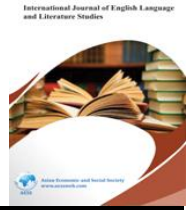




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FEMINIST GLIMPSES TO ORIENTAL CULTURE: THE STUDY OF LADY MARY MONTAGU'S TRAVEL LETTERS

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ABSTRACT

Lady Mary Wortley Montagues's travel letters were first published in 1763 based on her journey to the Ottoman Empire undertaken during the years of 1716 to 1718. Her letters are apparently written based on several occasions to historical individuals such as Lady Mar, Alexander Pope and Abbe' Conti. The memories show that her empiricist epistemology is in combine with a kind of relativist feminism to oriental culture which has been experienced during her interaction with the society of Turkish ladies on early eighteen century. This study aims to show part of Lady Mary Montagu's experiences among the women of Ottoman Empire and her feministic view towards their culture; particularly their manners and customs.

Key Words: Oriental culture- Feminism- Ottoman Empire (Turkish Ladies)

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INTRODUCTION

In 1717, Lady Mary Montague had a journey to the Ottoman Empire accompanying her husband who had been appointed as the British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte. However He miserably failed as a diplomat and after only fifteen months he was recalled. During their brief sojourn, Lady Mary kept a journal and wrote some letters on Turkish culture and habits. Her letters were particularly a complex of habits, manners and beliefs she had experienced among the women, especially the aristocratic ones, of early eighteen century in Ottoman Empire. Upon returning to England, Lady Mary produced an edited epistolary account of her travel based on the records. Although her daughter Lady Bore burnt the journal to prevent the publication, it was finally published just one year after Lady Mary's death in 1763.

The analysis of the letters has mainly focused on the fact that Lady Mary's letters have largely participated in the orientalism of her day and somehow she could be read as a feminist. There are several scenes and quotations in her letters that clearly show her admiration toward the culture of orient, the freedom that oriental women feel under their culture and the beautiful customs or interactions, exists among the oriental women, but are easily ignored or lost in the culture of West.

Definition of culture

Anthropologist Edward B. Taylor offered a broad definition, stating that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1).

However, due to the broad scope of culture, this study would be limited in the sense that just morals, habits and customs of Ottoman Empire's women would be considered through Lady Montagu's letters.

Lady mary and sympathy with the east

Lady Mary Wortley Montague, a prominent woman of the Enlightenment, not only is admired for her contributions to epistolary writing, her controversial literary war with Alexander Pope, and her introduction of smallpox inoculation to England, but also for her support of women's rights.

Reading through her letters clearly shows that she doesn't merely write of the orient, but she is also unafraid to contest- often quite sarcastically- the previous travel-writers' accounts of the east. She says: "Now I am a little acquainted with their ways, I cannot forbear admiring either the exemplary discretion or extreme stupidity of all the writers that have given accounts of [Turkish women]" (Halsband 327). In other words, in her letters, Montague "remarks upon cultural differences, as all travellers do; and at the same time, she contests

the normative masculine vision of her Western predecessors, noticing different phenomena, and correcting previous misrepresentations from her perspective as a woman" (Aravamudan 73).

As Montague visits and monitor the Turkish women and their morals, she regrets for all those false reports she have heard or read about before. She usually lets her first-hand experiences speak for themselves but sometimes she is frustrated enough to oppose against the reports and answer them harshly. For example at one part she writes a responding letter to a lady and says:

Your whole letter is full of mistakes from one end to 'tother. I see you have taken your ideas of Turkey from that worthy author Dumont, who has writ with equal ignorance and confidence. Tis a particular pleasure for me to here read the voyages to the Levant, which are generally so far remov'd from truth and so full of Absurditys I am very well diverted with 'em. They never fail giving you an Account of the Women, which 'tis certain they never saw, and talking very wisely of

the Genius of the Men, into whose Company they are never admitted, and very often describe Mosques, which they dare not peep into” (Halsband 386).

Even sometimes Montague sneers at descriptions of Turkey which are given by some uninformed merchants and travellers who

Pick up some confus'd informations which are generally false, and they can give no better an Account of the ways here than a French refugee lodging in a Garret in Greek street, could write of the Court of England” (qtd. in Aravamudan 74).

In another place she says:

Tis certain we have but very imperfect relations of the manners and religion of these people, their part of the World being seldom visited but by merchants who mind little but their own affairs, or Travellers who make too short a stay to be able to report any thing exactly of their own knowledge” (qtd. In Lowenthal 88).

When somebody read the surface of her Turkish Embassy letters, something more than just an account of her observations of the East is appeared. Lady Montagu in her letters of Turkish Embassy shows a very new and different engagement in oriental discourse. Besides, because during her journey Montagu had access to some places that no men traveller have ever had, she was able to find some first hands information that could be matched with no previous accounts about oriental women. When she writes about her visit to the women's Baths in Arianople she says: “Adeiu, Madam. I am sure I have not entertained you with an account of such a sight as you never saw in your life and what no book of travels could inform you of. “Tis no less than for a Man to be found in one of these places” (Halsband 315). During her writings, Montagu tried to observe the culture of orient as empirically and objectively as possible, and so she immersed herself in all aspects of the culture and try to escape her outsider's perspectives: “I ramble every day, wrap'd up in my ferige and asmak, about Constantinope and amuse my selfe with seeing all that curious in it (Halsband 405) ... I am pretty far gone in Oriental Learning, and to say truth I study very hard” (Halsband 337). So Montagu tried to dress in Turkish clothing, learned their language and also provided “descriptions of prenuptial baths, of marriage processions and gift giving, of childbirth, of slavery, of enchantments, sorceries, and the so-called balm of Mecca” (Fernea 335). “Montague clearly took advantage of every opportunity available to involve herself in the culture, not just as an observer but as a participant” (Petit 7). Elizabeth Warnock Fernea sees Montagu as “remarkably free of ethnocentrism and reinforcing the enlightenment ideals of empiricism, egalitarianism, and objectivity” (331).

Aravamudan in an article written about Masquerade, Womanliness and Levantinization asserts that the ambivalence of Montagu about the masquerade of feminine identification is conspicuously reminder of Joan Riviere's assertion that "womanliness [] could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she [the analysand] was found to possess it". He continues that "Montagu's self-positioning as a female author competing with male predecessors resembles Riviere's original concept of womanliness as a masquerade" (71).

So it is clearly apparent here that Lady Mary in no ways disapproves this liberty among oriental women. As Aravamudan suggests that this is the case because Lady Mary doesn't perceives Oriental women as members of her own cultural setting, but as members of an "ambiguous state of nature", in fact, a "prelapsarian" state (86).

One of the techniques that are now and then observed in Montagu's letters is familiarizing. While looking deeply into the culture of orient, she wisely chooses what are different or strange and then by casting the light of west on, tries to make a somehow familiarized situation for her reader. In other words, she compares those unfamiliar aspects of Orient with something similar in the West. Once going to Hammam and visiting naked women she makes a comparison among those women and classical figures in western art:

They walk'd and mov'd with the same majestic Grace which Milton describes of our General Mother. There were many amongst them as exactly proportion'd as ever any Goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian, and most of their skins shiningly white, only adorn'd by their Beautiful Hair divided into many tresses hanging on their shoulders, braided either with pearl or riband, perfectly representing the figures of the Graces" (Halsband 313).

However some authors, such as Gabrielle Petit believes that in this kind of description, Montagu has only perpetrates Western construction and has portrayed Turkish women in terms of Western Women and art. "She robs these women of their ethnicity by recasting them as objects of Western culture" (8).

To continue with her familiarizing technique, in another part she says:

Our Palace in Pera, which is no more a suburb of Constantinople than Westminster is a suburb to London"... the jewels of Sultana are "enough to make 4 necklaces every one as large as the Dutchesse of Marlbro's" ... "the Ladys go in their Coaches to see the camp as eagerly as our did to that Hide Park..." (Halsband 356, 62, 82).

At other part, Montagu makes a comparison between the women's baths and English coffee-houses: "In short, tis the Women's coffee house, where all the news of the Town is told, Scandal invented, etc" (Halsband 314)

Lady mary in hammam (bath) and harem

Being a woman, Lady Mary had access to all those places that were exclusively for women such as harems and baths. Isobel Grundy says: "she learned that the harem rested less on sexual than family politics; that women (veiled, of course) moved freely about the streets; and that the segregation of the sexes created a female space with its own culture and its own hierarchy" (148). Therefore, Montague's reports desexualized and normalized the women, especially where they were heavily eroticized by men (Petit 10).

Even at some parts Montague use the oral account of Turkish women themselves to fight against the eroticized picture of oriental woman. For instance she had heard a rumor about how Sultan chooses the woman she is going to spend the night with. She had heard that all the women of Harem just would crowd around the bed of Sultan and would ask for a favor; to be chosen by him. Whoever Sultan tosses his handkerchief to, would be chosen then. But when Montagu asked Sultana about this story she found it as a fake one and the truth was that the women was simply informed about Sultan's expectations just one night before (Halsband 383).

At this part, very soon, Montagu tries to make a similar situation in her western culture and says:

This seem'd to me neither better nor worse than the Circles in most Courts where the Gance of the Monarch is watch'd and every smile waited for with impatience and envy'd by those that cannot obtain it" (Halsband 385). However Petit believes that here Montagu criticizes Christian notions of morality and good conduct by illustrating good behavior in Islamic culture (18).

In most of the travelling notes, western observers have usually described Sultan's seraglio a state-within-a-state, having special laws and freedoms. But Lady Montagu tries to offer a completely different observation from the typical Christian belief that knows Islam as denying women souls. While trying to force others to modify their perceptions by relying on the relativism of a character in an Aphra Behn play, she says:

As to their [Turkish women's] Morality or good Conduct, I can say like Arlequin, 'tis just as 'tis with you, and the Turkish Ladys don't commit one Sin the less for not being Christians. Now I am a little acquainted with teir ways, I cannot forbear admiring either the exemplary discretion or extreme Stupidity of all the writers that have given accounts of 'em. 'Tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have" (qtd. In Aravamudan 79).

Lady marry and morals of turkish women

During her living in Ottoman Empire, Lady Mary did her best to remove the distance between the Turkish women and herself. As a result she participated in their activities, like visiting the baths, going to dinner at various women's houses, and engaging in conversations with them about both cultures, and therefore she showed that had done her best to identify with those women. Turkish women found her clothing and actions strange, and Montagu manipulated this in her account (Petit 11): "I was in my travelling habit, which is a riding dress, and certainly appear'd very extraordinary to them, yet there was not one of 'em that shew'd the least surprise or impertinent Curiosity, but receiv'd me with all the obliging civility possible" (Halsband 314).

To show how much she immersed herself in Turkish culture Montagu says: "I am in great danger of loseing my English. I find it is not halfe so easy to me to write in it as it was a twelve-month ago. I am forc'd to study for expressions and must leave off all other languages and try to learn my Mother tongue" (Halsband 309).

Montagu in her letters clearly explained that, unlike Westerners, The Turkish women accepted her differences and behaviours with no needs for being scorned.

At some parts, the reader feels that the roles are changed during Lady Montagu's stories. There are some scenes in which it is felt that it is Lady Montagu who is the object here and the Turkish women are observing her as the subjects. Maybe it could be explained through her experience in the Turkish bath while refusing to take off her clothes. Petit believes that here she was presenting herself as an object to the Turkish women (12):

The Lady that seem'd the most considerable amongst them entreated me to sit by her and would fain have undress'd me for the bath. I excus'd my selfe with some difficulty, they being all so earnest in perswading me. I was at last forc'd to open my skirt and shew them my stays, which satisfy'd 'em very well, for I saw they beleiv'd I was so lock'd up in that machine that it was not in my own power to open it, which contrivance they attributed to my Husband" (Halsband 315).

Therefore, it is no longer the Turkish women who are strange and exotic; Montagu is the foreigner in this situation. Montagu's refusal can be interpreted as portraying herself as an object being imposed upon and dominated by her husband and his wishes" (Petit 12). Kietzman believes that "In contrast to themselves, the women construct Montagu as an Other who is limited, passive (in her refusal to join them), pitifully singular, and oppressed by her husband" (540).

Analyzing the scene of Montague's taking off her clothes in the bath, most of the critics believe that Montagu used this occasion to express her opinion on corsets and sexual politics of their country (England). In writing the events and stories Montagu has been free enough to manipulate

the scenes as she liked, but here it seems that she aims to normalize the exotic and make it to seem more natural than Western behavior (Petit 13):

The oriental Women are natural, comfortable with their bodies, while the western women are imprisoned in their natural stays” (Melman 92). However, Elizabeth A. Bohls believes that “The corset/chastity belt, an everyday object suddenly made strange- becomes a witty allegory for Montagu’s own oppression as an English woman” (37).

Lady montague and the freedom of turkish women

One other important aspect of Montague’s writing- in line with Orientalist discourse- is her use of the east and Turkish Women as a mirror for her own status as a woman in England. She also uses the east as an Other to criticize the West and institutions. Here is the place that Montagu develops her theory of Turkish women being “the only free people in the Empire” (Halsband 329), rather than oppressed and imprisoned individuals that everyone assumes they are (Petit 16):

Tis very pleasant to observe how tenderly [Hill] and all his brethren Voyage writers lament the miserable confinement of the Turkish ladys, who are (perhaps) freer than any ladys in the universe, and are the only women in the world that lead a life of uninterrupted pleasure, exempt from cares, their whole time being spent in visiting, bathing, or the agreeable Amusement of spending Money and inventing new fashions. A Husband would be thought mad that exacted any degree of Economy from his wife ... They go abroad when and where they please”

In other word, as Bohl suggest, “the letter’s treatment of Turkish women is thoroughly ambivalent, doubtless tangled up with Montagu’s ambivalence about women’s status in her own culture” (40).

Montague take the veil, as a symbol to show how in her opinion, it frees the Turkish women to do what they want. She knows the veil as cover which helps women to go anywhere they want or to do anything they wish without being identified. Even this anonymity gives them freedom to have illicit sexual encounters without chance of detection (Petit 16). Halsband, in *the complete letters*, quotes from Montague that: “This perpetual masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their Inclinations without danger of discovery” (328). Or in another letter, writing to her sister, she says:

Tis very easy to see that they have more liberty than we have, no Woman of what rank so ever being permitted to go in the streets (without the veil and the ferigee)... You may guess how effectually this disguises them, that there is no distinguishing the great Lady from her Slave, and ‘tis impossible for the most jealous Husband to know his wife when he meets her, and no Man dare either touch or follow a woman in the Street....This perpetual Masquerade gives them entire liberty of following their Inclinations without danger of Discovery” (qtd. in Aravamudan 80).

So just at the time that Montague feels herself as somebody who lacks freedom in England and describes her corset or stays as a “machine” she feels the “veiled” Turkish women as free who have control over their own bodies.

Montagu also asserts that Turkish women have the right to divorce, and hold their properties in their own name, and take out of marriage what they have brought into it. And she points out that as a western woman; she lacks these benefits in England (Petit 17): Turkish women “are rich having all their money in their own hands, which they take with ‘em upon a divorce with an addition which he is oblig’d to give ‘em” (Halsband 329).

As it was mentioned before, here once again, Montagu uses the Turkish women as a mirror to criticize the role of women in England. As Mary Jo Kietzman points out “When Montagu sees Turkish women as *free* to create their own society, her sight is also informed by desire” (546).

Here Petit believes that Montagu sees what she likes to see and she wisely picks up what she thinks that would make the best advance in her criticism against the role of a woman in England. When she compares the Turkish baths with traditional English coffee-house, she is constructing the East as she likes to see it. She sees the baths as coffee houses because she finds it lacking in England, especially in her own situation, as a talented writer. Instead of publishing her work anonymously, she likes to be engaged in public discourse and publish her works under her own name (Petit 18).

Montagu conveniently ignores the aspects of Turkish Culture which seems unappealing to her, or not useful in criticizing the England society. She is not interested in actual problems of the Turkish society but uses the east as a mirror for her own life and culture (Petit 20).

However Bohls believes that “Turkish women’s vaunted freedom is on balance merely negative, a freedom from, rather than freedom to. The veiled woman in the street moves about in a kind of portable harem, a sacred space exempt from harassment, but effectively isolated from “public commerce”, in Montagu’s resonant phrase” (40).

Turkish women; the baby factories

However Lade Marry sees Turkish women as free in their society, but she believes that in Turkish culture they are compelled to be as baby factories. Based on Muslim doctrine, she writes,

the end of the Creation of Woman is to increase and Multiply, and she is only properly employ’d in the Works of her calling when she is bringing children or taking care of ‘em, which are all the Virtues that God expects from her; and indeed their way of life, which shuts them out of all public commerce, does not permit them any other” (qtd. In Bohls 40).

CONCLUSION

At the end it should be noted that Lady Mary Montague, is a historical figure which can't be easily labeled as an Orientalist. To understand how she and her writings fall into Orientalist discourse, one should read her writings on the both aspect of cultural dimension and gender domination. All the travel writers before her, were the men who tried to have a feminized and sexualized view toward the east; a view from a subject toward an object. But Lady Mary Montague never asserts her superiority over the East and most of the time she feels sympathy with the people of Orient. "She manages to slip between the cracks in the Orientalist theory" (Petit 22). As a woman Lady Mary opposed any gendered aspect of Orientalism, and tried to challenge any assumption sexualizing and feminizing the East. Petit asserts that Lady Mary Wortley Montague does not need to be labeled or to be pigeon-holed. He believes that trying to fit a historical figure into a certain category would result in loosening her identity and finally having a one-dimensional character. He knows Montague as a character that should be appreciated for her ambiguities and subtleties, instead of a character who should be melted down to fit a mold (22).

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