

Analyzing lady mary's
turkish embassy
letters: gender,
writing, and identity



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Identity is an idiosyncratic definition of a person that can be constructed through many variables: race, gender, class and culture, to name but a few. The Turkish Embassy Letters, comes with a pre-constructed, orientalist ideal of the East, where identity is constructed wholly on race and culture. Therefore, it is imperative that this account is from a female perspective. If seen through male eyes, the women that Lady Mary Wortley Montagu interacted with would have been seen as submissive and oppressed by their own culture, embodying the 'damsel in distress' trope. Instead, Lady Montagu is able to examine gender as a concept that not only influences identity, but is completely separate from it. It is from this female perspective that Lady Montagu is able to explore gendered oppression as a universal occurrence. An orientalist approach would view the West, and its people, as 'free', and the East as oppressed by their reserved culture and strict religion. Yet, the English protagonist is able to see that Turkish women may, in reality, be liberated through the anonymity of their veil. Therefore, Lady Montagu is able to re-define 'liberty' from this orientalist perspective, and to also liberate the Turks from this label of 'other'.

The identification of the Turk in Turkish Embassy Letters is constructed not through what the East was, but primarily through what the West was not. This 'otherness' is emphasised through a comparison to England and its 'amiable connexions with men of letters and taste'. Identity, and subsequently one's reputation in English society, is dependant upon education. The concept of 'taste' -extremely important within a judgemental eighteenth century society -is directly associated with 'letters', suggesting education and refinement are interdependent. It is evident that Montagu is

unable to escape the indoctrinated class system of her home country. Her approval of ' amiable' social circles is subtle but important, whilst the use of ' connexions' suggests an inner society of the upper class, closed off to the lower hierarchies of the class spectrum. Even in this examination of identity, gender is inseparable. Lady Montagu specifies ' men' as those worthy of bearing both an education and good taste; even as a woman, there is a learned belief that men are privileged by nature. This praise of English customs is structurally placed directly after a graphic description of Turkish barbarism. Purposefully, a comparison of the two cultures is automatically prompted. Therefore, the individuals described in the two accounts become representative of each culture as a whole, especially poignant as it includes the actions of a Turkish prince. He attempts to quash an uprising ' by ordering several persons to be strangled, who were the objects of his royal suspicion'. The lack of identity in ' persons' not only displays the lower classes as without this privileged voice, but it also suggests a disgustingly disposable element to human life. In contrast to the men of ' letters and taste', the violence of the ' barbaric spectacle' disregards class; identity is lost as everyone is reduced to a corpse. Furthermore, this comparison induces immediate judgement, both from narrative and reader. Yet, there is a sense of inescapable irony. The English are judged by their manners, their ' veins of wit' and ' elegant conversation', and the Turks by their laws of punishment. Therefore, when examined, the identity of the Turks is constructed in a method that is both biased and unbalanced. They are considered the ' other' in comparison to the English society, who notoriously judge on superficiality. To fully understand the Turkish identity, they must be considered as a separate culture, and not as in association with another. It is <https://assignbuster.com/analyzing-lady-marys-turkish-embassy-letters-gender-writing-and-identity/>

only through the physical distance from English society that Lady Montagu can observe as an outsider, and not conform to this judgemental perspective, as if she is a part of neither culture.

As a novel written from a female perspective, with access to exclusively female areas, it is undeniable that gender will be examined. This comparison between English and Turkish, that was previously seen as based upon sensibility, becomes how each culture defines freedom and oppression for women. Teresa Heffernan presents the eighteenth century view of the Turkish ' veiled woman' of whom ' can only be " saved" from her culture or " submit" to it.' [1] Lady Montagu, instead, views the veil as a protection from patriarchy, rather than an alienation of an oppressive culture. The author is almost admirable to their ' methods of evasion and disguise, that are very favourable to gallantry'. This sense of disguise is especially important in either Turkish or English society. To be a woman meant perpetual judgement upon her appearance, actions and morality. In a superficial society, this is inescapable. The veil allows Lady and handmaiden alike to appear identical; not only flesh, but social class is ' disguised' through this ' perpetual masquerade' (Montagu, p. 71). Thus, freedom is achieved through anonymity and an inability to judge, the very aspect that the Western male would assume is oppression. Lady Montagu then compares this existence to her experience as a woman in England. Similar to the Turk's suspected oppression, the English women are ' sold like slaves' (Montagu, p. xi) through the traditions of marriage and dowries. Additionally, this idea of ' gallantry' can be linked in this comparison. Culture, and gender politics are defined ' as different in different climates as morality and religion'. Yet, the struggle for a

lack of oppression is unbiased of culture and race; gallantry within gender politics is universal to all cultures, especially poignant within the strictures of the eighteenth century. Within this examination of gender, there is also an aspect of class. The author is a Lady, yet appreciates the freedom that 'even the bosom of servitude' offers. Even with such a status, Lady Montagu is unbiased, and refuses to include class within her examinations of gender. Therefore, gender is examined here separately from the other identity markers. 'Liberty' as a female is defined differently according to culture, location and class. Yet, all of this is kept in separate consideration as Lady Montagu simply observes and celebrates the freedom of the Turks, rather than considering their actions as 'other' in comparison to England.

Thus far, the identity of both Turkish individuals, and their culture as a whole, has been examined. Yet, these observations have been presented to the reader through the written word, and it is important to consider how the physical act of writing and perspective is important. Lady Montagu's perspective, and her letters as a point of information, becomes problematic. In the eighteenth century, travel writers made many claims upon their discoveries. Therefore, the genre can induce doubts as to whether the content is truth, or a falsification. Lady Montagu actively claims to a truth to her writing: 'I [...] desire you will believe me'. There is this constant assertion of truth throughout her text, displaying a self-awareness that her letters may be used as educational. Perhaps Lady Montagu repeats herself so as this seemingly accurate representation of cultures needs to be taken seriously upon returning home, difficult in both the genre, and gender of the author. However the very assertion of truth produces doubts; once again

perspective is problematic; the 'truth' according to Lady Montagu may not be the truth that others already believe. Despite this, Lady Montagu's letters present an opposition to previous masculine narratives such as Joseph Spence, of whom claimed 'Turkish ladies, you know are a sort of prisoner'. The phrase 'you know' suggest in itself a claim to authenticity simply due to his gender. Therefore, Lady Montagu's claim to truth perhaps suggests that Turkish gender politics cannot be recorded by man, as their very gender alters the way they see a culture, and therefore how they construct it through writing. It is not only the content -including the female-only areas that Lady Montagu can frequent -but the author that is important. Truth, perhaps, is not a universal concept that can simply be seen, but one that must be perceived.

The Turkish Embassy Letters can be understood as a record and construction of identity, primarily of the Turks, seen as the 'other'. This account defines Lady Montagu as the 'self', one that represents the English consciousness. Yet, throughout her letters, the boundaries between the 'self' and 'other' are blurred. This occurs physically, as Lady Montague adorns herself with Turkish dress, aligning herself not only with their culture, but the politics associated with their choice of dress. Gender also refuses to separate each culture; Lady Montague identifies with the imposed oppression of the Turkish women, that English women experience also. Yet there still remain moments of alienation in language such as 'phlegm', as Lady Montagu can seemingly never be rid of the male, orientalist narrative. Therefore, an underlying tension exists within her letters. The narrative is a detachment and an embodiment of both English and Turkish customs; paradoxically, it allows

Lady Montagu a position of indifference, with an analytical perspective of the both.

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