

# Lady Montagu's Portrayal of The Women of East in Her Turkish Embassy Letters

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**Abstract:** In 1978 Edward Said's *Orientalism* created a great deal of controversy which dealt with the West's elitist outlook and misrepresentation of the East. Only few studies concentrated on the other trend that embodied positive ideas. There were some Western writers who actually glorified the East and even considered it superior to the West. For instance, Geoffrey Nash's study, *From Empire to Orient : Travellers to the Middle East 1830-1926* (2005) falls into such a category. The author argues that the picture is more complex than the one previously proposed by Said who has mainly based his arguments on the Western 'hostile corpus.' Nash points to the *Spirit of the East* (1838), written by the First Secretary at the British Embassy in Istanbul, David Urquhart (1805-1877) as a pioneering work in this trend. Thus, for Nash, Urquhart stands as a 'discursive instability within Orientalism'. There was also a woman who lived before Urquhart who could be considered, the pioneer in her views toward the East; namely Lady Mary Montagu (1689-1762). Many critics of Montagu focused on Montagu's presumed lesbianism or licentious description of the seraglio. However, Montagu made various insightful and important comparisons between the West and the East, whether in the manners of people and habits, or in issues like slavery and women's rights. Her *Turkish Embassy Letters* provides a detailed and compelling account of her "radically decentering experience" in Eastern Europe and Turkey. Her experiences in both the West and the Eastern Empire between 1716 and 1718 provided her with an unique knowledge of the social, political, and religious customs of these nations. This paper attempts to illustrate the complexity of Montagu's social interactions within the gendered "contact zones" she experienced during her travel to Turkey. The paper also attempts to understand and interrogate women's history through the eyes of women.

**Keywords:** Women travel writing, male gaze and female gaze, East and West dichotomy, representation of women.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689- 1762) was an English Aristocrat, letter writer and a poet. Lady Montagu has been remembered for her letters, particularly her travels to the Ottoman Empire. Montagu traveled widely in the early years of her marriage to the Edward Wortley Montagu, when he first served as the English Ambassador to Turkey. The *Turkish Embassy Letters* provides a detailed and compelling account of her "radically decentering experience" in Eastern Europe and Turkey. Her experiences in both the West and the Eastern empire between 1716 and 1718 provided her with an unique knowledge of the social, political, and religious customs of these nations—the knowledge she delighted in sharing with her family and friends. Her letters from this period, which she collected, revised, and edited throughout her lifetime, were published—against the wishes of her family—only after her death in 1763. Being a women traveler Lady Montagu was uniquely privileged when she went to Turkey in 1716. As the wife of British Ambassador, she was assured access to the upper echelons of the Ottoman society. Her gender in addition gained her entry to distinctive institutions of the society which were off limits even to privileged men. Harems and women's bathhouses had already provided topics for curious speculation by male travel writers, several of who claimed to have visited them, although as Montagu pointed out, "Tis no less than death for a man to be found in one of these places". (Montagu 521). Her letters dated from 1716-1718 illustrate the pleasure she took in correcting male travel writers who she claimed, "are very fond of speaking of what they don't know" and "they often complicate common misrepresentations of Turkish Islamic society and particularly of Turkish women". (Meriwether 624).

The letters of Lady Montagu provided the reading public with a new account of the East. The few accounts by western travelling merchants were generally biased and inaccurate in their descriptions. She wanted to give an "objective" account, and referred in various letters that there were many fallacies in Europe with regard to the East. She clearly refers to the fact that most travelers could not comprehend the true nature of the people and places they have been to, because writing and living in any country is totally different from visiting it for a short period of time and then attempting to describe it. During the time when Lady Montagu wrote, the Orient was discursively feminizing and eroticized; West stood to East in a relation of proto-colonial domination that takes on a seemingly inevitable sexual character. Oriental women carried a disproportionate symbolic burden in this discourse, doubly "other" and "doubly exotic". The male travelers unanimously presented Turkish women as hypersexual, "wonton", "immodest" and "lascivious".(Bohls 179). While in reality, Ahmed argues that the fictitious details of *The Arabian Nights* (translated into English in 1702-1714) were highly responsible for forming a sensually romantic image of Muslim women in the East, by presenting belly dancers, submissive women slaves and an abundance of harems. Such views expressed a western male admiration and deep yearning to have concubines and to practice polygamy.

(Al-Rawi 26-27). But Lady Montagu seems concerned to correct the falsehood spread by previous travel writers, especially about the women whose wit, hospitality and beauty she so enjoyed during her two year stay.

“Clothes, far from inhibiting conversation and delineating subject groups do not operate as a semiotic barrier” in Montagu’s gaze according to Renen. (Renen 18). In a letter written to her sister in the Spring of 1717, Montagu describes in great detail the domestic Turkish fashion to suggest that rather than acting as emblems of national and class identity, clothes can be a gateway to wider cultural knowledge. She emphasizes the fine fabrics, detailed designs and expensive jewels of her ‘Turkish Habit’ that were for the most parts seen only by other females. She initially provides her sister with a self- portrait, familiarizing her readers with Eastern dress and inviting them to imagine themselves in these clothes, before describing how Turkish attire enhances the natural beauty of Eastern women. Montagu simultaneously shows how Turkish dress makes it impossible for women to signal boundaries and tempts her reader to explore imaginatively the more interior layers of Turkish culture: underneath the exterior exists a rich world that is not readily identifiable to the casual traveler. By observing the dress code of Islam, Turkish women cannot mark difference in national or cultural identity. In this way, their rich clothing promotes same-sex intimacy within the harem rather than antagonisms in public spaces.

Lady Montagu was surprised to find that the Turkish women were not as confined and repressed as they were pictured in the West. In fact she describes the veil as a means to escape the imprisonments of the male gaze and marriage. Montagu writes that the veil provides a way for a woman to control how she is seen, as well as to transgress her status as a married woman. Because of the veil’s power to disguise and because Turkish women had their own private social space in their homes and at the baths, Montagu wrote to her sister Lady Mar, “upon the whole, I look upon the Turkish women as the only free people in the Empire” (Meriwether 625). In fact, Montagu’s representation of the baths explicitly characterized her as the least physically and socially free woman there: “The lady that seemed the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her, and would fain have undressed me for the bath. I excused myself with some difficulty, they being all so earnest in persuading me. I was at last forced to open my skirt, and show them my stays, which satisfied them very well, for I saw they believed I was so locked up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my husband” (pp. 102–3). In this famous account, Montagu simultaneously critiques the confines of English women’s dress and the role husbands played in this institution, and by extension in their wives’ lives. Contradicting the generalized idea, Montague was of the view that western women were less liberated than the eastern ones. For instance, Mary Wollstonecraft, an English writer, in her famous *A Vindication of the Rights of women* (1792) stated that the women of her time were imprisoned in “cages like the feathered race, they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch”. She accused men of being behind the state of degradation because they, “earnestly labored to domesticate women, have endeavored, by arguments dictated by a gross appetite, which satiety had rendered fastidious, to weaken their bodies and cramp their minds.” (Rawi 19). Moreover, Montagu depicts the Turkish women as objects of inquiry for her English audience, while she simultaneously presents herself as an object of inquiry for the women. Such descriptions elucidate Montagu’s shifting subject/object status. Stepping away from her own subject location as an English traveling woman, she is temporarily able to look at herself through the eyes of the foreign women. In so doing, she discovers a critical outlook on her own culture that nourishes her political activism later on in her life and work. This critical outlook has become the salient element in examinations of Montagu’s Letters and the way she represents the multilayered interactions among Orientalism, patriarchy, class, race, and most importantly, feminism.

Another fascinating description cited in Lady Montagu’s letters to Lady (Adrianople) dated 1st April 1717 was an account of the Turkish baths in Sophia. She tried to break all the misconceptions prevalent at the time of picturing the East as an erotic and sensual place. She carefully counteracts previous traveler’s eroticized image with a rhetoric founded on her appropriation of the aesthetic domain to the women traveler. She presents her first interaction with the bathers in a manner that affirms the women’s independent subjectivity and agency while exposing the fallacy of Eurocentric prejudices. Arriving at the bathes in her riding habit, she is received with surprising tolerance by those women. Likening the beautiful bathers to prestigious European works of art- to Milton’s Eve and the frequently painted classical motif of Three Graces- she reinforces that these Turkish women were neither “wanton” nor “immodest”. In fact by comparing the bathing women to the works of European art, she attempts to de-eroticize them. Montagu has reversed the usual relation between traveler and inhabitant; she herself was obviously a curiosity, which the Turkish women inspect with a lively interest modulated by their extremely good manners. In refined politeness, the pride of the European courts, these eastern women surpasses the Western women aristocrats. Their tactful conduct reveal them as intelligent, sensitive selves, with whom the visitors may have some rapport. Montagu thus stands in contrast to a great number of other travelers who have attempted to give a picture of the East stemming from their preconceived stereotypes.

The Turkish Embassy Letters illustrates the complexity of Montagu's social interactions within the gendered "contact zones" she experienced. They also throw light on how these interactions worked to reconstitute her subjectivity; while her experience with other cultures surely transformed her view of others, it more importantly changed her view of herself as an Englishwoman and of the world as a whole. Montagu's resistance and critique of traditional women's role grew bolder after her travels. However the fact that Montagu typically pushed the boundaries of proper "feminine" behavior during her early life—in her self-education, her elopement with Wortley, and her writing, among other things cannot be avoided. Montague's reflections about Turkish women led her to eventually embody a new subject position in England—one that enacts political agency in ways traditionally regarded as "male". She does undergo a radical transformation after (and as a result of) her travels and this transformation changed her behavior, actions, and worldview; and eventually brought her to challenge social and political constraints that she dared not challenge before. Despite the mediation of such constraints that place her in a threshold position between the personal and the political, feminine and masculine, domestic and public, Montagu continued to exhibit subjective changes in her writing long after her return to England.

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