Publishing the 'Other': The Reception of Ruete's *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* (1886) in the US and Britain

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Abstract: This article examines the circulation history of Emily Ruete's *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* (1886) in Western publishing networks, revealing how the text's material dissemination both amplified and constrained its counter-Orientalist potential. While previous scholarship has focused primarily on the textual content of Ruete's counter-narrative, this study addresses how material conditions of publication and circulation fundamentally shaped the political efficacy of her intervention. This paper draws on extensive archival evidence, including book reviews and paratextual materials, while employing a methodological framework that synthesizes postcolonial theory with book history approaches. Through this integrated lens, it demonstrates how American and British editors systematically undermined Ruete's authority through dismissive commentary, sensationalistic excerpting, and the addition of condescending subtitles. Western publishing mechanisms often framed her critique of Orientalism repositioning her as a native informant rather than authoritative interpreter, with British reviewers explicitly challenging her credibility while American newspapers fragmented her narrative into exotic curiosities. This study advances scholarly understanding of colonial knowledge production by demonstrating how publishing infrastructures functioned as technologies of imperial control, effectively neutralizing Arab women's counter-narratives even while seemingly amplifying their voices.

Keywords: Arab women's writing, autobiography, publishing history, transnational circulation

1. Introduction

In 1886, a remarkable text entered the European literary landscape. A memoir penned by a woman who straddled two seemingly irreconcilable worlds. Born Sayyida Salme bint Said in Zanzibar as a princess of the Omani royal family, and later known as Emily Ruete after adopting her German husband Rudolph Heinrich Ruete's surname following their marriage in 1866, this author crafted a narrative that fundamentally challenged the prevailing Orientalist discourse of her time. While nineteenth-century European literature abounded with fantastical depictions of "Oriental" harems, passive odalisques, and despotic sultans, Ruete's *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* offered something unprecedented. An authentic insider perspective that systematically dismantled these exoticized myths. This unique account provided Western readers with detailed insights into East African royal life and Arab women's experiences in Zanzibar's Omani-ruled Muslim court at precisely the moment when European imperial powers were consolidating control

over Muslim territories worldwide. The memoirs' publication thus occurred within a complex web of colonial power dynamics and cross-cultural literary exchange. This article investigates the tension between authorial intent and editorial mediation in Ruete's memoir, exposing how Western publishing conventions reconfigured her critical intervention to reinforce rather than challenge imperial epistemologies.

Scholars have approached Ruete's text from various angles. Oruc (2019) examines her memoir as an act of "transoceanic" (p. 10) and "cultural translation" (p. 15) negotiating East-West power dynamics, while Maxwell (2015) emphasizes how Ruete's multiple identities facilitated cross-cultural knowledge exchange within imperial infrastructures. Al-Rawi (2008) positions Ruete alongside Lady Mary Montagu as providing nuanced counternarratives to Western stereotypes, and El-Fakki (2020) frames her as a revolutionary figure challenging traditional cultural constraints. More recent scholarship by Neumann (2022) considers the contemporary politics of Ruete's memorialization, reflecting ongoing tensions in how we interpret colonial-era texts. This article extends these analyses by incorporating several complementary theoretical perspectives that illuminate the material conditions of Ruete's textual circulation. Syed's (2021) analysis of how nineteenth-century Orientalist art feminized and sexualized the Orient through specific visual tropes including the harem scene, the odalisque, and the bathing woman provides crucial context for understanding the visual representations against which Ruete's narrative operated. These artistic conventions functioned by objectifying Eastern women's bodies while simultaneously rendering them exotic and distant, establishing a visual grammar of power that Ruete's text directly countered. Gruber's (2020) examination of epistemic privilege in dialogue contexts offers valuable insights into the uneven power dynamics across gender, race, and religious differentiations that shaped reception of voices like Ruete's. John's (2023) concept of "discrepant dislocations" in feminist postcolonial theory provides a theoretical lens for examining how Western publishing infrastructures simultaneously enable and constrain non-Western counter-narratives, precisely the tension evident in Ruete's publication history. My research builds upon these foundations while shifting focus to the tension between authorial intent and editorial mediation within imperial publishing networks revealing how even as Ruete's voice challenged Orientalist stereotypes, the mechanisms of literary circulation often reinforced the very imperial hierarchies she sought to dismantle.

This study employs a hybrid methodological approach that combines book history with postcolonial textual criticism to examine the paratextual and discursive transformations of Ruete's memoir as it circulated through Western publishing networks. My archival investigation of publishing records, reviews, and newspaper excerpts from 1886-1890 traces how physical production and distribution mechanisms shaped the political efficacy of Ruete's counter-narrative, drawing on McGann's (1991) concept of the "socialization of texts" (p. 69) that emphasizes how material conditions of production shape textual meaning. I also employ Said's (1978) framework of Orientalism and Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and third space as analytical lenses through which to understand the discursive environment Ruete navigated. While these theoretical frameworks emerged

primarily from analyses of South African colonial contexts, their application to Ruete's case as a Zanzibari/Omani figure operating within German, British, and American publishing networks is justified by the shared structural features of imperial knowledge production across different colonial settings. The mechanisms of textual appropriation, cultural translation, and discursive containment that Spivak identifies in South Asian contexts functions similarly in how Western publishing infrastructures mediated Ruete's voice. Similarly, Bhabha's concept of the third space provides an illuminating framework for analyzing how Ruete's liminality as both cultural insider and outsider enabled her to navigate and challenge Western publishing infrastructures even as those same structures sought to contain her counter-narrative potential. This demonstrates the transferability of postcolonial analytical tools across varied imperial contexts. This historiographical approach positions Ruete's memoir as an important historical precursor to postcolonial critique, what Gopal (2019) describes as a "reversal of the flows of authority and knowledge" (p. 175), demonstrating how her firsthand experience of cultural misrepresentation led her to develop counter-narrative strategies that would later be theorized by postcolonial scholars. This methodology allows us to understand not only Ruete's intended intervention in Orientalist discourse but also how imperial power structures mediated her voice through selective framing, strategic excerpting, and dismissive commentary, ultimately revealing the complex interplay between authorial agency and institutional constraint that characterized colonial-era cross-cultural literary production. Her exceptional dual identity as Zanzibari princess and European resident made her memoir commercially valuable to publishers, who permitted her voice to circulate primarily for its market appeal and ethnographic utility rather than its counter-hegemonic potential.

The implications of this research extend beyond illuminating a single historical text to offering critical insights into the structural limitations facing marginalized voices within colonial knowledge production. Despite Ruete's strategic deployment of her unique positionality to challenge Orientalist discourse, the very circulation mechanisms that brought her narrative to Western readers ultimately constrained its subversive potential. This case study demonstrates that the material conditions of textual production and dissemination were as significant as textual content in determining how counter hegemonic narratives functioned within imperial contexts. Ruete's publication history provides valuable perspective on how literary networks shaped cross cultural understanding and misunderstanding during the height of Western imperialism. Moreover, this analysis helps us better comprehend the complex interplay between imperial power and literary representation that continues to influence global knowledge production today. By examining both the content of Ruete's counter narrative and its subsequent circulation, we gain a more nuanced understanding of how colonial subjects negotiated, challenged, and sometimes inadvertently reinforced the discursive systems that sought to define them.

2. Writing back to empire: Dismantling oriental myths in *Memoirs*

Unlike the imagined harems and exotic fantasies that populated Western literature about the "Orient" through works like Burton's translation of *The Arabian Nights* (1885-1888), Ruete's memoir presents a nuanced, first-hand account that deliberately undermines stereotypical representations. Her unique position as both Zanzibari princess (born Sayyida Salme) and European resident (following her marriage to a German merchant) equipped her with an exceptional vantage point from which to critique cross-cultural misunderstandings and challenge the binary oppositions that structured colonial thought. This dual positioning raises a crucial question that shapes our analysis of her text. Does her authority and perspective derive primarily from her royal Zanzibari origins or from her European acculturation? While her identity as Zanzibari royalty provided her with the authoritative insider knowledge that gave her critique legitimacy and distinguished her voice from European travelers' accounts, it was her European residency that furnished her with the linguistic tools, publishing networks, and understanding of Western audiences necessary to effectively communicate her critique. As I will demonstrate in this part, it is precisely the interdependence of these two aspects of her identity rather than the primacy of either one that created the distinctive consciousness through which she navigates cultural translation in her text. This dynamic interplay between insider authority and outsider perspective informs both her rhetorical strategies and her analytical framework as she engages with Western misconceptions about Eastern societies.

Originally titled *Memoiren einer Arabischen Prinzessin*, Ruete claims in her preface that she began writing her life story, prepared in Berlin in May 1886, nine years earlier "for my children", who, she projected, knew "little more about my origin than that I was an Arabian and a native of Zanzibar" (p. v). She maintains that a general audience was not initially envisaged until she "only yielded to the repeatedly expressed wishes of many friends in having them published now" (p. vi). Oruc suggests, however, that "money was a motivating factor" (p. 5) and financial necessity likely played a more significant role in her decision to publish than she acknowledged publicly. Following her husband's death, Ruete faced considerable economic hardship, compelling her to seek employment as an Arabic and Swahili tutor to support her impoverished family. Despite her preface's modest framing, the text itself reveals a clear awareness of a broader European readership and demonstrates her intention to challenge prevailing Western misconceptions about Arab and Muslim societies. Throughout her narrative, Ruete consciously addresses the cultural divisions between "Western" and "Eastern" people, "Europeans" and "Orientals", "Christians" and "Mohametans", consistently working to correct what she perceives as European misunderstandings. This engagement extended from using binary vocabularies to directly positioning herself as a cultural mediator uniquely qualified to correct Western misconceptions. In the opening of one chapter, she explicitly states her corrective purpose saying that "I am convinced that, as a woman born in the East, people will be apt to think me partial, and I fear I shall not succeed in eradicating altogether the false and preposterous views existing in Europe, and especially in Germany" (p. 146).

Ruete's pessimistic acknowledgment that she "shall not succeed in eradicating altogether the false and preposterous views" reveals her acute awareness of the deeply entrenched nature of European misconceptions about the East. This statement reflects her recognition of the political and discursive power imbalances between East and West, even as she positions herself as uniquely qualified to challenge them. By specifically identifying "Germans" as holding particularly resistant misconceptions, she directly addresses her immediate audience while demonstrating her understanding that her memoirs operate within a contested ideological space where Western views about the East were firmly established and resistant to correction, even from an insider's perspective. Her deliberate engagement with these binaries and her explicit attempts to "eradicating altogether the false and preposterous views existing in Europe" demonstrate that Ruete was fully conscious of her memoirs' function as a political intervention in Western discourse about the East, strategically using her unique cross-cultural perspective to challenge and correct European misconceptions about Arab society.

Her frustration about these misconceptions becomes evident when she directly confronts the notion that "the East is still too much considered the land of fairy-tales, about which all sorts of stories maybe told with impunity" (p. 147-8). She specifically criticizes European travelers who, after brief visits to Constantinople, Syria, Egypt, or Morocco, feel entitled to write a "big book" on Eastern customs despite having "seen absolutely nothing of domestic life," relying instead on distorted accounts from hotel staff and "donkey boys" or simply letting their imagination run wild into "fable-land" (p. 148). Ruete pointedly observes that these Western authors consider entertainment the only "necessary merit" of their books about the East, prioritizing "sugar-plums between the pages" over accuracy. This critique aligns with Spivak's (1988) concept of "epistemic violence," wherein Western knowledge production systematically misrepresents non-Western subjects while simultaneously silencing their capacity for self-representation. Ruete's text operates precisely within this contested terrain, as she explicitly identifies and challenges the processes through which European discourse constructs the East as knowable only through Western interpretive frameworks. By dismantling these frameworks from her position as both insider and outsider, Ruete creates what Bhabha (1994) would term a "third space" where dominant colonial narratives are contested and reconfigured. Her bicultural perspective allows her to speak from a uniquely hybridized position that destabilizes the authority of Western ethnographic accounts.

Therefore, her memoir transcends simple autobiography, deliberately functioning as a cultural intervention that challenges the dominant European discourses on the East. The text's deliberate framing suggests she anticipated and indeed crafted her narrative with European cultural consumption in mind. As Oruc has pointed out, Ruete's book "gives primacy to the imagined European reader" (2019: 9). This cultural self-awareness manifests through her strategic bifurcation of East and West when recounting her personal history. There are many instances in the book where Ruete takes such a role of cultural translator and authentic witness. I will focus primarily on her depiction of the harem, as this space was

particularly subject to Western fantasy and misrepresentation, making it a critical site for her counter-narrative work. While Ruete's memoir also addresses other aspects of Zanzibari royal life, including polygamous family structures, this study limits its scope to representations of the harem as the principal site of Orientalist mediation in nineteenth-century American publishing contexts. Western texts of the period, including Richard Burton's influential translations of *The Arabian Nights*, systematically misrepresented harems as exotic domains of sexual availability, indolence, and oppression spaces where women existed primarily for male pleasure. These portrayals, which Said (1978) would later identify as foundational to Orientalist discourse, depicted harem women as passive objects languishing on divans, bathing in ornate pools, or engaging in petty rivalries for male attention. Building on Said's framework, Lewis's study on gendered Orientalism reveals how Western texts consistently characterized the harem as "a brothel like domain in which one man generally elevated in Western eyes to the status of sultan despotically controlled and had sexual access to a multitude of women" (2019: 174). Far from innocent creative liberties, these representations served as the "pivot of the Western Orientalist fantasy" (p. 166) that justified imperial ambitions by constructing Eastern women as requiring Western intervention. Lewis demonstrates how such sensationalized imagery generated "rescue narratives of civilizational alterity" (p. 169) that continue to shape contemporary Western attitudes toward Muslim women. It is precisely against this backdrop of distortion that Ruete's firsthand account derives its subversive power.

Ruete's memoir systematically dismantles these fantasies by depicting the harem as a practical domestic space where women engaged in productive labor and maintained complex social hierarchies beyond their relationships to men. She emphasizes that women in her household led structured, industrious lives, engaging in numerous practical activities that required skill and effort. In Chapter VI, she describes how women spent their time sewing, embroidering, and managing household affairs, stating,

> the older women, who take no pleasure in all this lively stir, retire to their rooms, alone or in company, to take up some fancy work, to embroider their veils, shirts, or drawers with gold thread or cambric shirts for their husbands and sons with red and white silk an art which requires considerable skill. Others, again, read novels, visit the sick in their rooms, or employ themselves with their own private affairs (p. 53).

This portrayal dismantles Western myths of the Arab woman as passive and idle, emphasizing instead their active contributions to the household. The inclusion of women reading novels is particularly significant as it reveals a level of literacy and intellectual engagement that directly contradicts Orientalist depictions of harem women as uncultured or intellectually stunted. That these women consumed narrative literature indicates not only basic literacy but an engagement with storytelling traditions and potentially with ideas circulating beyond their immediate environment. Similarly, the practice of visiting the sick demonstrates a compassionate ethic of care and community responsibility that Western colonial

narratives often positioned as uniquely European values. Perhaps most subversive is Ruete's reference to women "employing themselves with their own private affairs," a phrase that acknowledges these women possessed independent interests, concerns, and pursuits beyond their relationships to men or domestic duties. Through these seemingly simple observations, Ruete establishes harem women as intellectually curious, morally autonomous individuals with private lives deserving of respect a characterization that fundamentally challenges the Orientalist imagination which reduced such women to exotic objects of Western fascination and pity.

By meticulously cataloging these activities, Ruete performs what could be understood as ethnographic authority, the power to represent cultures through detailed observation. She appropriates the very methodologies Western observers employed to objectify Eastern subjects while redirecting them toward corrective purposes. Her narrative technique establishes an alternative epistemological framework that privileges insider knowledge over external observation, thereby inverting the colonial gaze and establishing Arab women as agents rather than objects of knowledge. Furthermore, she critiques European misconceptions about Eastern women, arguing that such misunderstandings often stem from superficial observations. She writes, "Foreign ladies even, supposing they have actually entered a harem either at Constantinople or Cairo, have never seen the inside of a real harem at all, but only its outside, represented by the state rooms decorated and furnished in European style" (p. 51). By grounding her descriptions in personal experiences, Ruete offers a counter-narrative to the imagined Orientalist fantasies perpetuated by European texts like *Arabian Nights.* This statement performs a sophisticated dual function. It simultaneously delegitimizes Western claims about harems while positioning Ruete herself as the authentic authority whose account deserves precedence over Western travel narratives and ethnographies. Her critique extends beyond mere correction of factual inaccuracies to challenge the fundamental structural assumptions that underpin colonial knowledge production about Muslim societies

Finally, Ruete's act of writing itself is a form of resistance against the erasure of Arab voices in historical narratives. By publishing her memoirs, she asserts her agency and claims a space for Arab women in the predominantly male and Eurocentric literary canon. Her strategic choice to write in German, the language of her adopted country and audience, demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of how to make her voice heard within European intellectual circles. While in her preface she employs conventional literary language, stating, "May this book, then, go out into the world and gain as many friends as it has always been my good fortune to make for myself!" (p. VI), the significance of her publication extends beyond this modest framing. Rather than reading this conventional phrase as an explicit political statement, we should consider the broader context of her work's circulation in nineteenth-century Europe. As an Arab woman entering European literary discourse, the mere act of publication represented an unusual intervention in a field dominated by Western voices. Her publication represents a calculated entry into what Said would later identify as the "cultural field" where imperial

power is both exercised and contested, allowing Ruete to participate in shaping discourse about her homeland rather than remaining merely its object. Her memoirs, thus, perform an act of writing back to empire, whereby she deliberately utilizes Western literary conventions to subvert Orientalist discourse and reassert agency over representations of her culture.

3. Text in transit

Within two years of its publication in Germany, two unattributed English translations of the memoirs appeared simultaneously in Britain and the United States, reflecting the rapid international interest in this unique narrative. These versions, both titled *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*, were published by Ward and Downey in London and D. Appleton in New York, targeting English-speaking audiences in their respective markets. This rapid translation process reveals not only commercial interest but also the cultural politics of how Eastern voices entered Western literary discourse through European linguistic channels. While a comparative analysis between the original German text and its English renderings would offer valuable insights into cross-cultural translation practices, this study deliberately focuses on the relationship between the two English-language editions circulating in British and American markets, employing textual comparison methodologies that do not require access to the German source text. The linguistic journey of Ruete's memoir raises important questions about power dynamics in cross-cultural literary transmission. The only explicit evidence regarding translation appears in a brief statement at the beginning of the English editions stating that "This version of 'The Memoirs of an Arabian Princess' is rendered from the German, in which language the work originally appeared". This single sentence acknowledges German as the source language but provides no further context about the translation process or decisions, a limited explanation typical of the period. What is worth noting, however, is that publishers deemed it necessary to specify the text's German origin, suggesting they considered this information relevant to readers at a time when notes explaining translation processes rarely appeared. Without editorial correspondence or additional paratextual materials, we cannot definitively establish the motivations behind inserting this translation note. This explicit acknowledgment of the German origin may, however, have positioned the memoir within established European literary traditions rather than presenting it as a direct transmission from an Eastern voice, potentially lending it greater legitimacy in Western literary circles. Nevertheless, this linguistic pathway from Arabic experience to German expression to English dissemination reflects the complex negotiation between cultural authenticity and Western accessibility that non-Western authors navigated when seeking to share their narratives with global audiences.

Careful textual comparison reveals that both translations are identical in content, phrasing, and style, providing evidence that they originated from the same translator, despite being published by different companies in separate countries. While Ruete's memoir has been translated from German multiple times (in 1888, 1907, 1993 and 2022), this analysis focuses specifically on the 1888 anonymous

translations due to the article's scope examining the memoir's reception during the nineteenth century in American and British markets. I investigate the textual relationship between these early translations through comparative analysis. To determine that both1888 editions were produced by the same translator, I employ two methodological approaches. First, using the digital comparison tool JuxtaText, I analyze textual similarities between the editions, which revealed identical features throughout both volumes. The opening paragraph of Chapter 4, for example, appears verbatim in both editions: "We lived quietly and peacefully at Bet il Watoro for about two years" (1888: 25). This identical phrasing demonstrates not merely similar translation choices but exact duplication, strongly suggesting a single translator produced both editions. Similarly, both translations render a passage about religious instruction identically: "The hours of prayer regulate the daily life of every Mahometan; they are said five times a day" (1888: 52). Second, I compared these 1888 editions with the 1907 translation to establish their distinctiveness through contrastive analysis. This revealed significant divergences in translation choices that reflect different translation strategies. For example, where the 1888 editions consistently render Ruete's description of her childhood home as "In Bet il Mtoni, the oldest of our palaces in the island of Zanzibar, I was born, and there I lived until the age of seven" (1888: 1), the 1907 version translates this as "It was at Bet il Mtoni, our oldest palace in the island of Zanzibar, that I first saw the light of day, and I remained there until I reached my seventh year" (1907: 3). The contrast between these renderings reveals fundamental differences in syntactic structure and word choice, with the 1907 translation employing a more dramatic, literary style compared to the straightforward approach of the 1888 versions. Similarly, the 1888 translations identically describe her father as "he was a model father and sovereign. Justice he valued as the highest of all things, and in this respect he knew no difference of person, not even between one of his own sons and the lowest slave" (1888: 5), while the 1907 version offers "He always had a pleasant greeting to give, whether the person was one of consequence or a lowly subordinate" (1907: 5), demonstrating both the unity of the 1888 translations and their distinction from subsequent translation efforts.

The identical translator for both 1888 editions exemplifies the fluid transmission of texts in the nineteenth century, when limited international copyright protection facilitated widespread literary appropriation across publishing markets. This legal environment enabled publishers to freely reproduce and adapt works from foreign markets with minimal legal constraints. While publishers readily appropriated texts across national boundaries, the role of translators in this transnational circulation often remained obscured. Translators frequently worked under anonymous conditions, their contributions rendered invisible in the publication process. This anonymity permitted publishers to present translations as transparent reproductions of original works rather than as interpretive rewritings requiring attribution. In Ruete's case, the identical translation appearing in both markets without credited authorship reveals how the labor of translation was subordinated to commercial interests, with translators rarely receiving recognition or compensation commensurate with their crucial mediating role in cross-cultural

literary exchange. These practices effectively created "an expanded market" through what were essentially "lawful piracies", enabling texts to circulate widely across English-speaking territories while bypassing regulatory constraints that would later become standard in the publishing industry (Spoo 2013: 11). The use of a single translator for both British and American editions of Ruete's memoirs suggests a level of coordination between publishers that transcended national boundaries, indicating that unauthorized reprinting was not the only transnational publishing practice. As Emily Todd observes, such practices consequently led to a "shared reading public" and "overlapping literary cultures" between the United States and Britain, creating transnational literary communities through the unrestricted circulation of texts in the absence of copyright protections (2018: 146), though this textual circulation represents just one factor among many including shared language, cultural institutions, and critical frameworks that facilitated literary exchange across the Atlantic. The identical translation appearing simultaneously in both markets ensured that readers in London and New York encountered precisely the same representation of Arabian culture through Ruete's narrative, creating a unified textual experience despite the geographic separation.

The conspicuous absence of editor's prefaces in the translated 1888 version of Ruete's memoir represents an exceptional departure from standard publishing practices for minority writers in the nineteenth century. This independence from overt editorial framing in the published text though not necessarily implying freedom from possible translation interventions or other subtle textual modifications positions her narrative uniquely within the literary marketplace of the period. It offers valuable insights when compared to both the conventions of slave narratives and the publication constraints typically imposed on female authors. Narratives by formerly enslaved people invariably followed established patterns that created what James Olney describes as a sense of "sameness" in the tradition (Olney 1984: 46). Similarly, female authors frequently published anonymously, under male pseudonyms, or with apologetic justifications for their literary endeavors. These women often experienced what Gilbert and Gubar call an "anxiety of authorship" (1979: 51). In contrast, Ruete's text circulated without prefatory endorsements or authenticating testimonials from Western authorities. This distinctive treatment cannot be attributed solely to Ruete's position between cultures, but must be understood through the lens of class privilege. Her aristocratic background in Zanzibar combined with her marriage into European society created a particular configuration of social capital that differentiated her publication experience from other marginalized writers. This privileging of aristocratic identity is immediately evident in the book's title itself *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* which foregrounds her royal status in addition to her gender and racial identity. Unlike slave narratives that typically emphasized the subject's journey from bondage to freedom in their titles such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Ruete's title establishes her authority through noble lineage from the reader's first encounter with the text. This strategic titular emphasis on royalty in addition to otherness represents a publisher's calculation that her class status would overcome potential reader skepticism about her gender and

racial background. While authors such as Frederick Douglass required white abolitionists' verification to establish credibility with readers, Ruete's royal lineage likely functioned as an alternative source of authority that publishers recognized as commercially appealing. Similarly, while writers like Jane Austen navigated restrictive gender expectations within their specific social contexts, Ruete's exotic origins and noble status may have exempted her from certain gendered publication constraints typical for European women writers of modest or middle-class background. This publishing pattern reveals how class and social position intersected with other identity factors to create specific conditions of literary production, with aristocratic privilege potentially offsetting disadvantages associated with gender and racial difference in the nineteenth-century literary marketplace.

Beyond the full-text translation, newspaper excerpts significantly shaped how Ruete's narrative reached and influenced mass audiences. Nineteenth-century print media created what Nicholson describes as a "complex web of connections" between publishers, readers, and cultural discourse (2016: 165). This interconnected network specifically enabled Ruete's narrative to travel between elite literary circles and popular readerships through strategic reprinting practices. National and regional newspapers became essential conduits for literature, making previously inaccessible texts available to diverse socioeconomic classes across urban and rural communities. Tusan demonstrates how high-circulation national publications wielded considerable influence over cultural narratives of the period, noting "the growing power of the press in shaping public opinion" (2016: 158). These publications transformed segments of Ruete's memoir into digestible excerpts that could reach readers who might never encounter the complete book. This circulation system, as Cordell explains, functioned as a self-reinforcing mechanism where "the system of newspaper exchanges produced a kind of feedback loop, in which texts circulated because of their perceived value to readers, while that perceived value was frequently tied to a given piece's wide circulation" (2015: 418). Through this dynamic network, Ruete's memoir found additional distribution channels beyond bookstore shelves, with newspaper editors selectively reprinting portions that aligned with their readers' interests in exotic cultures, women' rights, or religious practices in non-Christian societies.

4. Selective excerpting: Ruete's *Memoir* in American newspapers

An analysis of Ruete's memoir in American newspapers reveals a compelling paradox. The text's circulation through the press inadvertently reinforced the very stereotypes and misconceptions that the book aimed to challenge and correct. My research in the Library of Congress's Chronicling America digital newspaper collection, covering publications from 1887-1889 across seventeen states including New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Maine, Arizona, Maryland, Montana, Nebraska, and Minnesota, yielded one hundred ninety-three mentions of Ruete's memoir. The circulation of Ruete's text can be summarized in two categories. These are advertisements and reprinted excerpts. The book advertisements were straightforward and unembellished. First appearing in *the Indianapolis Journal* on

February 11, 1888, Ruete's memoir was listed alongside other publications under a section titled "New Books" and advertised simply as "Memoirs of an Arabian Princess: An Autobiography by Emily Ruete", priced at only 75 cents (*Indianapolis Journal.* 1888). This pricing is particularly telling when compared to other titles in the same advertisement including *Modern Cities and their Religious Problems* by American author Samuel Lane Loomis sold for one dollar, while *Evangelistic Work* by American author Arthur T. Pierson commanded 1.25 dollars. While such price differences might reflect variations in production costs, paper quality, or volume length, they also align with the standard publishing practices of the period regarding foreign works. The American publishing industry operated under the Copyright Act of 1790, which extended protection only to domestic authors while leaving foreign works without legal protection a practice that affected European, Asian, and all non-American authors equally. Publishers routinely produced what Spoo terms "cheap reprints" (2013: 32) of foreign works without securing rights or paying royalties, as these costs were not legally required until later copyright reforms. While Ruete's text circulated within this standard economic framework for foreign publications, the more significant transformation occurred in how American newspapers presented her narrative to readers. As will be demonstrated through close analysis of reprinted excerpts in this section, newspapers selectively presented portions of her memoir that positioned her not primarily as a royal figure or as a European convert, but as a general informant on Oriental customs. The headlines and framing devices employed by editors reveal how they recontextualized her specific autobiographical experiences as universal insights into exotic Eastern practices, often omitting her nuanced cultural explanations in favor of sensationalized descriptions that reinforced rather than challenged prevailing Western assumptions.

While the advertisements themselves presented the book without alteration or embellishment, it was in the reprinted excerpts where significant editorial liberties were taken. These newspaper extracts selectively pulled passages from Ruete's memoir, often privileging sensationalistic elements that aligned with Western preconceptions about "Oriental" life while omitting her more nuanced cultural and political observations. Several reprinted excerpts initially appear innocuous, seemingly motivated by genuine cultural curiosity. Newspaper editors frequently selected passages detailing customs such as "the Use of Henna", which meticulously described the dyeing practices of Eastern women (Arizona Weekly Enterprise 1888; Cheyenne Daily Leader 1888b; Evening Capital 1888; Lancaster Daily Intelligencer 1888b; San Antonio Daily Light 1888). Numerous newspapers also circulated pieces titled "An Arabian Meal". These articles purported to offer American readers insights into authentic dining customs of the East. Similarly, excerpts titled "An Arab Woman's Dress" appeared across multiple publications, presenting seemingly ethnographic information about clothing practices. (Daily Kennebec Journal 1888; Lancaster Daily Intelligencer 1888a; Morris Tribune 1888; The Fairfield News and Herald 1888). The Ohio Democrat 1888; However, these seemingly straightforward cultural observations subtly reinforced Orientalist paradigms. The excerpt on women's clothing appears comprehensive at first glance, describing not just the basic elements of "a shirt reaching down to the ankles,

trousers, and a kerchief" but also detailing how "the wealthy wear golden brocades," how anklets with "small golden bells" produce "a pleasant tinkling sound with every step," and how "tassel led ribbons hang from the band worn around the forehead". Yet the very selection of this passage reveals the Western press's preoccupation with Eastern women's bodies and attire. These descriptions, focused on tinkling anklets, decorative elements, and the various ways fabric adorned and revealed the female form, catered to the Western fascination with the exotic feminine "Other". Newspapers regularly chose these detailed descriptions of women's dress over Ruete's political analyses or intellectual observations, reducing her memoir to a catalog of exotic curiosities. While her original text situated these clothing descriptions within complex discussions of social customs and personal experience, the newspapers extracted and reframed them as ethnographic specimens for Western consumption, feeding into exoticized fantasies of the Oriental feminine.

While these excerpts about cultural customs underwent subtle distortions, a more pronounced editorial intervention can be observed in the widely circulated piece about childcare practices. Among these reprinted excerpts, the piece on childrearing practices received particularly extensive editorial intervention, appearing in at least six different American newspapers under titles like "The Baby in Arabia" or "Arabian Infants". The extract itself details the custom of dealing with newborn babies by which "on the fortieth day the baby's head is shaved—a ceremony which could scarcely be performed in our own country, where thick hair is usually of a later growth" (Cheyenne Daily Leader 1888a; Daily Yellowstone Journal 1888; Wichita Eagle 1888). The piece then continues to narrate the process of welcoming a newborn by indicating that no one allowed to see the infant until the "fortieth day" except from "its parents, the slaves on duty and a few intimate friends of the family". After the "fortieth day", the baby "may be seen by anybody, and is regarded as fairly launched on the tide of existence". On the surface, this piece appears that it did not contain any editorial intervention. While the newspaper reproduced the text faithfully without altering Ruete's words, a significant editorial intervention occurred in the title itself. When compared to the original piece appearing in Ruete's translated book, we can see that the title of the piece has been changed from "Birth and First Years of the Life of a Prince and Princess" to "the Baby in Arabia". This editorial alteration significantly broadens and generalizes Ruete's specific royal experience, transforming her particular aristocratic account into a characterization of all Arabian childcare practices.

This same excerpt appeared in certain publications with even more overt editorial intrusions, particularly when reprinted under the title "Arabian Infants". In these versions, editors added interpretive elements around Ruete's original text. The earlier example had simply changed her title, but these publications employed more extensive framing. They added the pointed subtitle: "The Hard Lot of Babies Who See the Light of the World in the East" (Kanabec County Times 1888; Omaha Daily Bee 1888; St Landry Democrat 1888; Camden J. 1890). The editorial commentary begins by asserting that "Life has exceptional difficulties for the babies of Eastern nations" who must be "brought up according to all the ancient customs of their

race". The editor then fixates on the practice of "winding a bandage about its body, after it has been bathed and perfumed", explaining that "the Arabs believe this process will make the body straight for life". The editorial voice concludes with the observation that it is "fortunate that babyhood is not a period which can be remembered in afteryears". This editorial language employs evaluative modifiers ("hard lot", "exceptional difficulties") and skeptical framing ("Arabs believe") that linguistically positions Eastern practices as questionable. The use of distancing language creates a rhetorical separation between the presumed Western reader and the described practices. Such linguistic patterns in these particular publications suggest an editorial tendency to frame Eastern childcare customs through a lens of cultural difference that emphasizes the foreign and potentially problematic nature of these practices. While these examples represent a limited sample, they demonstrate how specific editorial choices in these newspapers contributed to constructing particular representations of Eastern customs for Western readers.

Notably, my comprehensive review of one hundred ninety-three mentions of Ruete's memoir in American newspapers revealed a striking pattern of selective representation. These publications systematically excluded any reference to harem life, despite such material constituting a substantial portion of her original memoir. Editors consistently favored excerpts on childcare practices and cultural customs like the use of henna and Arabian meals rather than the harem, which typically dominated Orientalist accounts of Eastern women's lives. This selective editorial practice suggests that editors prioritized content that American readers could directly compare to their own domestic practices over reproducing Ruete's nuanced cultural critiques. Nonetheless, it was only in the parts that depict child-rearing that Ruete's text underwent evident editorial intervention, which suggests that the circulation of her text did not only serve as commercial sensationalism. It was also deeply rooted within Victorian cultural constructions of childhood, domesticity, and popular ethnographic curiosity. It reflects broader nineteenth-century American preoccupations with proper childcare and cultural anxieties about modernity, progress, and scientific approaches to parenting. The era witnessed a proliferation of publications devoted to childcare instruction, including the anonymously published *A Few Suggestions to Mothers on the Management of Their Children* (1884) and periodicals such as *The Mother's Journal and Family Visitant* (1836-1872) and *Arthur's Home Magazine* (1852-1898). That American periodicals circulated Ruete's childcare observations within an intellectual climate increasingly shaped by social Darwinism and racial hierarchy is particularly significant. The period's scientific racism provided interpretive frameworks through which non-Western domestic practices could be simultaneously presented as ethnographic curiosities and measured against an assumed Western developmental standard. As Rydell has argued, this cultural consumption of ethnographic materials contributed to notions of "Anglo Saxon racial superiority" (1987: 104) prevalent in American society. In the specific context of Ruete's text, editors' focus on child rearing practices allowed American readers to position their own domestic approaches as "advanced" while consuming Eastern motherhood as a primitive curiosity reinforcing racial hierarchies through the seemingly innocent domain of childcare.

Through this editorial mediation, the intimate domain of child-rearing was transformed into a symbolic national territory where American cultural superiority could be affirmed through comparison with the supposedly primitive domestic practices of the East, effectively rendering the home as a microcosm of larger imperial and civilizational hierarchies.

5. Controlled narratives: Ruete's *Memoir* in British newspapers

Having examined the complex reception and transformation of Ruete's memoirs in American newspapers, I now turn to its circulation in British publications, where different editorial practices and imperial concerns shaped the presentation of her narrative within the context of Britain's direct colonial involvement in East Africa. My research in The British Newspaper Archives identified fifty mentions of Ruete's work between 1887 and 1889. The British circulation of Ruete's memoirs, like its American counterpart, occurred primarily through advertisements. However, a striking difference emerges. While American newspapers frequently reproduced excerpts directly from the text, British publications consistently refrained from such direct quotation. Instead, British advertisements and literary notices offered reviews and summaries without extracting passages verbatim. This absence of direct quotation likely reflects Britain's more stringent copyright protection. As I have explained elsewhere, the identical translations appearing in both American and British editions suggest the work was translated by a single individual. It is possible that the British publisher commissioned the original English translation, though no translator's correspondence or publisher's archives have survived to definitively confirm this hypothesis. This theory is supported by early British advertisements, such as one appearing in the Newcastle Courant on December 2, 1887, preceding American notices (Newcastle Courant 1887). Furthermore, the pricing structure aligns with standard British publication practices of the period, with Ruete's memoirs priced at six shillings, identical to contemporaneous works by British authors such as F.M. Allen's *Through Green Glasses* offered by the same publisher.

The protections afforded by British copyright law in the late nineteenth century, structured by the Copyright Act of 1842 and related case law, may have paradoxically created space for editorial voices to interpret Ruete's memoirs rather than allowing her narrative to speak directly to readers, although this claim remains necessarily tentative in the absence of detailed archival evidence from publishers. Under the 1842 Act, authors and their assigns were granted exclusive rights of reproduction for a substantial term (the author's life plus seven years, or forty-two years from first publication, whichever was longer), and unauthorized republication of "substantial" portions of a work could constitute infringement. The statute did not clearly define what counted as a "substantial part," leaving the question to judicial interpretation; as a result, British publishers and editors sometimes proceeded cautiously when handling foreign works, especially if an identifiable rights-holder might challenge re-use in the British market. In the United States, by contrast, federal copyright protection in the 1880s depended on formalities (such as registration and notice) and generally did not extend to foreign authors unless specific bilateral agreements existed. This weaker and more fragmented protection

for non-U.S. works meant that American publishers frequently reprinted or adapted foreign texts with fewer legal obstacles than their British counterparts faced. Consequently, while British publishers operated under a relatively clear statutory framework that recognized authors' exclusive rights to reproduction, American houses often enjoyed wider de facto latitude in excerpting and reissuing European texts, especially where foreign authors had not complied with U.S. formalities. Since no publishers' archives have been located to document a legally motivated decision-making process, any suggested causal link between copyright law and these editorial strategies must be framed as a hypothesis rather than a demonstrated fact. Even so, the dynamic that emerges where editorial framing mediates Ruete's voice for British audiences can be read as suggestive of implicit imperial anxieties and as potentially reinforcing the very colonial ideologies her text sought to challenge.

Publishers typically promoted the book with brief statements suggesting it offered "a trustworthy account of life and manners among the Arabs of Eastern Africa" (Daily Telegraph and Courier 1888) for curious British readers. Yet ironically, the reviews themselves often perpetuated Orientalist ideologies rather than engaging with Ruete's counter-narrative. A particularly telling example appeared in *John Bull*, a newspaper whose very name evoked British nationalist identity and imperial pride. This review directly challenged Ruete's authority, claiming there was "little sound commonsense to be found on European views about Mahomedan Arabs" (1888). The term "Mahomedan Arabs" here functions as a period-specific British label for Arab Muslim populations, reflecting contemporary Christian-centric and Orientalist ways of naming rather than any emic self-designation. The reviewer dismissively asserted that "the authoress is mistaken in supposing that the views prevalent on the subject of the position of Eastern women are based on hasty and insufficient information". This commentary exemplifies what Said would later identify as the self-reinforcing nature of Orientalist discourse. When confronted with contradictory evidence from an authentic cultural insider, British reviewers simply dismissed the source rather than reconsidering their preconceptions. The review's condescending tone positions Western knowledge production as inherently superior to lived experience, a stance that can be situated within what postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Dipesh Chakrabarty describe as a broader imperial project of epistemic dominance. This project, however, did not stand in isolation. The production and control of knowledge about colonized societies operated alongside, and in support of, more overt forms of imperial power, including the political domination of subject peoples and the economic exploitation of their labor and natural resources across Africa and Asia.

Women's social position in the East became a focal point across multiple reviews, revealing British preoccupations with gender as a marker of civilization. *The London Evening Standard's* December 24, 1887 review recommended the book "as a picture of female life in the East" specifically for "older girls and women" (1887), immediately categorizing the text as feminine rather than historical or political. The reviewer noted that readers "may be perhaps surprised to find many

things conflicting very strongly with the ideas they may have found of the wretchedness of their Mahometan sisters, and of the numerous adventures of European methods of existence". The phrase "may be perhaps surprised" is revealing. It presupposes the existence of settled "ideas" about the "wretchedness" of Muslim women, yet it also concedes that Ruete's account does not simply confirm these ideas and may disrupt some readers' expectations. Rather than treating the colonial reading public as entirely homogeneous or ideologically fixed, this formulation suggests that at least some British readers, particularly women, might experience a degree of dissonance between inherited stereotypes and the realities described in the memoir, even if we lack direct testimony from those readers. This framing betrays a condescending assumption that Western women naturally pitied their Eastern counterparts, an assumption that is textually grounded in the review's use of the word "wretchedness" to characterize the lives of "Mahometan sisters." The term "wretchedness" does not merely register a neutral social condition; it encodes an affective posture in which Eastern women are imagined primarily as objects of suffering and compassion, inviting Western women to occupy the position of sympathetic observers or potential rescuers. At the same time, the acknowledgment that readers might be "surprised" by elements of Ruete's narrative can also be read as a limited recognition, within the review itself, of the inadequacy or incompleteness of some pre-existing British assumptions about Muslim women, indicating that colonial discourse could contain internal tensions rather than operating as a perfectly closed, monolithic system. By positioning Ruete's account as merely a curiosity that might surprise British women readers, the review tends to domesticate and contain the memoir's potential to meaningfully challenge colonial representations of Muslim women's lives.

The Vanity Fair review from December 17, 1887, continued this pattern of surprise at Ruete's revelations while subtly reinforcing imperial assumptions. In describing the book as a "revelation concerning Eastern women and their ways" (1887), the review expressed astonishment that Muslim women "are not overwhelmingly oppressed, they have some rights of independent and upright action, and a great many of them do love one another; and, what is a still prove of large-mindedness, they love one another's children into the bargain". The framing of Ruete's account as a "revelation" participates in a broader Orientalist discourse that consistently positioned Eastern societies as mysterious and unknowable, requiring Western mediation to become intelligible to British readers. This rhetorical strategy, common in Victorian travel writing and ethnographic accounts, reinforces the position of the Western observer as discoverer rather than merely transmitter of knowledge. By expressing wonder at such fundamental aspects of human connection, the review reflects specific imperial assumptions about Muslim women's lives that had been cultivated through decades of travel narratives, missionary accounts, and popular fiction portraying Eastern domestic arrangements as fundamentally different from British norms. This representation of Muslim women's basic emotional capacities as surprising or exceptional demonstrates how certain strands of Victorian imperial discourse had constructed a particular image

of Eastern femininity that emphasized difference and inferiority rather than shared humanity.

As my discussion so far has demonstrated, the circulation and reception of Ruete's memoirs differed significantly between British and American publications, revealing distinct imperial concerns and editorial practices. In Britain, where copyright laws provided strict control over the text, reviews typically appeared in formal literary publications and emphasized the book's revelatory nature while reinforcing imperial hierarchies. The American press, less constrained by British copyright restrictions, frequently excerpted and repurposed Ruete's narrative in newspapers across the country, often fragmenting her memoirs into sensationalized accounts that emphasized exotic elements. Where British reviews focused on Ruete's observations about women's position in Muslim society, reflecting anxieties about gender and imperial justification, American newspapers more frequently highlighted the domestic elements of her story, such as child rearing. This differential treatment reflects the distinct imperial positions of the two nations. Britain, with direct colonial interests in East Africa, needed to carefully manage narratives that might challenge its authority, while American publishers, positioned at greater distance from formal colonial administration in the region, could afford to treat Ruete's story more as entertainment than political testimony. Nevertheless, both approaches ultimately served to contain and neutralize the counter-imperial potential of Ruete's narrative, either through dismissive editorial framing in Britain or through sensationalistic fragmentation in America, demonstrating how print culture in both contexts operated within what postcolonial theorists identify as the imperial archive, a system of knowledge production that privileges Western interpretive authority (Richards 1993; Spivak 1999). These editorial practices, particularly decisions about which passages to excerpt, which elements to emphasize, and which contextual information to include or exclude, reflect the power dynamics inherent in translation and textual mediation as analyzed by Tymoczko and Gentzler (2002). The selective representation of Ruete's narrative through strategic excerpting, framing, and contextualizing demonstrates how Western editors exercised epistemic control by determining which aspects of her story would reach readers and how those elements would be interpreted.

6. Conclusion

The publication history of the English version of Emily Ruete's *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* reveals the complex tensions between authorial intent and editorial mediation within imperial publishing networks. Ruete crafted a deliberate counter-narrative to challenge Western misconceptions about Arab and Muslim societies, yet her text was reshaped through distinctly different processes in British and American publishing contexts. While her memoir represented a rare instance where an Arab Muslim woman's voice penetrated Western discourse about the "Orient", specific publishing mechanisms undermined its subversive potential in each national context. In Britain, copyright protections paradoxically enabled greater editorial control, as reviewers filtered Ruete's narrative through interpretive frameworks that preserved imperial epistemologies. These reviewers expressed

surprise at discovering basic humanity in her account of Muslim women's lives while simultaneously dismissing her challenges to Western expertise. Meanwhile, in the United States, where copyright restrictions were less stringent, her text was fragmented into sensationalized excerpts that emphasized exotic cultural practices while omitting her more substantial political and social critiques. This differential treatment across national borders illuminates how Western publishing practices functioned as technologies of imperial power, simultaneously amplifying and containing voices that challenged dominant colonial narratives.

The reception of Ruete's memoir exemplifies the structural limitations facing marginalized voices within colonial knowledge production. Despite Ruete's strategic deployment of her unique positionality as both cultural insider and European resident to challenge Orientalist discourse, the very circulation mechanisms that brought her narrative to Western readers ultimately reinforced the imperial hierarchies she sought to dismantle. This case study demonstrates that the material conditions of textual production and dissemination were as significant as textual content in determining how counter hegemonic narratives functioned within imperial contexts. Ruete's publication history offers critical insights into how literary networks shaped cross cultural understanding and misunderstanding during the height of European imperialism. Her memoir stands as both testament to the possibilities of writing back to empire and a sobering reminder of how publishing institutions in both Britain and the United States, despite their different approaches, effectively neutralized her challenges through distinct but equally effective means: British publishing through selective framing and dismissive commentary in book reviews, and American publishing through fragmentation, decontextualization, and sensationalistic excerpting.

The historical dynamics examined in this study remain strikingly relevant to contemporary debates concerning cultural translation, global publishing inequalities, and the representation of marginalized voices in the present literary marketplace. Just as nineteenth-century publishing mechanisms contained and neutralized Ruete's counter-narrative, today's publishing industry continues to mediate non-Western voices through selective translation practices, marketing frameworks that emphasize cultural otherness, and editorial decisions that privilege certain types of narratives over others as documented in studies like Mourad's (2024) and Malkawi's (2026). By examining the historical case of Ruete's memoir, we gain critical perspective on persistent structural inequalities in today's transnational literary field, where the mechanisms of textual circulation still frequently reinforce rather than challenge dominant cultural hierarchies. This historical analysis thus provides valuable context for ongoing efforts to create more equitable conditions for cross-cultural literary exchange in our increasingly interconnected but still profoundly unequal global publishing landscape.

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