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BRITISH WOMEN TRAVELLERS AND THE HAREMS

Liberties, Enslavement and Domesticity

A thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the complex perspective of a woman traveller. Wortley Montagu, Martineau, Burton and their contemporaries, represented the harem through various lenses. The Oriental harem has fascinated Western civilization since time immemorial. This sacred place, reserved for the women and children of the Muslim household, had long been a terra incognita to British outsiders, until the publication of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's (1689-1762) *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763), which gave impetus to a whole tradition of travel writings, particularly harem accounts, penned by British women. The aristocratic Wortley Montagu recasts Turkish women from their previous Western image as over-sexed and soulless beings to idealized domestic goddesses, living in an ideal world, the harem. Harriet Martineau (1802-1876), travelled to the Ottoman Empire more than a century after Wortley Montagu's residency in Oriental lands. Martineau was a rare talent. She was an accomplished journalist and a pioneering figure in Western sociology. She spent her life validating a place for herself and her sex in a patriarchal and male-dominated society; she earned her own keeping, and lived independently. Martineau related her eastern experience in *Eastern Life: Past and Present* (1848), in which the Oriental harem figures very little. Martineau pitied the women she encountered in Egypt, and depicted them as slaves of a corrupt system, the harem and the practice of polygamy. My thesis ends with the travel writings of Lady Isabel Burton (1831-1896) whose view of the Oriental women she met in Syria is the most tempered. Her *Inner Life of Syria, Palestine and the Holy Lands: from my Private Journal* (1875) displays a tolerance of other cultures and a move toward moral and cultural relativisms.

Each of the women considered in this thesis formed her own harem, projecting on to this distant Oriental structure her fears, hopes and desires. Wortley Montagu's harem was a utopia for women only. The Victorian Martineau opined that the Oriental harem was a hell on earth. Lady Isabel Burton constructed a happy medium between the two. Although at times ambivalent towards the Syrian women she encountered, she partook in their customs and manners, particularly public bathing, smoking and other Eastern indulgences. Her attitude illustrates that the British home and the Oriental harem are not so dissimilar, bridging the gap between us and them.

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INTRODUCTION

‘I’ll not stand you an inch in the stead of a seraglio,’ I said; ‘so don’t consider me an equivalent for one. If you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you, sir, to the bazaars of Stamboul without delay, and lay out in extensive slave-purchases some of that spare cash you seem at a loss to spend satisfactorily here.’

‘And what will you do, Janet, while I am bargaining for so many tons of flesh and such an assortment of black eyes?’

‘I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved – your harem inmates amongst the rest. I’ll get admitted there, and I’ll stir up mutiny; and you, three-tailed bashaw as you are, sir, shall in a trice find yourself fettered amongst our hands: nor will I, for one, consent to cut your bonds till you have signed a charter, the most liberal that despot ever yet conferred!’¹

Jane Eyre’s indignant reaction to Rochester exemplifies Western views of the Oriental harem prevalent in the Nineteenth Century. It is the intention of this thesis to explore a British woman’s perspective on the Muslim harem during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. British women travelers to the Near East enjoyed exclusive entry to the private chambers of Ottoman households, a privilege which carved out a niche for them in the colossus of European travel writings on Oriental customs and manners. Mary Astell in ‘Preface by A lady’ illustrates the exclusivity and novelty of a woman’s perspective on the world without:

I CONFESS, I am malicious enough to desire, that the world should see to how much better purpose the LADIES travel than their LORDS; and that, whilst it is surfeited with Male travels, all in the same tone, and stuffed with the same trifles; a lady has the skill to strike out a new path, and to embellish a worn-out subject with variety of fresh and elegant entertainment.²

The ideas and concerns at the heart of this thesis relate to me personally. I am a woman of Palestinian-Lebanese origin, I travelled to New Zealand in my early years to be raised between two cultures, Western and Eastern. What I want to explore in this thesis is that travel in reverse. How did female travelers to the Orient in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries view the new world they entered? Did they see the Oriental harem as a place of exotic beauty and adventure, or did they shrink from a culture that was different to their own? Did these women’s pre-conceptions of the Muslim home change when they

experienced the source, or did their assumptions and ethnocentricity cloud their ability to experience the source culture? Moreover, how were women's accounts of harem life different from their male predecessors and contemporaries? How much did these women's personal agendas, lives, and thoughts affect their construction of the Orient? Finally, to what extent were these women able to voice their true views of harem life and Oriental women in a time leading up to, and during, Britain's age of "High Imperialism"³.

This thesis will focus on the travel accounts of three British women, each belonging to different periods and different marital, social and economic statuses. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, the first of my case studies, is considered a pioneer of the British female travel writing tradition. She was of aristocratic upbringing; well educated, and a highly intellectual, philosophical and broad-minded individual. Wortley Montagu's position as the wife of a British diplomat to Turkey in 1717 gave her an opportunity to glean an understanding of the manners and customs of the Turkish elite, with a focus on their domestic habits. Her one year sojourn in Turkey produced the highly influential and popular *The Turkish Embassy Letters*; this compilation of letters, published posthumously in 1763, provided many people in Europe with their first glimpses of the Ottoman harem. Out of all of the women in my study, Wortley Montagu remains the most successful, and most well-known. She wrote her letters in the early eighteenth century, wherein there was more tolerance to different sexual and religious systems than in the following century. This latitudinarian attitude, characteristic of the Augustan age, allowed Wortley Montagu some freedom to speak of the sexual aesthetic of the Turkish ladies. This in turn makes her account more entertaining and aesthetically pleasing than the other accounts of women travellers I will review.

The next lady traveler is perhaps the most accomplished and prolific of my study; Harriet Martineau, a middle class woman, who lived independent of any man. For Martineau, writing was a vocation, and a successful one; George Eliot once described her as 'the only woman in England who thoroughly possessed the art of writing'⁴. Regardless of the veracity of Eliot's statement, Martineau enjoyed a successful position in journalism and fiction writing that eluded many of her female contemporaries and successors. She used her skilled pen to advocate the rights of women, most strikingly their rights to education and equal work opportunities. Moreover, Martineau was a woman who frequently travelled; she toured and produced books on the social manners of America, after which she visited the Near East, and produced the controversial *Eastern Life, Past and Present* (1848). Embedded in this book is a study of the genealogy of religion, a subject which women were discouraged from writing about. Martineau's travelogue on Egypt and the Holy lands is of interest to the corpus of women's travel writings that appeared in nineteenth-century Britain. Her manifest abhorrence of Oriental domestic life illustrates the polarity and diversity of views on the Oriental harem and its women. Furthermore, her 'Hareem' chapter can be interpreted as a venting for her micro-political views on the "Woman Question" in Britain.

The last adventurer of my thesis is Lady Isabel Burton; best described as a loyal

wife and travel companion to one of the most colorful and infamous personalities of Victorian England, Sir Richard Francis Burton. She is the typical female traveler of the Victorian age, writing for her own sex, but nevertheless involved in the career of her husband in the East. Isabel Burton was of the upper middle class, she was a devout catholic and spent her life valorizing her husband's career. She produced two travel accounts, the most famous of which is *The Inner Life of Syria, Palestine and the Holy Lands (1875) from my private journal*. The tropes and themes in this book are representative of the conventional harem account that proliferated in the nineteenth century.

This thesis investigates the writings of these three British women travellers on the harem space and Oriental women. The historical reach of my thesis extends from 1717, the year of Wortley Montagu's sojourn in Turkey, until 1875 with the publication of Isabel Burton's travelogue. Through the close reading of letters, travelogues and memoirs I will explore the ways in which women's harem accounts provided an alternative view to the inauthentic accounts written by Western men. However, the travels of Wortley Montagu, Martineau and Burton, must be seen in the context of travel writing as a genre, and issues relating to gender, particularly in relation to European perceptions of the Orient. My interest and argument is strongly indebted to post-colonial feminist scholars, in particular Billie Melman, Reina Lewis and Sara Mills. My analysis of female travel texts uses post-colonialism and post-structuralism, especially those ideas proposed by Michel Foucault, Edward Said and other scholars who followed in their tradition. However, I depart from Said's model of Orientalist discourse, particularly in its homogeneity. My argument, in keeping with Melman, Mills and Lewis, is that women's role in the formation of knowledge about the Orient is complex and that travel writings by women about the harem upsets the binary of West and East and the homogeneity of colonial discourse from which Said draws.

Much recent critical attention has considered travel writings, although its status as a genre or a pseudo genre remains ambiguous, as Tim Youngs illustrates: Travel writing feeds from and back into other forms of literature. To try to identify boundaries between various forms would be impossible and I would be suspicious of any attempt at the task.⁵ Travel writing also encompasses a range of literary styles and genres and Zweder von Martels details the main variations and constituents that comprise travel writing:

Travel writing seems unlimited in its forms of expression, but though we may therefore find it hard to define the exact boundaries of this genre, it is generally understood what it contains. It ranges from the indisputable examples such as guidebooks, itineraries and routes and perhaps also maps to less restricted accounts of journeys over land or by water, or just descriptions of experiences abroad. These appear in prose and poetry, and are often past of historical and (auto) biographical works.⁶

Travel writing thus traverses both fiction and non-fiction, and can include fiction writings like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Melville's *Moby Dick*. The crucial and common thread in all forms of travel writing is the collision of cultures, which occurs in what Mary Louis Pratt terms contact zones: 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today.'⁷

Thus travel writing hinges on the relationship between observer and observed, a relationship doomed to a model of inequality, and an asymmetrical nexus of us and them. As Foucault posits in 'What is an Author?', a traveller's writing voice is more an extension of his/her background and ideological informants than opinion:

. . . the "author-function" is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine, and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not operate in a uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by the spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer, purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and to a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy.⁸

It may be seen that the boundaries of female discourse are extended by travel writing as these writers step outside of the domestic sphere to comment upon the world of politics, sexuality and alien cultures. Foucault's concepts of discourse, the gaze, and the nexus of power and knowledge all tie into the process of travel, its production and distribution. Foucault describes discourse as 'the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements'⁹.

Previous interests in the recovery of women's travel writing have focused on seeking out the ways in which women's travel writing might be distinctively different from that of their male counterparts; 'It is a common assumption amongst critics on women's travel writing that women's writing is self-evidently different to men's, and very little work examines the features shared with male-authored texts.'¹⁰ This type of analysis is reductive however, as it emphasizes "essentialism" and perpetuates the ideology of separate spheres, and prescribed gender roles. Women's writing is not homogenous; gender is not a unifying determiner. Mills, in her study of the British women traveller's role in the Empire, suggests that women's writing was regulated by discursive constraints: the discourse of femininity and the discourse of empire:

...western women writers' accounts often display a tension between the negotiation of two groups of discourses, neither of

which completely overrides the other. They were certainly not considered to be ‘speaking for’ the imperial project in their work. The discourses of ‘femininity’ determine that women writers are more likely to describe their interactions with people rather than solely relating these accounts of the country to larger colonial issues or strategies.¹¹

These discourses at once regulated women’s travel writing and enabled them to exist. Hulme defines colonial discourse as:

an ensemble of linguistically-based practices unified by their common deployment in the management of colonial relationships, an ensemble that could combine the most formulaic and bureaucratic of official documents – say the Capitulations issued by the Catholic Monarchs to Christopher Columbus in 1492 – with the most non-functional and unprepossessing of romantic novels – say Shirley Graham’s *The Story of Pocahontas*. Underlying the idea of colonial discourse, in other words is the presumption that during the colonial period large parts of the non-European world were produced for Europe through a discourse that imbricated sets of questions and assumptions, methods of procedure and analysis, and kinds of writing and imagery, normally separated out into the discrete areas of military strategy, political order, social reform, imaginative literature, personal memoir and so on.¹²

Women’s travel writing of the nineteenth century is not free of colonial ideology, and this adds to the complex reaction of women viewing the Middle Eastern “other”. As the ideology of empire expanded, Britain’s view of the Ottomans changed, and this thesis demonstrates some of these changes through the eyes of women writers. For years, women wrote under pseudonyms; their gender roles curtailing them from public expression. Literary production for women ‘breaks the cultural taboo against women as public speakers’¹³, and, as Cora Kaplan comments,

in western societies (and in other cultures as well) public speech is a male privilege and women’s speech is restricted by custom, in mixed sex gatherings or, if permitted, still characterized by its private nature, an extensive of the trivial domestic discourse of women.¹⁴

Despite the obstacles, women travelled and produced well received travel accounts. However, these women had to negotiate their position as writers and women, and to do so they often employed particular textual strategies. For example, travel writing could be written in the form of the ‘confessional’, and Mills comments that: ‘In women’s travel writing there is a strong influence of the ‘confessional’ model of texts, so that

although women are depicted performing strong and adventurous acts, they are far more self-revelatory than men's. There are significant discursive pressures on women writing travel accounts to position them within the confessional mode.¹⁵ The confessional model was suitable for women, for example they were encouraged to write their travels in the form of letters and diaries. However, it would be misleading to assume that women's travel accounts are a direct reference to their lives. Mills writes that: There is no sense in which it can be assumed that reading a travel journal gives the reader information about the life of the writer. What should be analysed are the "various positions of subjectivity" within this confessional field which women writers can occupy and construct for themselves.¹⁶ The interplay between discourses of femininity and colonialism creates heterogeneity of women's travel writing, and disrupts Said's linear view of colonial discourse.

Much of my thesis is on the *locus sensualis* of the East, which has been a timeless fascination for the West; the harem:

[The] combination of sexuality and the oppression of women [in the harem] appealed to the West because of its obvious political aspect. From the Enlightenment onwards, the harem came to be not merely a psychosexual symbol, but a metaphor for injustice in civil society and the state and arbitrary government.¹⁷

In relation to this point, Ruth Bernard Yeazall in *Harems of the Mind* relates the negative connotations of the harem space to 'linguistic confusion': Thinking of women as literally locked up in the harem, Europeans mistakenly associated the Turco-Persian word for palace, *saray*, with the Italian *serrare* to lock up or enclose — by which false etymology the English "seraglio" and the French *sérait* came to signify not only an entire building (as in the "Grand Seraglio" at Constantinople), but the apartments in which the women were confined and even the women themselves...[and] European imaginations freely exploited the confusion.¹⁸

Further, the harem, veil and polygamy have been linked solely to Islam, although they did not originate in Islamic decree. The harem comes from the Arabic root *haram*, which means forbidden, sacred, or needs protection. By inference, a harem is the place where the women and children of a household are kept safe from intrusion. Thus, the fundamental function of the harem is not sexual, as the West propitiates, but rather communal and familial. Leila Ahmed defines the harem as:

a system that permits males sexual access to more than one female. It can also be defined, and with as much accuracy, as a system whereby the female relatives of a man - wives, sisters, mother, aunts, daughters - share much of their time and their living space, and further, which enables women to have frequent and easy access to other women in their community, vertically, across class lines, as

well as horizontally.¹⁹

The dynamics of the harem system, that is polygamy and the seclusion of women, originate in pre-Islamic times. The Old Testament contains references to polygamists, most notably prophets Abraham and Jacob. Prophet Abraham had two wives,²⁰ and Jacob married four women.²¹ Moreover, the New Testament contains no explicit sanctions against plural marriage, except in one instance; wherein St. Paul addresses the qualities of deacons and Elders, one of which is monogamy.²² Furthermore, the *gynecaea* was a Greek synonym of the harem system, and Chinese noble households also contained private quarters for its women and children.

Despite the practice of polygamy among numerous peoples and across different faiths, in Western literature it is most often associated with the Muslim Orient and came to be recognized as a manifestation of the supposed despotism and sexism of the Islamic faith. In *Women's Orients* Melman suggests that Muslim polygamy gained a distinctive place in Western imagination:

In contradistinction to other forms of non-monogamous sexuality encountered by Europeans, the harem system had been rarely idealized. Polygamy and 'promiscuity' in the far East, in equatorial societies or in the antipodes had been elevated to models of natural sensuality or pre-Lapsarian innocence. The haremlik (or women and children's quarters in the Ottoman house) was not a utopian place, nor the locus of innocent sexuality, not even to 'polygamists' like Montesquieu and Diderot. Indeed the haremlik had occupied a special in the sexual geography of travelers, ethnographers and thinkers.²³

This thesis contains three chapters on the lives of three British women who produced their own take on the Oriental harem experience. Chapter One begins with the first British women travel writer to produce a secular account of the Ottoman Empire, Wortley Montagu. Her *Turkish Embassy Letters* constitute a critique of previous male accounts, and her tolerant and sympathetic views present her as a citizen of the world. The next chapter follows the Eastern travels of Harriet Martineau, an independent and misunderstood spirit. Her views on Oriental domestic life may seem racially charged to the modern reader, but upon closer analysis her writings may be read as a social political commentary on the British home. My last chapter examines the writings of a faithful wife and travel companion, Lady Isabel Burton. Despite her conformity to Victorian ideals of femininity, her writings on her experiences in a Syrian harem and a public bath betray her adventurous and wild spirit. My conclusion compares the perspectives of Wortley Montagu, Martineau and Burton with the travel memoir of a nineteenth-century governess in Egypt. Emmeline Lott's condescending views on Ottoman daily life throw into relief the more nuanced and complex attitudes of the three women whose writings lie at the heart of this thesis.

In the course of this thesis, the harem will be viewed as a *topos*: ‘a set of references, a congeries of characteristics, that seems to have its origin in a quotation, or a fragment of a text, or a citation from someone’s work on the Orient, or some bit of previous imagining, or an amalgam of all these.’²⁴ The signifiers of the harem are varied and at times paradoxical; women and men onlookers transcribed this institution differently. The intention of this thesis is to explore the range of alternate views and representations of domestic life in the former Ottoman Empire. These representations belong to British women travelers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The historical backdrop of my thesis is significant as the writings of these women take place at a time when British women sought to establish themselves in their own societies. I will examine the main recurring tropes, images and themes in the harem accounts of these “exceptional” women. How did Britain’s societal “other” describe their cultural other? Through the close reading of their travelogues and letters and memoirs, I hope to delineate British women’s complex roles of resistance and compliance within the Empire. I will explore how the change in the variables of class, marital status, and purposes of travel — work or pleasure — changes the textual formation of Oriental harem. Finally I will show how these women subtly vented frustrations with their own cultures, and the restraints placed upon them through travel writing, which provided an opportunity for their macro-political commentaries, an assessment of female sexuality, and the constraints placed upon it, not only in the Eastern World, but also in the West. Lott describes Wortley Montagu as the “Princess of Female Writers”²⁵, and it is with the views of the ‘Lady Ambassador’²⁶ that Chapter One begins.

ENDNOTES

¹ Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*, (London: W. Nickilson & Sons Ltd., 1847.), p. 227.

² Mary Astell, ‘Preface by A Lady’, (1724), in *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, The Turkish Embassy Letters*, ed. by Teresa Heffernan and Daniel O’Quinn (Canada: Broadview Editions, 2013), p. 223.

³ Quoted in Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference*, (London, New York: Taylor and Francis e-library, 2005), <<http://bookos.org/book/1107163/69a78c>>, [accessed 10 April 2013], p.1.

⁴ Quoted in Gaby Weiner, ‘The only woman in England who thoroughly possessed the art of writing: Harriet Martineau and journalism’, in *Martineau Conference paper*, (Boston, 2009),

< <http://www.gabyweiner.co.uk/HM%20&%20journalism.pdf>>, [accessed 8 September 2012], p.1.

⁵ Tim Youngs, *Travellers in Africa: British Travelogues 1850-1900* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p.8.

⁶ Zweder von Martels, *Travel Fact and Travel Fiction: studies on fiction, literary tradition, scholarly discovery and observation in travel writing*, (Leiden: Brill, 1994), p. xi.

⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003), in *bookos*, <<http://bookos.org/book/1291352/a3b714>>, [accessed 20 April 2013], p.4.

⁸ Michael Foucault, ‘What is an Author’, pp 321-334, ed. Donald Prezios, *The Art of History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2009), p.329.

⁹ Michael Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 90.

¹⁰ Mills, p. 28.

¹¹ Mills, p. 105.

¹² Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters* (London, New York : Routledge, 1992), p.2.

¹³ Mills, p. 4.

¹⁴ Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1987), p.70, quoted in Mills, p. 41.

¹⁵ Mills, p.103.

¹⁶ Mills, pp. 103-104.

¹⁷ Billie Melman, *Women's Orients* (Michigan, University of Michigan, 1992), p. 60.

¹⁸ Ruth Bernard Yeazall, *Harems of the Mind*, (Yale: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 2.

¹⁹ Leila Ahmed, 'Western Ethnocentrism and Perceptions of the Harem' *Feminist Studies*, vol. 8, no. 3 (Autumn, 1982), in *JSTOR*, <<http://www.JSTOR.org/stable/3177710>> , [accessed 30 May 2013], 521-534, (p.523).

²⁰ Genesis (16: 2-4), *King James Bible*.

²¹ Genesis(29:23-30; 31:17; 32:22), Genesis (30:1-24; 37:2), *King James Bible*.

²² 1Timothy (3:2,12), Titus (1:6), *King James Bible*.

²³ Melman, pp. 60-61.

²⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p.177.

²⁵ Emmeline Lott, *The Governess in Egypt: Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople*, (Philadelphia: T.B Peterson & Brothers, 1865)

²⁶ Lott, p. xxii.

Charles Jervase, *Portrait of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (1717)



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mary_Wortley_Montagu_by_Charles_Jervas,_after_1716.jpg [accessed 4 July 2013]

CHAPTER ONE

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: The Veil and Its Moving Liberties

[A]s much as I love travelling, I tremble at the inconveniences attending so great a journey with a numerous family, and a little infant hanging at the breast. However, I endeavour upon this occasion to do as I have hitherto done in all the odd turns of my life; turn them, if I can, to my diversion. In order to this, I ramble every day, wrapped up in my ferigée and asmáck, about Constantinople, and amuse myself with seeing all that is curious in it.¹

Travel gave Lady Mary Wortley Montagu a legacy of fame; she was as an icon for the British woman traveller, her *Turkish Embassy Letters* opening up a window of opportunity for women travellers to the Eastern Mediterranean. She possessed an aptitude for retelling stories about distant cultures and her accounts of the domestic affairs of the Ottoman aristocracy brought her literary recognition throughout Europe. Today her widely anthologized *Embassy Letters* is regarded as an example of early ethnographic literature. Wortley Montagu's life and works also demonstrate the position of women authors in eighteenth century Britain. In this chapter I explore both the unique view her writing provides on Turkey, and in particular Turkish women, and the ways in which Wortley Montagu's *Embassy Letters* are a polemic against the circulating male views of the Orient in her day. Positioning Wortley Montagu within the Orientalist discourse paradigm is thus problematic. Her writings, although they are an attack on European male assumptions of the harem, perpetuate some of the circulating assumptions about the Orient, especially in relation to its tropes and images in *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, popularly known as the *Arabian Nights*.

Wortley Montague's travel writings bear the imprint of her upbringing and world view. The loss of her mother when she was four, and the frequent absences of her father, Evelyn Pierrepont, Duke of Kingston, was a life-long burden. Her feelings of paternal neglect and maternal deprivation cast a shadow over Wortley Montagu's writing about Turkish women. As will be explored more fully later in this chapter, her passages on Turkish domestic life betray her sense of comfort and closeness in the harem; a female community structured around women's solidarity, and matriarchy. Despite Wortley Montagu's grievances against her father's

neglect, it was his associations and wealth that helped to shape her intellect and wit. She enjoyed the benefits of a classical education, and she taught herself Latin so well that she was as capable of the language as most men.² Her fervent belief in the need for female education led her to send Bishop Burnet a translation of *Enchiridion of Epictetus* in 1710, accompanied by an ironic letter protesting against the ‘universal ridicule[...] a learned woman’ confronted.³ Wortley Montague was a devoted daughter to her father, taking on the responsibilities of the management of the household, but also enjoyed spending time with her father’s associates from the Kit-Cat club – ‘a group of fashionable men devoted to the Whig cause and Hanoverian succession’⁴. Wortley Montagu developed a close friendship with both Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, the author-editors of the influential *Spectator*. Her most interesting friendship was with Pope, who was besotted with her, although in later years their friendship turned into antagonism over a political feud. Pope channelled his spite into art, characterising Wortley Montagu as a “Sappho” in his poetical attack: *To a lady: Epistle II*. Nevertheless, in between his polarized feelings towards her, Pope and Wortley Montagu’s correspondences during her husband’s Embassy in Turkey are of interest in my analysis.

George Paston writes that Wortley Montague ‘had a way of thinking very different from other girls’. Rather than looking for a husband, she regarded ‘marriage but as a bond that was to subject her to a master’ and planned a life of ‘retirement and study’ for herself.⁵ However, this intention was undermined by her growing affection for Edward Wortley. Their correspondence reveals her critique of contemporary attitudes to women. In one letter she challenges an article published in *The Tatler*:

Mr. Bickerstaff has very wrong notions of our sex. I can say there are some of us that despise charms of show, and all the pageantry of greatness, perhaps with more ease than any of the philosophers. In contemning the world, they seem to take pains to condemn it; we despise it, without taking the pains to read lessons of morality to make us do it. At least I know I have always looked upon it with contempt, without being at the expense of one serious reflection to oblige me to it. I carry the matter yet farther[...]There is something of an unavoidable embarrassment in making what is called a great figure in the world; [it] takes off from the happiness of life ; I hate the noise and hurry inseparable from great estates and titles, and look upon both as blessings that ought only to be given to fools, for 'tis only to them that they are blessings.⁶

This letter gives us an insight into the mind of the then twenty-one year old Wortley Montagu. She points out that there are women who despise show, and comments that some women may give up show more easily than any of the “philosophers”. Wortley Montagu did not endeavour to hide her true thoughts, even when addressing the man who might become her husband. She goes on to say

‘Few women would have spoke so plainly as I have done; but to dissemble is among the things I never do.’⁷ Her fearlessness is manifested in her *Embassy Letters*, wherein she passionately censures European male authorities’ assumptions on Turkish life, and confidently announces her own observations on important subjects to male authorities like the Abbé Conti, a famous Italian savant and *litterateur*, and Alexander Pope.

Marriage in the eighteenth century was a market, dictated by monetary matters, and indifferent to matters of the heart. Rae Blanchard comments, ‘It was a social and economic contract designed to protect private property and male inheritance.’⁸ Edward’s financial background deemed him a suitable suitor for Wortley Montagu. However, their marriage was impeded by Lord Dorchester’s stipulation, that a large settlement should be entailed on a male heir as yet unborn. This pre-condition was difficult for Edward to accept as he felt it would be a financial burden on his estate.⁹ Like many women of her day, Wortley Montagu moved from the control of her father to that of her husband, and in a letter to Edward, she explains a woman’s predicament, obedience: ‘I have no hand in the making of Settlements. My present Duty is to obey my Father. I shall so far obey blindly as not to accept where he refuses, tho’ perhaps I might refuse where he would accept[...].my Father may do some things disagreeable to my Inclinations, but passive Obedience is a doctrine should allwaies be receivd among wives and daughters.’¹⁰ The obstinacy of Lord Dorchester was resolved by an elopement, the couple marrying under a private license in 1712. After marriage, their correspondences depict Wortley as a submissive, affectionate wife, although Wortley Montagu was also active in promoting husband’s political career. Although overt political involvement was a mirage to women in Wortley Montagu’s time, she found ways to apply her Whig upbringing and influence Edward’s parliamentary election.¹¹

On April 7, 1716, Wortley Montagu’s life entered a new phase. Edward was appointed Ambassador Extraordinary to the Court of Turkey and the representative of the Levant Company, a post he held for a year. Wortley Montagu accompanied him with their first born son. She kept a journal of the events and experiences she had in Turkey, although unfortunately this personal log was burned by her literary executor, her daughter. However, the letters she sent to her family and social circle during her time in Turkey are derived from that perished journal. In 1763, a year after Wortley Montagu’s death, *The Turkish Embassy Letters* was published, in keeping with the author’s desire to see her work in print, although not in her lifetime. The collection is a compilation of pseudo letters to named and nameless addressees, constructed in the fashion of an epistolary travel memoir, a popular genre at Montagu’s time.¹² Although the letters that comprise this book were not identical to those she sent home, her views on Turkish life remained intact.

On her way to Turkey, Wortley Montagu visited some European cities. Although they are a familiar scene to her and other women of her nationality and

social standing, she relates some things that she finds peculiar in their manners and customs in a very comical, but informative style. She reveals early on in her *Embassy Letters* qualities necessary for any travel writer; her keen, observant eye, her interest in the habits of other nations, and her literary wit. In one of her earliest correspondences from Turkey, Wortley Montagu sets a new tone: ‘I am now got into a new world, where everything I see appears to me a change of scene; and I write to your ladyship with some content of mind, hoping at least that you will find the charm of novelty in my letters, and no longer reproach me, that I tell you nothing extraordinary.’¹³ This passage captures what separates Wortley Montagu’s travel writing from her male counterparts, their “novelty”.

For the first time, Britain was to catch glimpses of the harem from the eyes of a witness. British men could only speculate, dream and project their fantasies on to this *terra incognita*, as ‘[t]is no less than death for a man to be found in one of these places.’¹⁴ Studies of the Muslim Orient have always observed its women. For example, Aaron Hill and Jean Dumont write (imaginatively) about the abuses of women in the Orient, but of course they did so without ever experiencing it and, as Bridget Orr suggests:

The enclosure of women is a staple in the voyage writing Wortley Montagu perused before her visit: Rycout, de Thevonot and Tavernier all devote chapters to the subject – for Dumont, published in 1696, it’s already a cliché: ‘I need not tell you with what severity they are guarded by the white and black Eunuchs, who never permit ‘em to enjoy the least shadow of Liberty. All the relations of Travellers are full of repeating the Observations of Others, I shall only add, that tis a Capital crime to look upon these Women[...]There is no slavery equal to that of the Turkish Women.’¹⁵

Wortley Montagu’s *Embassy Letters* stand in contrast to male assumptions of Turkish women’s confinement and abuse, and as will be discussed in this chapter, there is a prevailing counter argument that runs throughout her letters on the life of Ottoman women; there is liberty in bondage.

During Wortley Montagu’s stay in Constantinople and Adrianople, she was invited into the households of the Turkish-Circassian military and official elites. Her *Embassy Letters* aims to provide an exhaustive view of Turkey; there are fifteen recipients all together, twelve are female, and the book’s fictional addressees range in class, social and political status.¹⁶ Melman suggests that from Wortley Montagu onwards, there was a shift in the way women travellers and ethnographers looked at the harem, the microcosmic Orient:

Wortley Montagu’s work represents a wider consciousness of the comparativeness of ‘morality’ (her own terms designating sexual

moral) and the relativity of Western European values...the *Letters* exude an aura of broad-mindedness and tolerance towards the Ottomans, indeed towards Europe religious and cultural ‘other’ as such. Wortley Montagu’s letters, in short, may be appropriately designated a key text, the corner-stone in the new, alternative discourse that developed in the West on the Middle East.¹⁷

The *Turkish Embassy Letters* received wide recognition and were praised for their linguistic style and content by prominent figures including Voltaire, Dr. Johnson, the English feminist Mary Astell, Thomas Carlyle, and Lytton Strachey. ‘Edward Gibbon is said to have exclaimed, when he finished reading them, “What fire, what ease, what knowledge of Europe and Asia”’.¹⁸

The *Embassy Letters* occupy a special place in the body of Oriental studies derived from Wortley Montagu’s intimacy with her subject, Turkish society, and her addressees. Although physically distant from her British circle of acquaintances, friends and family, Wortley Montagu sought to keep contact with them through her letters. Furthermore, as wife of an Ambassador, she was able to negotiate visits into the private chambers of the elite households of Ottoman families. As Orr writes, the letter reflects Wortley Montagu’s ‘increasing involvement and interaction with, rather than distanced observation of, a variety of Turkish individuals’. Orr argues that Wortley Montagu is ‘much closer to both her audience (friends and relations in England) and to her subjects (Turks with whom she engages in sociable commerce) than male writers such as Dumont or Hill, a double proximity which at point suggests some collapsing of the distance from one’s object which guarantees knowledge.’¹⁹ Orr’s claim that Wortley Montagu’s closeness to both her subject and recipients “guarantees knowledge”, is problematic, and must not be taken for granted. The construction of knowledge is complex; several factors are at play. Among these are the writings that the travellers peruse before their voyage, which no doubt inform their view of the source culture, and a more influential factor, is the intention behind the travel book. The analysis of selective passages of the *Embassy Letters* will demonstrate how Wortley Montagu’s descriptions of Turkish women and their life were informed by an agenda.

The tone, register and, at times, subject matter of Wortley Montagu’s letters varies according to the gender of the recipient. She writes letters from Turkey to the Lady Mar., who was probably a reference to her sister, and the unnamed lady. This anonymous lady recipient is representative of a typical female audience. She is interested in Turkey, but in the details of domestic life rather than the world of politics and religion. Wortley Montagu’s letters to the unknown lady and Lady Mar. tend to be more pictorial and informal, with relatively few allusions. Moreover, the tone she writes with suggests a close, familial connection. In contrast, when Wortley Montagu wrote to a male audience, she changed her tone to a more formal register, rich in allusions, intellectual and philosophical comments,

and political observations. These features of her writing are evident in her letters to the Abbe Conti and Alexander Pope. While Wortley Montagu's letters are notable for these distinct gendered registers, what she reveals in terms of attitude is in many ways similar, regardless of her audience. In letters to both lady Mar. and her male friends she frequently challenges prevailing views of Turkey, but also conforms on occasion, to the views of her day.

One of the most erotically charged scenes in Oriental literature is the *hammam*, public bath, or Turkish Bath: '[t]he women's public-baths were identified as *loci sensuales* in the erotically charged landscape of the Orient. For the female bathers combined two of the oriental woman's traditional characteristics: over-sexuality and the easterner's propensity towards indolence.'²⁰ In one of her first correspondences from Turkey, Wortley Montagu creates history, she prescribes, for the first time, British woman's visit to a Turkish bath. Her visit was in Adrianople wherein she set out in her 'riding dress' to the bagnio at Sophia.²¹ Aware of the oddity of her attire, Wortley Montagu reassures her readers that there was 'none of those disdainful smiles, or satiric whispers, that never fail in our assemblies when anybody appears that is not dressed exactly in the fashion.'²² In fact, Wortley Montagu's bath companions had nothing but admiration for her, telling her she was 'very charming'²³. After elaborating on the physical and architectural structure of the bath, Wortley Montagu paints a picture her readers – a feast for their eyes:

The first sofas were covered with cushions and rich carpets, on which sat the ladies ; and on the second, their slaves behind them, but without any distinction of rank by their dress, all being in the state of nature, that is, in plain English, stark naked, without any beauty or defect concealed. Yet there was not the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them. They walked and moved with the same majestic grace which Milton describes of our general mother.²⁴

Wortley Montagu's elaborate description of the Turkish women bathers manages to demystify the motif of the Turkish *bagnio* as a *loci sensuales* and for the first time frames this place within a domestic structure. Wortley Montagu points out the domestic furnishings, something definitely familiar to her English readers. She stresses the naturalness and lack of prurience in the nakedness of the women; "not the least wanton smile or immodest gesture amongst them". She even likens them to Milton's Eve before the Fall:

Nor those mysterious parts were then conceal'd
Then was no guiltie shame, dishonest shame
Of natures works, honor dishonourable,
Sin-bred, how habe ye troubl'd all mankind
With shews instead, meer shews of seeming pure,
And banish from man's life his happiest life,

Simplicitie and spotless innocence.²⁵

However, as Gabrielle Petit points out, Wortley Montagu's insistence on the lack of immodesty and indecency in the enclosed space of nude women suggests that she was expecting to find prurience, or that she was even looking for it.²⁶ Having said this, for Wortley Montagu, nakedness provided anonymity of class and social status, and meant freedom from the social restraints attributed to class hierarchy. However, Wortley Montagu is mindful of the significance of dress in her own culture; she herself did not take off her garments, and Joseph W. Lew suggests that '[r]etaining her habit does not merely allow Lady Mary to maintain the physical signs of her rank; it also reminds her and the bathing women of her Englishness.'²⁷ Wortley Montagu continues her description of the Bath and the bathers:

There were many amongst them as exactly proportioned as ever any Goddess was drawn by the pencil of Guido or Titian and most of their skins shiningly white, only adorned by their beautiful hair divided into many tresses, hanging on their shoulders, braided either with pearl or ribbon, perfectly representing the figures of the Graces. I perceived that the ladies with the finest skins and most delicate shapes had the greatest share of my admiration, though their faces were sometimes less beautiful than those of their companions.²⁸

The picture that Wortley Montagu paints here of the Turkish women may at first reading remind us of a typical oriental scene, delicate skins and shapes, a recount of tantalizing images and an obvious fetishization of white skin. However, Wortley Montagu elevated the aesthetic of Turkish women, from the attributes of sexual depravity to the artistic. She resorted to westernizing the bath house in an attempt to mediate the paradox between "naked" and "modest". In this vein, the naked Turkish female bathers are compared to classical figures in Western art, and the function of the bagnio, which commonly meant brothel in England²⁹, is transformed into a 'the women's coffee-house, where all the news of the town is told, scandal invented, &c. —.'³⁰ The bath in Wortley's model of representation has its parallel in British culture, "a women's coffee-house", stripping it from its foreignness and "otherness".

Wortley Montagu's strategy of Westernization is innovative, and to a certain extent, it is effective in de-sexualizing the Oriental women, and as Elizabeth Bohl's comments that 'Aesthetic distance helps defuse the degrading potential of their corporeality within Orientalist discourse[...]to let Montagu present them as human individuals potentially deserving of interest and respect, rather than essentially non-human Others.'³¹ However, one must remember that there were no women's coffee-houses in eighteenth-century Britain. Perhaps Wortley Montagu wished for such an institution to exist, wherein women could get together "without

any distinction of rank by their dress”, and indulge themselves away from men’s control and power.

In stark comparison to Wortley’s Eva figures and classical goddesses, is the following passage from a source on the harem available to her. Joseph Withers writes of the women in the Grand Signor’s *Seraglio*:

Now it is not lawfull for anyone to bring ought in unto them, with which they may commit the deeds of beastly, and unnatural uncleannesse: so that if they have a will to eat, radishes, cucumbers, gourds, or such like meats; they are sent unto them sliced, to deprive them of the means of playing the wantons; for they being all young, lusty and lascivious wenchs, and wanting the society of men (which would better instruct them and question less far better employ them) are doubtless of themselves inclined to that which is naught, and will often be possest with unchaste thoughts.³²

Wortley Montagu’s Turkish ladies depart from this depiction, as they are ‘recast from oversexed houris playing with cucumbers into Venus, Eve, and the Graves, bringing them closer to upper-class European sensibilities.’³³ However, Wortley Montagu’s picture of the bath does not omit the erotic entirely; she is aware of the male gaze, and invokes the invisible presence of a male artist:

To tell you the truth, I had wickedness enough to wish secretly that Mr. Jervas could have been there invisible. I fancy it would have very much improved his art, to see so many fine women naked, in different postures, some in conversation, some working, others drinking coffee or sherbet, and many negligently lying on their cushions, while their slaves (generally pretty girls of seventeen or eighteen) were employed in braiding their hair in several pretty fancies.³⁴

Wortley Montagu teases her male audience, who must be frustrated; like this male artist Mr Gervase, they are unable to enter this space, as it would literally be death to do so. Nussbaum ‘identifies this move [appropriation of the male gaze] with homoeroticism in the text, through which Montagu identifies herself with the sexualized Oriental women and longs to enter their company.’³⁵ However, Anna Seclor argues that Wortley Montagu’s reference to the male artist, whose gaze is invisible yet penetrating, indirectly leads the reader back to the trope of sensuality through discursive chains of reference. The painter’s gaze is primarily invoked in aestheticizing the scene, but thereby deepens the objectification of the women and the interior landscape of their forms. The invoked gaze is detached, but nonetheless the scene is sexualized by the invisible male painter because his mention reiterates the ‘forbidden’ nature of the space, and this prohibition is itself linked through the discursive chains of Orientalism to the supposed sensual hedonism of the women.

This reference creates a tension in the passage, but does not negate the simultaneous rejection of typical Orientalist themes regarding the all-female space of the bath.³⁶ As her description of this exclusively female space continues, Wortley Montagu finds a way to rescue herself from the male gaze: ‘That 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.’³⁷ Wortley Montagu remains dressed! In a later letter she confessed her deep immersion in Turkish culture, ‘I am in great danger of losing my English. I find it is not half so easy to me to write in it as it was a twelvemonth ago. I am forced to study for expressions, and must leave off all other languages, and try to learn my mother tongue.’³⁸

Despite this admission of Oriental fervour, Wortley holds back from assimilating to the aesthetic position of the Turkish women, who are now naked and exposed to the voyeur’s gaze (the invisible Mr Gervase), via her textually constructed frame. She retains her clothes, thus strategically extricating herself from objectification. Unlike the other two hundred women, Wortley Montagu ‘plac[es] herself inside the central frame with the Oriental women, yet also insistently remain[s] outside the larger frame as artist, producer, and letter writer, she foregrounds her solidarity with the Turkish women as subject/subjected: all women become objects of art for the Western male.’ Lew goes on to highlight that Wortley Montague’s ‘strategy for escaping being objectified by male art and male discourse remains problematic. She turns discourse and art back upon themselves: she escapes being framed by framing the framer (Mr. Jervas). By drawing attention away from the static object (the Orient, the woman) [...] Lady Mary’s victory, however, remains purely personal: the one may escape representation by presenting herself; the two hundred cannot.’³⁹ What happens is little short of exhibitionism: ‘I was at last forced to open my shirt, and shew 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.’⁴⁰

Wortley Montagu’s little exhibitionist masquerade is significant to both audiences, ‘she is the fetish for the female gaze at the bath, and for the mixed gaze back in England.’⁴¹ Her “stays” are symbolic of the bondages of her own society, epitomized by her husband; ‘both the viewing Turks and the reading English are led on to fantasize medieval chastity belts on Montagu, if not quite whips, chains, and handcuffs... her constraining clothing is misapprehended as her husband’s handiwork’.⁴² Wortley Montagu overturns the European misapprehensions of the Oriental woman as a slave; the female gaze at the bagnio subverts her position as an observer. Subsequently, it is the British woman who is a victim of despotism and arbitrary power, the “contrivance” of the husband, and by extension, society. Theresa Heffernan comments on this power shift:

[...]as lady Mary shifts the gaze to her own imprisoned body, teasingly opening her skirt and inviting rescue, she forces attention on the English social order and complicates the role of the heroic colonialist reader. This gesture interrupts the binary of veiled and unveiled, the slave and the free woman, religion and reason, which structures the travel accounts of her predecessors. Lady Mary's undressing or unveiling does not naively assume an unfettered freedom but rather displays a gendered social order that underlies the very rhetoric of western reason.⁴³

Moreover, Wortley Montagu's metaphor of the "machine" she is locked up in is reminiscent of a letter she wrote to her husband, at the time in which they were discussing the nuptial pre-condition her father had imposed on Edward. She writes: 'People in my way are sold like slaves, and I cannot tell what price my Master will put on me.'⁴⁴ Wortley Montagu is intimating that Western thinking, despite the Age of Reason, has yet to develop in the way it handles women. In the bath, which is an intimation of the harem's structure, that is, a female operated, and inhabited place, Wortley Montagu constructs a "femtopia". She places herself, and by extension, British society as the object of the Turkish women's gaze. She puts British social customs and manners under scrutiny, and cleverly infiltrates social commentary under the guise of what most men of her time would dismiss as women's "vanities".

Beauty was a recurring trope in Wortley Montagu's descriptions. In a letter to Lady Mar, she proudly announces that she has dressed like the natives, and assigns nearly a whole page to the description of her Turkish dress. She then moves on to elaborate on the unrivaled and abundant beauty of the Turkish ladies:

Tis surprising to see a young woman that is not very handsome. They have naturally the most beautiful complexion in the world, and generally large black eyes. I can assure you with great truth, that the court of England (though I believe it the fairest in Christendom) cannot shew so many beauties as are under our protection here.⁴⁵

Her admiration of the extraordinary complexions and natural beauty of the Turkish women follows closely the male descriptions made before her. Although men describe the Orientale as sexually prurient, her exotic beauty is present in their descriptions. However, the view of Oriental beauty did change as the years progressed, we will observe later how women travellers in the nineteenth century struggled to share Wortley Montagu's notion of the Turkish women's beauty; where she painted it as "ample" they describe it as "wanting". We know that Wortley Montagu owned a copy of *Les Mille et Une Nuits*, or the *Arabian Nights*, which was translated first into French by Antoine Galland a little more than a decade before her trip to Turkey. This iconic text had irrevocable impact on the

way Europe perceived, produced, and reproduced knowledge on Oriental Customs and manners. In the age of the Enlightenment, which was stifled with an intoxication of reason and discoveries, texts like the *Arabian Nights* provided a pleasant diversion: ‘*Les Mille et Une Nuits* proved very successful, perhaps providing a pressure-valve for “an era that was fidgeting under the stern dominion of rationalism, desiring imaginative space and relief from sobriety”, and would become with time one of the most ubiquitously referenced “representations” of the Orient in the citational universe of Orientalism.’⁴⁶

Although Wortley Montagu’s letters familiarize the Turkish women, they nevertheless stress those tropes of Oriental life reiterated throughout the *Arabian Nights*. Although the Oriental women are cast in a new light, vindicated from prurience, they still appear to the reader as hedonistic and negligent women, whose only occupation is diversion. In a letter to Lady Mar. she describes a visit to the Sultana Hafitén, a middle aged widow (and former favorite) of Sultan Mustafa II. The descriptions of opulence, extravagance and over all grandiosity of the Sultana’s abode, attire, and dining experience with Wortley Montagu could be perceived to have been copied out of the *Arabian Nights*:

I was led into a large room, with a sofa the whole length of it, adorned with white marble pillars like a ruelle, covered with pale blue figured velvet on a silver ground...Her [the Sultana’s] dress was something so surprisingly rich, I cannot forbear describing it to you... her girdle as broad as the broadest English ribbon, entirely covered with diamonds. Round her neck she wore three chains, which reached to her knees: one of large pearl, at the bottom of which hung a fine coloured emerald, as big as a turkey-egg....Round her talpoche she had four strings of pearl, the whitest and most perfect in the world, at least enough to make four necklaces, every one as large as the Duchess of Marlborough's....Besides this, her head-dress was covered with bodkins of emeralds and diamonds....This I am very sure of, that no European queen has half the quantity; and the empress's jewels, though very fine, would look very mean near hers.⁴⁷

Wortley Montagu’s circle of acquaintances and friends contained samples of the richest people in Britain, yet many would have been unaccustomed to grandeur on this scale. To help her readers grasp the scene, she skillfully familiarizes and domesticates certain objects, whilst preserving their uniqueness. The diamonds are “every one as large as the Duchess of Marlborough’s”, and she estimates the price of this almost surreal attire; ‘according to the common estimation of jewels in our part of the world, her whole dress must be worth above a hundred thousand pounds sterling.’⁴⁸

She goes on to describe the grand table the Sultana's house had prepared, fifty dishes, placed one at a time, the value of the cutlery and utensils alone could help feed a small country in our modern day:

[...] the magnificence of her table answered very well to that of her dress. The knives were of gold, the hafts set with diamonds. But the piece of luxury that grieved my eyes was the table-cloth and napkins, which were all tiffany, embroidered with silks and gold, in the finest manner, in natural flowers. It was with the utmost regret that I made use of these costly napkins.... After dinner, water was brought in a gold basin.⁴⁹

Wortley Montagu's description of her visit at the Sultana's harem reads like a tale of exaggerations, an accusation which she anticipated from her readers:

Now, do I fancy that you imagine I have entertained you, all this while, with a relation that has, at least, received many embellishments from my hand? This is but too like (say you) the Arabian Tales: these embroidered napkins! and a jewel as large as a turkey's egg!—You forget, dear sister, those very tales were written by an author of this country, and (excepting the enchantments) are a real representation of the manners here.⁵⁰

Wortley Montagu assures her readers that these accounts are real, they are the actualization of the *Arabian Nights*. Many of her other letters on Turkish life contain the same attempt, 'to [collapse] time and geography to affirm that Galland's translated folk-tales, culled from the oral lore of Turkey, Arabia, Persia, India and even China, were in fact written by a Turk describing the customs of the place.'⁵¹ To Wortley, the "Orientalness" of the Orient is pleasing, yet its architecture seems to be too obscure or different to describe in a letter: 'tis yet harder to describe a Turkish palace than any other, being built entirely irregular...it would be very unintelligible in a letter.'⁵²

In Wortley's letter to the Abbi Conte⁵³, a savant and *litterateur*, she displays a shift in both content and tone:

'Tis certain we have but very imperfect relations of the manners and religion of these people, this 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. The Turks are too proud to converse familiarly with merchants etc., who can only pick up some confused information 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.⁵⁴

She makes clear her new approach to the study of Turkey. She disassociates herself with the previous tradition of Oriental knowledge, the narrations of merchants and travellers, and distinguishes herself as someone who did not “make too short a stay” and claims the authority of a resident. During her stay in Turkey, Wortley Montagu was quite the sedulous traveller; she took every opportunity to learn of the Turkish culture, its customs and manners. She studiously learnt Turkish language, visited churches, mosques, military camps. She had conversations with ladies of distinction, like Sultana Hafitén, and interviewed her on the structure of the seraglio.

In her residence in Belgrade, Wortley Montague was privy to have an Effendi, the equivalence of a scholar in England, as a close acquaintance, and she was reported her daily conversations with him to the Abbé Conti:

I explained to him the difference between the religion of England and Rome ; and he was pleased to hear there were Christians that did not worship images, or adore the Virgin Mary. The ridicule of transubstantiation appeared very strong to him. Upon comparing our creeds together, I am convinced that if our friend Dr. ____ had free liberty of preaching here, it would be very easy to persuade the generality to Christianity, whose notions are already little different from his.⁵⁵

Wortley Montagu’s opinion emanated from her religious beliefs, Protestantism. Here, she contemplates the possibility for missionary work in Turkey. After she has probed the mind of the most learned of the Turkish demographic, a scholar, she reports there is great potential to convert the Turkish into Protestantism. Wortley Montagu’s letter to the Abbé Conti continues with more observations of the Turkish people, as she studies their creed. She challenges the interpretations of Turkish habits described by accredited male travel writers before her. From the sects of Mahometism (in modern Western scholarship this religion is referred more accurately to as Islam), to the drinking habits of the Turks.⁵⁶ She displays a confidence in the truth of her notes, as they are derived from an intimate conversation with the Effendi, which gave her an ‘opportunity of knowing their [the Turks] religion and morals in a more particular manner than perhaps any Christian ever did.’⁵⁷ Wortley Montagu’s residence in London surely made her acquainted with John Locke’s philosophical ideas of empiricism. She casts herself here as the empirical heroine, her remarks on Turkish religion and customs are drawn from personal experience; she participates with her object of study, displaying characteristics which could very well categorize her as an early ethnographer.

The following passage from Wortley Montagu’s letter to the Abbé Conti

intimates her tolerance, a characteristic of the Enlightenment:

He [the Effendi] assured me, that if I understood Arabic, I should be very well pleased with reading the Alcoran, which is so far from the nonsense we charge it with, it is the purest morality, delivered in the very best language. I have since heard impartial Christians speak of it in the same manner; and I don't doubt but all our translations are from copies got from the Greek priests, who would not fail to falsify it with the extremity of malice.⁵⁸

Wortley Montagu's displays progressive thinking, and her criticism of older translations of the Quran, produced by the Greek Catholics, is in keeping with the circulation of ideas at the time of her letter; and as Anne Secor comments: 'This inversion of the old order, in which the Greek priests are represented as lowly and Koran as elevated, marks a particular historical juncture in the rolling tides of Western constructions of the East and its meaning. The anti-Islamic polemic was still in circulation, but the locus of British Orientalism vis-à-vis Turkey was shifting.'⁵⁹

Furthermore, Wortley Montague's attitude is a manifestation of the shift in Western European perceptions of Islam. In a time not too distant from Wortley Montagu, Medieval Europe, Islam was demonized; most pronouncedly from the time of the Crusades, a war that was blessed by the Pope and fought with the sacred goal of restoring Christian access to Jerusalem and other Holy places. The thirteenth century *The Divine Comedy* contains an example of Western European attitudes towards Islam; Dante's characterization of the Prophet Mohammad (peace and prayers be upon him) and the grotesque punishment he endures in the *inferno*. The new tolerance to Islam can be accounted for by two historical changes, the rise of Protestantism augmented by the Enlightenment. As Melman points out:

as much as [Wortley Montagu's letters] [...]are a vindication of the Ottoman women's morality and Muslim morals in general, [they] are pronouncedly anti-Catholic. Praise of the tolerance of the Turks was a stick which Protestants— well before the Enlightenment— used to beat with Catholic intolerance. Those extracts in the Letters which describe the Catholic states and principalities in Central Europe abound with derisory remarks on Catholic theology, liturgy, and ritual.⁶⁰

A force akin to Protestantism was the Enlightenment, it propelled ideas and movements towards a new established tolerance of Europe's Other. Western Europe's necessary and increasing contact with other nations and their cultures resulted in a move away from a Eurocentric view of the world. Wortley Montagu's *Embassy Letters* stand in this tradition, her latitudarian attitude is part of the Age of Reason which was:

[A] period between one century of belief in dogma and hierarchical principles (the seventeenth century) and another (the nineteenth century). Hazard sees the eighteenth century as a time of exploration and discovery, in thought as well as action. This was accordingly a time when the customs and manners of other peoples seemed suddenly less strange and more worthy of analysis. If all men were equal, were not their manners of worshipping God also equally valid? This revolutionary idea led to a reassessment of Islam as well as of Hinduism and Buddhism.⁶¹

Wortley Montagu corresponded from Turkey with one of the most celebrated and influential writers in British literary history including Alexander Pope. They had an interesting and turbulent relationship, from unrivalled admiration and familiarity to unrestrained indignation. They were active correspondents even before Wortley Montagu left for Turkey; they also collaborated in the writing of *Eclogues*, which were later printed under Pope's name. In a letter he wrote to Wortley Montagu's shortly before her departure, Pope confessed his growing attachment to her: "...indeed I find I begin to behave myself worse to you than to any other Woman, as I value you more."⁶² To express the value of their friendship to him even more, he copied in his own hand her five town eclogues, and presented them to her in an album richly bound in red Turkey leather. Wortley Montagu's letter to Pope from Adrianople introduces a new narrator:

I dare you say expect at least something very new in this Letter after I have gone a journey not undertaken by any Christian of some 100 years. The most remarkable accident that happened to me was my being very near overturned into the Hebrus; and if I had much regard for the glories that one's name enjoys after death, I should certainly be sorry for having miss'd the romantic conclusion of swimming down the same River in which the Musical head of Orpheus repeated verses so many ages since[...]*Who knows but some of your bright wits might have found it a subject affording many poetical turns, and have told the world in a heroic elegy that as equal were our souls, so equal were our fates?*⁶³

Wortley Montagu changes her narrative to suit the recipient, her content takes on a literary divergence. She alludes to classical literature, a feature common to Augustan writing. Wortley Montagu paints a conceited image of herself as a heroic adventurer who has "gone a journey not undertaken by any Christian of some 100 years." In the same letter to Pope she writes of the Turkish people's abilities in Music, and dancing ' Mr Addison might here make the experiment he speaks of on his travels, there is not being one instrument of music among the Greek or Roman statues that is not to be found in the hands of the people of this country.'⁶⁴ Wortley Montagu is again rivalling the accounts of the notable men of her day, intimating

that she knows more about artistic capacity of the Turkish people than Joseph Addison. She historicizes the Turkish people in classical times. In the Augustan Age, classical history and literature was appreciated, and attributed as being the origin of civilization. She appears very bold and confident in her relation of what she garnered of the habits and customs of the Turkish people through her immersion in their culture, 'I am pretty far gone in Oriental Learning'.⁶⁵ She devoted Wednesdays to Turkish language, which proved fruitful as she presented to Pope some translations of Turkish poetry, noting that it was very difficult.

Wortley focused on the Turks' interest in diversions, whether it be music, dancing or the bath, she generally admired these people for their hedonism, which is in contrast to the Briton's preoccupation with reason and science. In a letter to the Abbé Conti relating the fine taste of the Turks in architecture, structure and furnishings of their apartments, Wortley discerns that:

[Turkish] people are not so unpolished as we represent them. 'Tis true their magnificence is of a different taste from ours, and perhaps of a better. I am almost of opinion they have a right notion of life; while they consume it in music, gardens, wine, and delicate eating, while we are tormenting our brains with some scheme of politics, or studying some science to which we can never attain, or, if we do, cannot persuade people to set that value upon it we do ourselves[....]We die or grow old and decrepid before we can reap the fruit of our labours. Considering what short-lived weak animals men are, is there any study so beneficial as the study of present pleasure ?[...].But I allow you to laugh at me for the sensual declaration that I had rather be a rich effendi with all his ignorance, than Sir Isaac Newton with all his knowledge.⁶⁶

Wortley Montagu affirms to the Abbé Conti the refinement of Oriental people, they are not philistines, but rather educated in art and civility. However, while she refutes the discourse of savagery, she reaffirms some Orientalist stereotypes. The Turks are described as rich, hedonistic, indolent, sensual, and abandoned to their carnal desires as such, while Europeans as hardworking intellectuals, as her reference to Isaac Newton poignantly illustrates. It remains to be seen how, in the next century, women travellers despised the libertine lifestyle they perceived to exist among the Ottomans, as their sensibilities shifted to the appreciation of values like earnestness and propriety.

Wortley Montagu builds up her argument on the freedom of the Turkish ladies. Her bath letter betrays her envy of the Turkish women's decadent lifestyle, they have the liberty to take up diversions, like their voluptuous bath trips. Then in two letters to the Abbé Conti she dispels notions of Turkish women's inferiority amongst Islamic society. In one of these letters, which is a series of replies to the Abbe Conti's inquiries, Wortley begins by commenting on the fallaciousness of

those notions of the Koran dispersed by the Greek priests, who 'are the greatest scoundrels in the universe [and] have invented out of their own heads a thousand ridiculous stories, in order to decry the law of Mahomet'.⁶⁷ She then begins her elucidation of women's position in Islam, first observing what the Islamic decree makes of its women's lot in the afterlife:

I assure you it is certainly false, though commonly believed in our parts of the world, that Mahomet excludes women from any share in a future happy state. He was too much a gentleman, and loved the fair sex too well, to use them so barbarously. On the contrary, he promises a very fine paradise to the Turkish women. He says, indeed, that this paradise will be a separate place from that of their husbands; but I fancy the most part of them won't like it the worse for that; and that the regret of this separation will not render their paradise the less agreeable.⁶⁸

This statement is not altogether true, and perhaps Wortley Montagu had misunderstood her sources in order to come to this conclusion. In Islam, women and men are seen as equal in God's eyes and in regards to their judgment and reward, that is heaven. However, Wortley Montagu's comment, that the separation of husbands from their wives will not make a difference to women, and that it 'will not render their paradise the less agreeable' is significant. Thus far, we have observed Wortley Montagu's desire for an exclusively female space, whether in the bath, or in heaven, Wortley Montagu wished for that "femtopia", a space governed by women, for women.

However, her observation of Mahomet's [the Prophet Mohammad's] kindness to women breaks up notions of the despotic eastern male. In another letter she retells an account of a Christian woman who chose to live with a Turk. She also reassures her readers of the kindness of the Turk to his slaves: 'I cannot forbear applauding the humanity of the Turks to these creatures ; they are never ill-used, and their slavery is, in my opinion, no worse than servitude all over the world[....]In my opinion, they are bought and sold as publicly and more infamously in all our Christian great cities.'⁶⁹ Women's roles as mothers and forbearers of society, is significant in Islam, and Wortley Montagu observes:

God has not ordered them [women] to govern or reform the world; but he has entrusted them with an office which is not less honourable, even that of multiplying the human race, and such as, out of malice or laziness, do not make it their business to bear or to breed children, fulfil not the duty of their vocation, and rebel against the commands of God. Here are maxims for you prodigiously contrary to those of your convents. What will become of your St. Catherines, your St. Therasas, your St. Claras, and the whole bead-roll of your holy virgins and widows? Who, if they are

to be judged by this system of virtue, will be found to have been infamous creatures, that passed their whole lives in most abominable libertinism.⁷⁰

Wortley Montagu's passage reveals her very progressive mind. She illustrates how virtues are relative, and departs greatly from ethnocentricity. She does not condemn the Turks for different sexual customs and manners, as they value marriage, and reproduction over celibacy, celebrated in Christian societies.

In a letter to Lady Mar. Wortley Montagu consolidates her argument further on the liberties of the Turkish women. To Wortley Montagu, sexual freedom is paradoxically facilitated by the veil:

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 'em. 'Tis very easy to see they have more Liberty than we have, no woman of what rank so ever being permitted to go in the streets without 2 muslins...and their Shapes are wholly conceal'd by a thing they call a 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.⁷¹

Wortley Montagu's sees the veil as a license for sexual freedom:

For Montagu as well as for her only eighteenth-century disciple, Lady Elizabeth Craven[...] 'Liberty' spelt out 'sexual freedom'. And it meant one's ability to follow one's 'inclination' and 'indulge' oneself (Montagu's words) in that inclination, regardless of one's sex....A few (male) travellers before her [Wortley Montagu] had commented upon the advantages of the veil...in particular [that] the yashmak offered Ottoman women kinds of freedom denied to the Christian woman.⁷²

Both Wortley Montagu and Lady Elizabeth Craven (1750-1828) envy the liberties afforded to the Turkish women. The issue of liberty was close to home for the adulterous Craven. She envied the Turkish women because they 'are perfectly safe from an idle curious, impertinent public',⁷³ which she herself was subject to after a scandalous affair with the Margrave of Anspach, which resulted in all her six children disowning her. The discussion of sexual freedom is not uncommon to eighteenth-century thinking. Enlightened thinkers acknowledged Man's sexual nature, sexual license for men was condoned, but society had different expectations

for women. They were closely guarded and protected because '[s]exual freedom for women would certainly endanger the family. Thus, whereas natural man was free to pursue his will, the natural woman was perceived (within certain limits) largely as mother and wife. And purity in females was valued as in the Pauline doctrine and still considered as vital in the monogamous family.'⁷⁴ It is important to understand that Wortley Montagu does not see the Turkish women's sexual license as morally depraving. In a letter to the Countess of Mar. (Lady Mar.) she writes: 'as to their morality or good conduct, I can say, like Harlequin, that 'tis just as it is with you; and the Turkish ladies don't commit one sin the less for not being Christians.'⁷⁵ As Melman comments; '[w]hat is novel in [Wortley Montagu's] usage of the metaphor of the veil is the notion that Liberty, that is a moral-free and natural sexual conduct, is applicable to both sexes.'⁷⁶

Wortley Montagu's admiration of the freedom which Turkish women enjoy does not end with the sexual. It is the financial autonomy of the Turkish women that she covets the most: '[they don't have to] apprehend the resentment of their husbands; those ladies that are rich having all their money in their own hands, which they take with them upon a divorce, with an addition which he is obliged to give them. Upon the Whole, I look upon the Turkish Women as the only free people in the Empire.'⁷⁷ Craven corroborates this view, the Turkish wife 'sits at home bedecked with jewels or goes out as her fancy directs, and the fruits of his [the husband's] labour are appropriated to her use'.⁷⁸ Financial emancipation was not granted to married women in Britain until the Married Women's Property Act in 1882. Like Craven, Wortley Montagu suffered the consequence of the unjust economic mores of her society; she separated from her husband a few years after coming home from Constantinople, and was left dependent on his mercy. Wortley Montagu's commentary on the Turkish women's freedom is a reaction to those fetishized relations of the Turkish women's sufferings and abuses at the hands of the despotic Eastern men. Perhaps her British readers may introspect, and review their own system of manners and customs, and realize that British society abuses its women's intellect and restricts their freedom.

Wortley Montagu's observations on the Turkish women's unfettered freedoms were corroborated by women travelers in the century following that of her travels in Turkey. A notable example is Julia Pardoe (1806-1862) who traveled with her father to Turkey in 1836; she was famous for producing novels and travel accounts inspired by her stay in Turkey. In her book *City of the Sultan* (1836) Pardoe pronounces that:

If, as we are all prone to believe, freedom be happiness, then are Turkish women happiest, for they are the freest individuals in the Empire. It is the fashion in Europe to pity the women of the East; but it is ignorance of their real position alone that engenders so misplaced an exhibition of sentiment...[Turkish women] are permitted to expostulate, to urge, even to insist on any point

wherein they may feel an interest; nor does an Osmanli husband ever resent the expressions of his wife; it is, on the contrary, part and parcel of his philosophy to bear the storm of words unmoved....A Turkish woman consults no pleasure save her own when she wishes to walk or drive or even to pass a short time with a friend: she adjusts her yashmac and feridjhe....the idea of [the husband] controlling her in the fancy or of making it subject of reproach on her return is perfectly out of the question.⁷⁹

Pardoe lists the kinds of freedom available to Turkish women, and unattainable to most ladies of her time in the British Empire: the freedom of expression and the freedom of mobility that is provided by the woman's yashmak or the veil; both freedoms available to the Turkish woman without reprimand. Furthermore, Melman suggests that Pardoe justifies the harem based on Utilitarian idiom — popular to the nineteenth century ideology; for Pardoe 'harems are justifiable: they make Ottoman women "happy" — that is, they are useful and do not cause "suffering"'.⁸⁰

Pardoe goes on to invoke the image of the slippers in the Turkish harem and reveals a departure between her and Wortley Montagu in their connotation of "freedom": 'Should he [the Turkish husband], on passing to his apartment, see slippers at the foot of the stairs, he cannot, under any pretence, intrude himself in the harem: it is a liberty every woman of the Empire would resent.'⁸¹ For Pardoe, whose observations come a century after those of Wortley Montagu who travelled in 1717, "freedom" connotes freedom from sex and violation of privacy, just as the veil guarantees freedom of movement without intrusion. Wortley Montagu, on the other hand, sees the veil as a symbol for unwarranted sexual freedom without being caught.

The difference in the perceptions of freedom between the two ladies may be accounted for by the change in sensibilities between the two periods. The eighteenth century was more liberal in its discussion of sex and man's tendency towards license, whereas to the Victorians, freedom meant a woman's control over her own sphere (the harem or home) and body, and a control over reproduction, privileges that evaded British women at the time. Women travellers from Montagu onwards, especially in the nineteenth century, conceded that Muslim women in the Orient, across different classes and social statuses enjoyed freedom and independence unrivaled by their British counterparts. As Yeazall comments: 'Recognizing how little either law or custom acknowledged an Englishwoman's right to marital privacy, nineteenth-century travellers tended to idealize the sanctity of the harem, celebrating its inviolable space as a realm of female autonomy and control.'⁸² However, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter Two, this opinion was not shared by two well-known reformers and advocates for women's rights, Harriet Martineau, and her friend Florence Nightingale.

Wortley Montagu has thus far only elaborated on the aesthetic beauty of the Turkish women; their advantages as they pertain to sex, but as to their wit, or lack thereof, she has remained indifferent. Her textual painting of the Oriental woman is by and large structured around the image of a domestic goddess, a wife and a mother. We are given no intimation of what she perceived of their calibre. However, in a letter to Lady Mar., Wortley Montagu reveals another Turkish beauty, whose seems to be a Turkish parallel to Wortley Montagu. Wortley Montagu visited the Khaya's harem, whose lady is Fatima, of her regal beauty Wortley Montagu writes:

I have seen all that has been called lovely either In England or Germany, and must own that I never saw anything so gloriously beautiful...I was so struck with admiration that I could not for some time speak to her, being wholly taken up in gazing...I am persuaded could she be suddenly transported upon the most polite Throne of Europe, nobody would think her other than born and bred to be a queen, though educated in a country we call barbarous...our most celebrated English beauties would vanish near her.⁸³

Once again Wortley Montagu has exaggerated and expounded on the beauty of a Turkish lady, but Fatima is not another painting of Wortley Montagu's, she is attributed with substance:

[...]now that I understand her Language, I find her wit as engaging as her Beauty. She is very curious after the manners of other countries and has not that partiality for her own. So common to little minds, A Greek that I carry'd with me said to me in Italian: This is no Turkish Lady, she is certainly some Christian[...] I assured her [Fatima] that if all the Turkish ladies were like her, it was absolutely necessary to confine them from public view for the repose of mankind.⁸⁴

Wortley Montagu seems to project some of what she sees in herself onto Fatima's characterization. She describes her as a woman who is "very curious after the manners of other countries and has not that partiality for her own". She professes that Fatima became a dear acquaintance of hers, and that she has formed the ideal female friendship. The close bond Wortley formed with this woman, and the parallels she found in of herself in this woman proves to the British reader that Turkish women have specimens finer than not only in physicality but more importantly in character, than the British woman of quality. What is unique however, is Wortley Montagu's adoption of the patriarchal voice. She suggests that women as enchanting as Fatima ought to be locked up, although her emphasis is on a masculine inability to control of their desires rather than a need for female confinement.

Wortley Montagu expresses her respect and liking for the Turkish ladies, but when she described a scene in Tunis to the Abbé Conte, her admiration is eradicated and she betrays some ethnocentricity, a voice inconsistent with her views thus far:

It being now the season of the Turkish Ramadan (or Lent) and all here professing at least, the Mahometan a religion they fast till the going down of the Sun and spend the night in feasting. We saw under the Tress in many places companies of the country people, eating, singing, and dancing to their wild music. They are not quite black, but all mulattos, and the most frightful creatures that can appear in a Human figure. They are almost naked, only wearing a piece of coarse serge wrapped about them.—But the women have their arms to their very shoulders and their necks and faces adorned with flowers, stars and various sort of figures impressed by gunpowder; a considerable addition to their natural deformity⁸⁵

Evident in this description is the divergence between this scene and the Miltonic Eve, or the country people she had described in earlier letters, who are mostly of European descent, perfectly mingling with their Sylvan setting. The incongruities she sees in the peasants, the ‘frightful appearance’, the “wild music” and the “natural deformity” all emphasize Wortley Montagu’s inability to frame the Tunisian people within the same frame as was used for the Turkish. Sukayna Banerjee suggests that Wortley Montagu constituted Turkey within the imaginative spaces of Europe:

Thus upon visiting “one of the finest bagnios in Constantinople”, she could remark not only how the Turkish ladies “have at least as much wit and Civillity, nay Liberty, as Ladys Amongst us”, but also comment upon how the wedding festivity she witnessed there “made me recollect the Epithalamium of Helen by Theocritus, and it seems to me that same custom has continu’d ever since”. Conversely, when visiting the ruins of Carthage in North Africa, she is unable to establish a similar line of continuity of congruity, almost lamenting instead, that the ruins of what she perceives to have been splendid summer apartments were now used as granaries by the local populace, whom she describes as differ[ing] so little from their own country people, the baboons, “tis hard to fancy them a distinct race”⁸⁶

Wortley Montagu’s admiration only existed because she saw Turkey as an extension of Europe, and the Turkish women as white. By contrast the darker skinned peoples in North Africa are “Baboons”. It is arguable therefore, that Wortley Montagu’s letters are not as culturally open-minded as the modern reader

may have thought.

Wortley Montagu's life changed after her return home from her husband's unsuccessful Embassy in Turkey. Her letters and other poems were circulated among her social circle in manuscript and she was appreciated in court for her engaging wit. Her letter to the Abbé Conte was published, without her permission, and she became a celebrated figure; she was so famous that a print was published, showing her donning a Turkish dress and holding a book (see figure 1, Wortley Montagu in Turkish attire). She published — anonymously — a political periodical in support of Walpole's ministry, entitled the *nonsense of commonsense*. She ardently supported and helped launch the literary career of her cousin, the dramatist and novelist, Henry Fielding. Her success and flourishing popularity was shadowed by the termination of her marriage; she separated from Edward in 1737, and was left financially dependent on him. After the elopement of her daughter in 1739, Wortley Montagu fell in love with a much younger Italian man, Francesco Algarotti, and she ran away from England to pursue a life with him. Unfortunately their time together was no more than an escapade, but she remained in Europe until 1761, when she came home to England and spent the remaining year of her life.

I have demonstrated that Wortley Montagu's letters about Turkish habits and customs differ from what and how her predecessors and contemporaries wrote about the Muslim Orient. She focuses on the women in her writing, and on the domestic life of the Ottomans. She derides male travellers for claiming to know the interior of Ottoman life, the workings of the harem, when they could not have been allowed to enter. The harem gave Wortley Montagu a career. Because of her gender, she was privy to see what no male traveller could, and she did not let the opportunity slip by her, as she gleaned all she could about Ottoman domestic daily life. She produced letters to her circle of family, acquaintances, and some very famous friends, like Pope. Her letters produced an alternative representation of the Ottoman Empire, and its domestic entity, the harem. She westernized the East, finding parallels and characterizing the harem as a similar institution in Britain; she constructed the *bagnio* as a social hub, a women's coffee house, not a locus of erotica and female sexual depravity. However, in the next century, Ingres would use her description as his inspiration for *Le Bain Turc*, a lesbian themed painting. Nevertheless, Wortley Montagu's feats in constructing the Oriental harem were novel. She familiarized and domesticated her descriptions. Both British and Turkish women enjoy fine furnishings, dress, and jewellery. Her argument is clear, Turkish women enjoy more liberty than their British counterparts:

'Tis also very pleasant to observe how tenderly [Hill] and all his brethren voyage-writers lament the miserable confinement of the Turkish ladies, who are perhaps freer than any ladies 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, whose expenses are no way limited but by her own fancy. 'Tis his business to get money, and hers to spend it: and this noble prerogative extends itself to the very meanest of the sex.⁸⁷

Wortley Montagu imagined, and reconstructed, the harem as a “femtopia”, an ideal place governed by women, for women; a matriarchy. This construction may have been the result of projecting her feelings of deprivation from a mother figure, the loss of a good friend, Anne Wortley, and her girlhood dream of living in an English monastery and electing herself as Lady Abbess.⁸⁸

Despite her novel representation of Turkish women, Wortley Montagu still frames them within the sexual. She does not detail into their intellect, their spirituality, or how they practice their religion. She stresses their indolence, hedonism, but does not condemn it. On the contrary, she elevates this sensual lifestyle. As Lewis comments, her letters came at a time when : ‘the old myth of the Turk as a barbarous, despotic, and lustful infidel was just beginning to give way to the new myth, still in its embryonic form, of the non-European as the embodiment of mystery and romance and ultimately of wronged innocence.’⁸⁹ Furthermore, her subject matter is geared by the expectations of her audience. The *Arabian Nights* is filled with fantastical stories conveying the east as a place of heightened and unrestrained sexuality. Therefore it is unlikely that British readers in Wortley Montagu’s social circle would have expected her to relate ordinary, mundane activities of the Muslim women.

Furthermore, Wortley Montagu’s tolerance and open-mindedness extends only so far as the limits of Europe. She re-maps Turkey within the boundaries of Europe, and thus finds it easy to form an admiration for the Turkish women’s customs and etiquette, and develop a familiarity with them, and even form friendships, as with the ‘fair Fatima’⁹⁰. On the other hand, when confronted with dark skinned people, whose colour is not only unfamiliar but also offensive to her European sensibilities of racial hierarchy, Wortley Montagu disassociates herself from the scene, and describes the women as deformed. Despite the blockage of the hierarchy of race that prevented Wortley Montagu from connecting with people or women of a different skin colour, she established a new direction in the depiction of Muslim women in the Orient. Furthermore, to the British woman reader at home, Wortley Montagu’s *Letters* opened her eyes to a world wherein women who are thought to belong to an inferior culture, religion and set of ideas, are living freer and more independent lives than those belonging to the “civilized” cultures. She (the British woman) may then have reflected on her position and abuse at the hands of an andocentric culture. Wortley Montagu is thus in her own right a reformer, and an enlightened and philosophical traveller of the East.

ENDNOTES

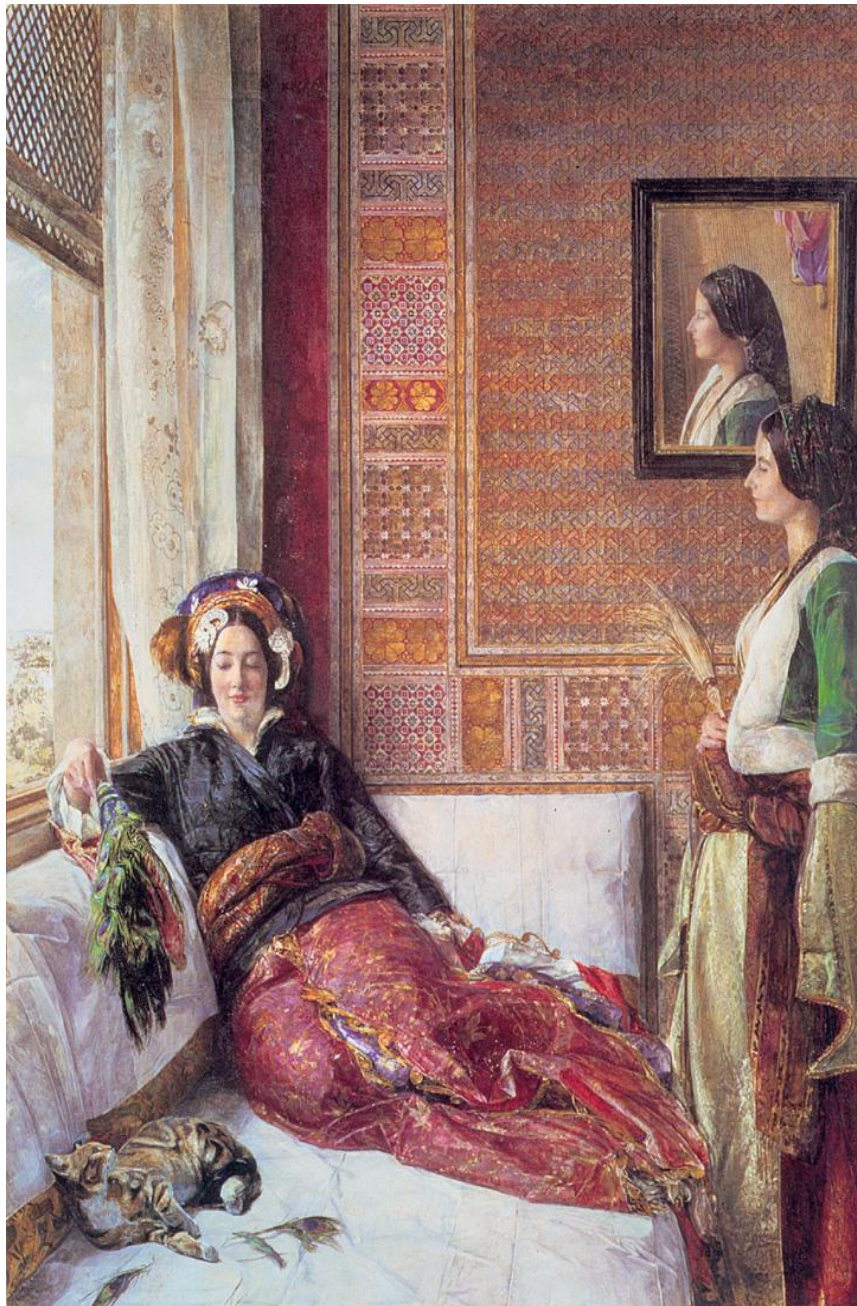
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- ¹⁴ Wortley Montagu, p.106.
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- ²² Wortley Montagu, p 105.
- ²³ Wortley Montagu, p. 105
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- ³² Joseph Withers, *A Description of the Grand Signor's Seraglio*, (London: John Martin and John Ridley, 1650). p.59.; quoted in Bridget Orr, p.9.
- ³³ Bohls, p. 34.
- ³⁴ Wortley Montagu, p.105
- ³⁵ Anne, Seclor, 'Orientalism, Gender and Class in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish Embassy Letters: to persons of distinction, men of letters and c.' *Cultural Geographies*, 6.4, (1999), 375-398, (p. 391).
- ³⁶ Seclor, p. 391

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- ³⁷ Wortley Montagu pp.105-106
- ³⁸ Wortley Montagu p. 160
- ³⁹ Lew, p. 44
- ⁴⁰ Wortley Montagu, p.105
- ⁴¹ Srinivas, Aravamudan, 'Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in the Hammam: Masquerade, Womanliness, and Levantinization', *ELH*, vol. 62.1, (1995), 69-104, (p. 83).
- ⁴² Aravamudan, p.83.
- ⁴³ Teresa, Heffernan, 'Feminism Against the East/West Divide: Lady Mary's Embassy Letters.' *Eighteenth Century Studies*, 33.2 (1990-00), 201-215, (p. 211).
- ⁴⁴ Wortley Montagu, p. 23.
- ⁴⁵ Wortley Montagu, p.115.
- ⁴⁶ Seclor, p. 384.
- ⁴⁷ Wortley Montagu, pp. 153, 154.
- ⁴⁸ Wortley Montagu, p. 154.
- ⁴⁹ Wortley Montagu, 154-155.
- ⁵⁰ Wortley Montagu, p. 156.
- ⁵¹ Secor, 385.
- ⁵² Wortley Montagu, p. 174.
- ⁵³ Abbé Atonio Conti (1677-1749). He was received at Court in England in 1715. See R. Halsband, *The Complete letters*, p.315.; footnote 3, *The Life of Mary*, p. 48.
- ⁵⁴ Wortley Montagu, p.106.
- ⁵⁵ Wortley Montagu, p.107.
- ⁵⁶ Wortley Montagu, 108-110.
- ⁵⁷ Wortley Montagu, p. 108.
- ⁵⁸ Wortley Montagu, p. 108.
- ⁵⁹ Secor, 383.
- ⁶⁰ Melman, p. 94.
- ⁶¹ Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, 'An Early Ethnographer of Middle Eastern Women: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)'. *Journal of Near Eastern Studies, Arabic and Islamic Studies in Honour of Nabia Abbott*, 40. 4, part 2, (1981), 329-338, (p. 331).
- ⁶² Halsband, *The Life of Mary* p. 58.
- ⁶³ Wortley Montagu, p.117.
- ⁶⁴ Wortley Montagu, p.118.
- ⁶⁵ Wortley Montagu, p.123.
- ⁶⁶ Wortley Montagu, p.174.
- ⁶⁷ Wortley Montagu, p.175.
- ⁶⁸ Wortley Montagu, pp.175-176.
- ⁶⁹ Wortley Montagu, p.165.
- ⁷⁰ Wortley Montagu, p.176.
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- ⁷² Melman, p. 86.
- ⁷³ Lady Elizabeth Craven, *A Journey Through the Crimea to Constantinople: In a Series of Letters from the Right Honourable Elizabeth Lady Craven, to His Serene Highness the Margrave of Brandebourg, Anspach, and Bareith*, (London: G.G.J. and Robinson, 1789), p.233.
- ⁷⁴ Melman, p. 95.
- ⁷⁵ Wortley Montagu, p. 115.
- ⁷⁶ Melman, p. 86.
- ⁷⁷ Wortley Montagu, p. 116.
- ⁷⁸ Craven, p. 233.
- ⁷⁹ Julia Pardoe, *The City of the Sultan, and, Domestic manners of the Turks in 1836 (1837)*, (London: Henry Colburn, 1837) 2vols, vol1, pp.100-102.
- ⁸⁰ Melman. p.105.
- ⁸¹ Pardoe, p. 101.
- ⁸² 89 yeazall
- ⁸³ Wortley Montagu, p. 132.
- ⁸⁴ Wortley Montagu, p. 158.
- ⁸⁵ Wortley Montagu, pp.184-185.
- ⁸⁶ Sukayna Banarjee, 'Lady Mary Montagu and the "boundaries" of Europe', *Gender, ed. Kirsti siegel, Genre & identity in Women's Travel's Writing*, (NY: Peter Lang 2004), pp.31-54, (pp.49-50).
- ⁸⁷ Wortley Montagu, p.167.
- ⁸⁷ Wortley Montagu, p.152.

⁸⁸ Paston, p. 21.

⁸⁹ Lewis, p. 96.

**John Frederick Lewis, *Life in the Harem*
(1858, Cairo)**



<http://xaxor.com/oil-paintings/1169-john-frederick-lewis-1805-1876.html>
[accessed August 2013]

CHAPTER TWO

Harriet Martineau: The Harem as Enslavement

She was born to be a destroyer of slavery, in whatever form, in whatever place, all over the world, wherever she saw it, or thought she saw it.¹

In contrast to Wortley Montagu, Harriet Martineau repudiated the harem and its dynamic, regarding the whole institution as a form of slavery, a hell, a far cry from Wortley Montagu's "femopia". In her day, Harriet Martineau's success in journalism and literature was a shining example for other women writers. She was prolific in many genres, but her most pronounced talent was in journalism. Martineau's achievements in sociology led her to be accredited with being the first woman sociologist. She was a prolific writer, an avid anti-slavery activist, and a far trekking traveller. Among her activism was her passionate work for women's equality; she was one of the first women to write about the "Woman Question". Martineau used her talented pen to raise awareness about the right of women to equal education and career opportunities, and she supported women's suffrage until her death. Her travels took her to the Muslim Orient, where she visited Egypt, Sinai, Palestine (which included modern day Jordan), and Syria. The product of her journey was a travel itinerary: *Eastern Life, Past, and Present*. This book was a detailed, scrupulous survey of the origin and progression of the three Faiths; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Furthermore, *Eastern Life* illustrates Martineau's controversial views on religion, and her journey in the East is a metaphor for her spiritual quest, as she progressed from Unitarian to agnostic, finally reaching atheism in her older years. What sparks interest in her life and work is the contradiction between her progressive mind and views and her overall prudent and non-tolerant attitudes towards Oriental domestic life. Her opinion of the harem is shared by Florence Nightingale. Martineau's views also show similarities with another independent woman, a literary heroine, Jane Eyre. The amalgamation of these women's views illustrates how an independent and educated British woman constructed the harem.

Harriet Martineau was born into a middle class family in Norwich. Her parents were Unitarians, and their non-conformist values played an integral role in shaping Martineau's inquisitive and reformative spirit. She received several years of formal education, and was surrounded by the books her brothers studied at college. As early as sixteen old, Martineau experienced physical difficulties; she began losing her sense of hearing, and had to rely on an ear trumpet in her adult life. To make matters worse, this disability was accompanied by a decrease of function in her senses of taste and smell.

In a letter to her mother upon leaving Norwich, and resolving to live in London permanently, Harriet Martineau writes: ‘I fully expect that both you and I shall occasionally feel as if I did not discharge a daughter’s duty, but we shall both remind ourselves that I am now as much a citizen of the world, as any professional son of yours could be.’² Professionalism and amateurism were two separate things for Martineau, and she always sought to distinguish between the ‘pen’ and the ‘needle’: women’s domestic work, and masculine labour. She believed that ‘the female author must leave her needle and domestic circle behind, in order to take up the pen.’³ Martineau published her first article under the pseudo name “Discipulus” in 1822, “Female Writers on Practical Divinity” were published in the radical, Unitarian periodical *Monthly Repository*. In her *Autobiography* (1877), she recounts the night her brother sanctioned her career: “Now dear you leave it to other women to make shirts and darn stockings; and do you devote yourself to this.”[...]That evening he made me an authoress.⁴ In 1826 the Martineau’s business collapsed. This misfortune was a blessing in disguise for Martineau; poverty was her freedom from social prejudice against working women, and she entered the workforce armed with her two skills of needlework and writing.

Linda H. Petersen writes that Martineau ‘was the quintessential Victorian woman of letters — working in multiple print media, managing the literary and financial aspects of her career, and successfully fulfilling the role of *dotoressa* to the nation.’⁵ Martineau held a distinct and novel position among the other female writers of the early Victorian era; her content, diversity of genres, and style of writing made her literary identity ambiguous, straddling both gender literary roles. Despite the growing popularity of British women writers in her time, the boundaries of professional writing were heavily circumscribed, women were confined to writing about “feminine” topics: love, marriage and domesticity. Those serious topics, such as politics, economy, and theology, were generally considered beyond women’s intellectual grasp. Notwithstanding this, Martineau crossed the boundary of separate literary spheres, and was commissioned to write — under her own name — a multi-volume work entitled *Illustrations on Political Economy*, published in the *Monthly Repository*. A series of this kind was novel: a composition of fictional stories which help simplify the principles of political economy to the masses. The innovative combination of fiction and non-fiction in this work made it a success, and marked Martineau’s talent in non-fiction writing. To those in the nineteenth century literary market, her career and journalistic success was a manifestation of the capabilities of women in the intellectual field, and her literary persona has even been deemed masculine in some biographies.⁶ Martineau’s conceptualization of writing and authorship was not romantic and her work reveals that she understood the literary market place.⁷ Her breakthrough into the male-dominated journalistic scene made her the envy of women writers of her day, and she was admired by two famous iconic women authors in particular, Charlotte Bronte, and Elizabeth Gaskell. They communicated with her through letters and she even critiqued some of their work.

Among Martineau's successful literary endeavors were her travel writing books, in which her social intrigue and advocacy for social justice were evident. She produced two well received books, *Society in America* (1836), and *Retrospect on Western Travel* (1837), which recounted her experience in America during a two year tour. Martineau was fascinated with the "American experience" as purported by the concepts of the Declaration of Independence; individuality, equality and the right to political representation. As Logan comments:

[Martineau's] American experiences early established the ideological basis for a body of work guided by her desire to eradicate slavery in its various forms; racial slavery, seen in her abolition themed writings; sexual slavery, illustrated by her focus on worldwide oppressions of women; and social slavery, demonstrated by her aim to educate the working classes about the forces creating and perpetuating their economic exploitation.⁸

In *Society in America*, Martineau's approach to travel writing differed from the prevalent descriptive style that focused on nature. Instead, she utilized a scientific method, which aimed at 'serious sociological analysis that measures America's practice against its stated principles'.⁹ Martineau believed that 'to test the morals and manners of a nation by a reference to the essentials of human happiness is to strike at once to the center and to see things as they are'.¹⁰ Her analysis of American society was a holistic one, which incorporated a survey of domestic life and public life, and she gave special consideration to the way society treats its marginalized groups, in particular women, children, immigrants, and slaves.

Martineau's success as a travel writer made her a favorite among the publishers and in 1846 she was commissioned, by John Murray, the most prominent of travel writing publishers, to write a memoir of her journey in the near East. Her manuscript was rejected by Murray, however, when he 'heard rumors of the book's challenge to Christian ascendancy'.¹¹ In spite of this, *Eastern Life: Past and Present* reached the hands of the public in 1848, and became immediately popular; it was one of the staple travel books that prospective travelers to the Near East perused before reaching their destination. Martineau's book is divided into four parts, "Egypt and it's Faith", "Sinai and it's Faith", "Palestine and it's Faith", and finally Syria and it's Faith", with over third of the book on Egypt. Her interest in theology preceded her visit to the Near East, and was only heightened thus after. In her *Autobiography* she notes that she studied the bible, and wrote prize winning essays to persuade Unitarian values to Christians, Jews, and Muslims.

Martineau never married and her early views on the subject are reflected in her observations on Egyptian harem life in 1845. In her *Autobiography* she recounts how disappointed she felt upon hearing the news of her friend's engagement, as she thought this matrimonial commitment would "deprive her of larger opportunities of usefulness to the world."¹² Martineau retells another anecdote, a more personal

one, about her brush with marriage. She recounts her admiration of the mind and friendship in a man named George Worthington; he proposed, and she reluctantly accepted his offer for fear that her refusal might jeopardize his health. He died however before they could marry, and years later Martineau reflects on this chapter of her life:

I am, in truth, very thankful for not having married at all. I have never since been tempted, nor have suffered anything at all in relation to that matter which is held to be all-important to woman,—love and marriage...Every literary woman, no doubt, has plenty of importunity of that sort to deal with; but freedom of mind and coolness of manner dispose of it very easily: and since the time I have been speaking of, my mind has been wholly free from all idea of love affairs¹³

Martineau was consistent in her feelings towards traditional feminine roles, she rejected marriage, love, indeed any attachment that she believed would imprison a woman's mind and impede her creativity. The harem, structured on family life, and more or less, on women's confinement, would have certainly seemed a prison for a woman like Martineau. *Eastern life* is a triple decker book, and devotes only ten pages, rather disparagingly, to the harem. Martineau's lack of interest in interrogating the domestic life of the East is evident. It is exploration that excited her. She was enchanted with Egyptian antiquity and described it scrupulously. Furthermore her writings on the East, show her interest in the genealogy of religion, a subject which figures prominently in *Eastern Life*, as she attempts to locate the origin of the Holy Faiths in pre-historic Egyptian faith. Improvements in maritime and land transportation made travel cheaper and easier than ever before; however, the masses of Britain did not go further than their villages, but an increase of literate people with a thirst for knowledge allowed travel writing to flourish. Reading travel writing was a vicarious pleasure for those who were not fortunate enough to physically travel. They could envision, through the travellers' work, those distant lands which were thought to be untainted by the problems that accompanied technology in the nineteenth century, civilization, industrialism and scientific intoxication. Yet paradoxically, it was science and discovery that fuelled the study of Egypt:

[t]he exploration of Africa attracted enormous attention during the middle decades of the century and was in many ways the spur to the most classic forms of Victorian travel writing. Exploration was guided by the attempt to discover and describe the physical setting. The travel-reading public were fascinated with snow-covered mountains on the Equator, large inland lakes (on which surely one could use steamboats) and, above all, speculations on the source of the Nile. The search for the source was important because the Nile nourished Egypt, because one could speculate on whether the

ancients had known the source, and because the traveller who found it would have lasting fame.¹⁴

Eastern Life is part of this tradition and trend. It is rich in descriptive detail of the landscape, antiquities, and sights. It gives advice on the best clothes and routes to take to maximize the Eastern experience, and in this way it displays the characteristics of the typical “travel guide” of the nineteenth century.

Martineau’s hearing disability posed a threat to the testimony of her “witness” writing, but she was quick to resolve the issue. In the preface of *Eastern Life*, Martineau substantiates her travel writing: she thanks her companion travellers for their corroboration of her observations:

They permitted me to read to them my Egyptian journal; (there was no time for the others) that I might have the satisfaction of knowing whether they agreed in my impressions of the facts which came under our observation. About these facts there is an entire agreement between them and me.—For the opinions expressed in this book, no one is answerable but myself.¹⁵

These companions were Mr and Mrs Yates, and Mr Joseph C. Ewart, three witnesses to check the veracity of Martineau’s accounts. Furthermore her loss of hearing did not deprive her text from auditory descriptions, like listening to the sea on the way to Batroun or hearing the buzz of the crowd.

Eastern Life investigates the origins of Christianity, and concludes that all of the holy religions originated in Ancient Egyptian traditions and morals, and based on this common source, they shared a unity, whose roots existed prior to the bible, Roderick Cavaliero comments ‘[t]he antiquity of the Pharaonic civilisation suggested that the fundamental orthodoxies of the Bible story had put an age to the world pitifully short, and that Egyptian history might pre-date the Flood, providing one more stick with which to beat Christianity.’¹⁶ Martineau writes:

I saw the march of the whole human race, past, present & to come, through existence, & their finding the Source of Life. Another time, I saw all the Idolatries of the earth coming up to worship at the ascending series of Life- fountains, while I discovered these to be all connected, - each flowing down unseen to fill the next, - so that all the worshippers were seen by me to be verily adoring the Source.¹⁷

The above passage was written prior to her travel to the East, but it connects to her historical and religious speculations in that journey. It was in her first chapter, “Egypt and its Faith“, that Martineau pronounced her idea, that the faith of the Ancient Egyptian priesthood was originally monotheistic:

[T]he leading point of belief of the Egyptians, from the earliest times known to us, was that there was One Supreme,—or, as they said,—one only God, who was to be adored in silence, (as Jambachus declares from the ancient Hermetic books,) and was not to be named; that most of the other gods were deifications of his attributes ; while others again, as Egypt, the Nile, the Sun, the Moon, the West, &c., were deifications of the powers or forces on which the destiny of the Egyptian nation depended. ¹⁸

One of these “lesser Deities” is Osiris, and it was in his story that Martineau found the most significant resemblance between the two faiths— Ancient Egyptian doctrine and Christianity. Osiris was believed to have left his heavenly abode to assume a human form; he died in a battle against the forces of evil, rose again to spread blessings over the people and the earth, and was appointed Judge of the Dead and Lord of Heaven. After a lengthy explanation supported by authoritative texts of Pythagoras and Herodotus, Martineau purports that it was ‘impossible not to perceive that Osiris was to the old Egyptians what the Messiah is to be to the Jews; and what Another has been to the Christians’.¹⁹

Although Sanders maintains that *Eastern Life* merely participated in the ongoing theological debate that was happening at the time, Roberts finds that it is original in terms of the effect it had on a wider readership.²⁰ Martineau felt it her duty to educate the public as with her earlier publications, most prominently *Illustrations of Economy*. Travel literature was a suitable medium for her to communicate her knowledge as it was abundant and it appealed to the masses. However, the reaction to her publication was general disfavor by the critics. From the Evangelical *Eclectic Review*, to the liberal *British Quarterly Review*, the periodicals disapproved; ‘if she had confined herself to the proper object of a book of travel and not ventured beyond the sphere of her own knowledge and experience, she might have produced a work second to none in its class and value’.²¹

To Harriet Martineau, Islamic faith and its practice in modern Islamic society, especially in Egypt, seemed peripheral to the focal point of her study of Eastern life. Subsequently, she includes little commentary throughout her book on the matter. According to Melman, ‘Martineau’s work is informed by [an] antiquary and unsystematic approach to the past. The very title of this work . . . reveals a bias towards pre-Islamic history. . . Martineau is interested in the present not for itself but as a contrast to a greater past. She is a ‘genealogist’ (her own term). Time and again she discloses her total lack of interest in the Muslim Orient and in contemporary Egypt.’²² Nonetheless, Martineau’s spirit for social equality led her to appreciate some things about the Islamic community, especially elements of social equality. After visiting the mosque of Sultan Hassan in Cairo, Martineau expressed her admiration:

Nothing charmed me so much about them [the mosques] as the spectacle of the homeless poor, who find a refuge there. In the noble mosque of Sultan Hasan...we entered a vast court sacred to all those who have hearts, whether they be heathens, Mohammedans, or Christians, for the solace and peace which are to be found there...On the platform sat a man making his garment...as much at his ease as if he had been in a home of his own...Several poor people were sitting talking cheerfully: and under this roof and on this mat, they were welcome to sleep, if they had no other place of rest...We are accustomed to say that there is no respect of persons, and that all men are equal, within the walls of our churches: but I never felt this so strongly in any Christian place of worship as in this Mohammedan one, with its air of freedom, and welcome to all the faithful.²³

Martineau is generous in her praise of the Mosque's philanthropic attributes. Although other churches had begun to flourish in Harriet Martineau's time, England's primary church, the Anglican Church catered to the middle classes. Furthermore, the Sanction Act stripped the main source of livelihood for many of the lower classes, and left them to seek jobs in the industrial cities. All these economical disadvantages back home in Britain made Martineau appreciate the purpose of the Mosque's services to the masses.

The most pertinent chapter of *Eastern Life* for this discussion is the shortest and the least favorite of Martineau herself: "The Harem". Martineau visited two harems on her Eastern tour, one in Cairo and another in Damascus. From the outset, readers can sense Martineau's strong contempt at what she observed in the women's quarters: 'I cannot now think of the two mornings thus employed without a heaviness of heart greater than I have ever brought away from Deaf and Dumb Schools, Lunatic Asylums, or Even Prisons. As such are my impressions of harems'.²⁴ Martineau's background as the author of *How to Observe Morals and Manners* indicates that she perhaps should have been more open minded and more objective than the average woman traveller of her day. In *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, Martineau gives some potent advice to fellow travellers. Foreign societies should be studied scientifically and historically, and not based on English or European values. Moreover, society is most accurately studied as a composite, taking into consideration its women, children, and marginalized groups. In her survey of the domestic structure of the Orient, specifically, the harem, however, it seems that Martineau abandoned her own advice:

I learned a very great deal about the working of the institution [the harem] and I believe I apprehend the thoughts and the feelings of the persons concerned in it: and I declare that if we are to look for a hell upon earth, it is where polygamy exists: and that, as polygamy runs riot in Egypt, Egypt is the lowest depth of this hell. I always

before believed that every arrangement and prevalent practice had someone fair side, – some one redeeming quality: and diligently did I look for the fair side in regard to polygamy: but there is none. The longer one studies the subject ... the more does one's heart feel as it would break.²⁵

Martineau did not speak or understand Arabic, and to make things worse, on her first visit to a harem, the one in Egypt, she lacked an interpreter. So it would seem highly unlikely that she actually could 'apprehend the thoughts and the feelings of the persons concerned'. The whole interaction reads as awkward and one-sided, as Martineau herself seems unable and unwilling to communicate with the harem women: 'The time was passed in attempts to have conversation by signs; attempts which are fruitless among people of the different ideas which belong to different races is impossible.'²⁶ In many ways, a travel writer is a mediator of translation, a bridge between cultures. However, Martineau's unwillingness to understand the Egyptian domestic dynamic takes away from her credibility as a travel writer, and even more so as a sociologist, as per the standards she purports in her *How to Observe Morals and Manners*.

Martineau's dismissive attitude towards Eastern women and their lifestyle may be attributed to more than a lack of open-mindedness or an ethnocentrism. Although the West had generally acknowledged the harem to be an alternative model of sexual and familial arrangements, Martineau could not reconcile herself with it. She was a single woman, who lived alone, worked for a living, and was as independent of any man. Her Unitarian upbringing, which exalted work and productivity, augmented by her personal endeavours in campaigning women's rights to equal opportunities in work and education, caused her to disavow a system structured on separate spheres. To be sure, the harem was not synonymous with polygamy as Martineau suggests, for by the time she travelled to Egypt, polygamy was becoming an aristocratic preserve.

Martineau's view of the harem and polygamy was shared by her friend Florence Nightingale, who traveled to Egypt in 1848 and produced a travel journal *Letters from Egypt: A Journey on the Nile 1848-49*, based on her five month sojourn in Egypt. Like Martineau, she finds the harem demeaning and enslaving to women:

In the large harems, there are 200 to 300 wives and 4 to 5 children; but she [the Egyptian woman] is not a wife, nor a mother; she cannot sit down in the presence of her son; her husband is her master and her only occupation is beautifying herself[...]. She becomes his real wife only at his caprice, by a paper given to her, then she is satisfied to believe that she will stay at the gates of paradise[...]. the woman[...]. has more to suffer here than the man, both in heart, and in spirit, and in body.²⁷

Nightingale's view of Egyptian women is echoed in a passage she wrote about the predicament of British women:

Women are never supposed to have any occupation of sufficient importance *not* to be interrupted, except "suckling their fools"; and women themselves have accepted this, have written books to support this, and have trained themselves so far as to consider whatever they do as not of such value to the world or to others, but they can throw it up at the first "claim of social life". They have accustomed themselves to consider intellectual occupation as a merely selfish amusement, which it is their duty to give up for every trifler more selfish than themselves.²⁸

Nightingale and Martineau fail to appreciate the value of women's work in a domestic setting. In contrast, their Victorian contemporary, Sophia Lane Poole, sister of the famous Orientalist Edward Lane Poole, managed to appreciate women's work in the harem. In *The English Woman in Egypt* (1845) Poole observes an industrious community in the harem and finds 'the employments of the harem chiefly consist in embroidery, on an oblong frame, supported by four legs; but they extend to superintending the kitchen, and indeed the female slaves and servants generally ; and often ladies of the highest distinction cook those dishes which are particularly preferred.'²⁹ Poole describes the organized ambiance in the harem community, wherein all the women distribute their work. From the slaves to their ladies, they co-operate in making sherbet, delicious summer drinks from freshly picked flower leaves and fruits whose variety is 'too tedious to describe'.³⁰ Then she observes the harem women's unparalleled skill and talent in embroidery: I must not speak slightly of their embroidery; for it is extremely beautiful— as superior as it is unlike to any fancy-work practised in England. Taste of a very remarkable kind is displayed in its execution; and similar, in many respects, to that exhibited in the most elaborate decorations of Arabian architecture; but its singular beauty is in some measure produced, where colours are employed, by the plan of often taking the colours at random.³¹

Poole's stay in Egypt lasted much longer than that of temporary sojourners, Martineau and Nightingale. She accompanied her brother, and resided in Egypt for three years. She admits that shedding prejudices, former misconceptions, and one's own cultural baggage is a difficult task:

After a residence of nearly three years in an Eastern country, in the habit of frequent and familiar intercourse with the ladies of the higher and middle classes of its population, you will probably think me able to convey some general ideas of their moral and social state. To do this, I find to be a task of extreme difficulty...I have endeavored to divest myself of prejudice; but altogether to lose sight of our English standards of propriety has been impossible;

and as every state of society in the world has its defects, to avoid comparison would be unnatural.³²

Despite the uneasiness and anxiety that spring from the collision of different cultures, Poole made an effort to adapt to Oriental life and glean the manners and customs of the natives as much as possible, very much like her predecessor Wortley Montagu. She dressed like the natives, and adopted the veil. Unlike Martineau, who refused to wear the veil in her Eastern journey, and entered the harem unfamiliar with the language of its inmates. Poole, on the other hand, delayed her harem visit till she had acquired a little Arabic as 'it is the common language of Egypt, some knowledge of it is indispensable.'³³ She even grew accustomed to Oriental food and eating habits:

In obtaining an insight into the habits and manners of the women, I possess considerable advantages ; first, from my brother's knowledge of the East, and secondly, from my plan of adhering strictly to habits cherished by the people, which system has secured at once their respect, while it has excited their surprise. We have even gone so far as to adopt their manner of eating; and here I must digress to beg you not to say " How very disgusting !" but read how we do it, and then you may confess that it is not so unpleasant as you thought. The dishes are prepared in a very delicate manner³⁴

Poole differs from her antecessor Lott, a governess who served in an Elite Egyptian household for two years. While Poole respects the etiquette and customs of her Eastern hosts, Lott defiantly rejects and refuses to adopt them, risking her own health in the process:

...I find the Arab diet so nauseous to my taste as to oblige me to live chiefly upon dry bread and a little pigeon or mutton, but that, owing to the want of more nourishing food, and especially European cooking, I found my strength gradually sinking day by day ; and that the constant use of coffee, and the total deprivation of those stimulants, such as malt liquor and wine, to which I had always been accustomed, and of which it is absolutely necessary that Europeans should partake in warm countries to counteract the hostile debilitating effects of the climate, would, I fear, soon throw me on a bed of sickness.³⁵

Poole comments on the power an Egyptian woman possesses in the harem, especially in the richer households:

...I am disposed to think...that women, in many respects, have the ascendancy among the higher orders throughout the East. We imagine in England that the husband in these regions is really lord

and master, and he is in some cases; but you will scarcely believe that the master of a house may be excluded for many days from his own hareem, by his wife's or wives' causing a pair of slippers to be placed outside the door, which signifies that there are visitors within.³⁶

Thus Egyptian women, in Poole's model, are not helpless and downtrodden as Martineau and Nightingale suggest. On the contrary, they own their space, the harem, and govern it, a view similar to that of Wortley Montagu's.

Poole wished to give a comprehensive account of all the things she found agreeable and commendable in the East, but the discourse of Empire caused her to feel anxiousness for doing so: 'Devoted as I am, justly, to my own dear country and her blessed associations, I can give you my candid opinion, without any fear that I shall be suspected of preferring a residence in the Levant to my English home.'³⁷ She proceeds to speak however, 'without reserve'³⁸, of what she observed of the kindness, solidarity and symbiosis that prevailed in Egypt:

It is very certain that if a daily journal were published in Cairo, we should not see paragraphs headed "death by starvation", distressing case, &c.; but why is it . . . for there are no houses here for the reception of the poor, as in England. It results from the contented spirit of the poor, if provided simply with bread and water; and, more than all, from the sort of family union which subsists throughout the East, and which literally teaches the poor to "bear each other's burthens".³⁹

This 'family compact'⁴⁰ perpetuates to the middle and upper classes, and mothers, Poole observes, have an esteemed position in Eastern households, 'her gentle reign lasting with her valued life, and the love and respect of those around her increasing with her years.'⁴¹ An Egyptian woman, whether she is fulfilling her role as a mother, wife or sister, is respected and looked after in the Eastern home:

All blood relations in the East take precedence of the wife, who is received into a family as a younger sister. It could scarcely be suffered here, or in Turkey, that a father or mother should quit a house to make way for a son's wife...and let me ask you, is not this as it should be? I cannot understand how any person with a spark of nature in his breast could allow a beloved parent to resign what a child should be willing to shed his heart's blood to preserve.⁴²

Polygamy proved a difficult concept for Poole to accept. It is interesting that some women travellers could not tolerate polygamy, Scottish diplomat and writer David Urquhart (1805-1877) reminds the European public in *Spirit of the East*, that although polygamy does not figure legally in the modern West, it was practiced in

its essence:

All the convictions of our habits and laws stand in hostile array against the country where the principle of polygamy is admitted into the laws of the state. But yet, while we reproach Islamism with polygamy, Islamism may reproach us with practical polygamy, which unsanctioned by law, and reprov'd by custom, adds degradation of the mind to dissoluteness of morals'.⁴³

Thus, with all its evils, Eastern polygamy protected the rights of women, it legitimized their children, and protected them financially and socially. On the other hand, the social and economic situation for British wives who were victims of adultery was deplorable. Although the husband could divorce his wife on grounds of adultery, wives had to prove she was victim to further horrendous acts, bestiality, incest, battery, to be granted a divorce.

Wortley Montagu's Turkish *hammam* was a woman's sensual utopia; home to goddess-like beauty, entertainment, diversion, all the while free from prurience and male intrusion. In contrast, Victorians like Martineau and Poole struggled to endow the bath with the same positive descriptions and qualities, nakedness and overt indulgence proved too insensible to their Victorian decorum. Martineau even goes so far as to dehumanize the women bathers, '[t]o this moment, I find it difficult to think of these creatures as human beings and certainly I never saw anything, even in the lower slave district of the United States, which so impressed me with a sense of the impassable differences of race.'⁴⁴ And Poole relates similar discomfort emanated from her unfamiliarity with such a sight:

On entering this chamber a scene presented itself which beggars description. My companions had prepared me for seeing many persons undressed; but imagine my astonishment on finding at least thirty women of all ages, and many young girls and children, perfectly unclothed. You will scarcely think it possible that no one but ourselves had a vestige of clothing. Persons of all colours, from the black and glossy shade of the negro to the fairest possible hue of complexion, were formed in groups, conversing as though full dressed, with perfect *nonchalance*, while others were strolling about, or sitting round the fountain. I cannot describe the bath as altogether a beautiful scene; in truth, in some respects it is disgusting; and I regret that I can never reach a private room in any bath without passing through the large public apartment.⁴⁵

Poole finds the scene disgusting and uncomfortable, and these feelings may be attributed to the nonchalance she observed in the Eastern women's attitude about being naked. Furthermore, the communal feeling shared between women of different races and classes in the bath was unfamiliar to the Victorian Poole. Her

shock is perhaps a reaction to being confronted with the fact that in the nude, stripped off the rigid codes of dress and manners, all women, of different races and statuses, are equal. Her eighteenth-century predecessor Wortley Montagu observed the anonymity of class in the *hammam*, and although she admired this quality of the bath, we must remember that she reserved her dress in the presence of the naked bathers.

Poole's description of the Oriental bath has similarities with that of Wortley Montagu, but differs in its aesthetic description of the bathers. Both ladies represent the bath as a social hub. Wortley Montagu was mesmerized by the natural beauty of the Turkish women bathers, and constructed the bath as a women's coffee house, whereas Poole concludes that Eastern bathing is revolting because it is public: '... the eyes and ears of an Englishwoman must be closed in the public bath in Egypt before she can fairly enjoy the satisfaction it affords; for beside the very foreign scenes which cannot fail to shock her feelings of propriety, the cries of the children are deafening and incessant. The perfection of Eastern bathing is therefore rather to be enjoyed in a private bath'.⁴⁶ In contrast to Martineau and Poole, Wortley Montagu represented the aesthetic of the Eastern women without charging it with moral judgment. Evident is a shift in sensibilities. Poole admits to the satisfaction of Eastern bathing experience, but it is best enjoyed outside of an Oriental interior. Melman suggests that Montagu's '*tableau vivant*'⁴⁷ of the Bath at Sophia in 1717 represents a moral free aestheticism, which is typical of the Augustan's cultural openness to diversity.

Although the visit to the harem had become an unavoidable and routine part of British women's travels to the Orient in the 1800s, Victorian travellers were constrained in their discourse about sex. To negotiate English propriety, women travellers often implied sexual imagery through the use of synecdoche and physiognomy, of the latter Melman writes:

The travel-writers were not merely describing. They were *physiognomists*, that is, they used human features and expressions and the human physique to judge oriental 'nature', whether the character of individual oriental woman, or the moral state of the Middle Eastern society[...]. Inner characteristics and values were then inferred from the outward appearances. Physical detail provides clues to morals and, at the same time conveys to the reader social and moral beliefs concerning feminine sexuality.⁴⁸

This use of physiognomy was characteristic of the Victorian novel, etiquette books, and in painting. Dickens and Anne Brontë are prominent examples. In Martineau's descriptions, the eastern women were all characterized as unhealthy looking, '... we did not see a healthy complexion among the whole company; not anywhere among women who were secluded from exercise, while pampered with all the luxuries of eastern living.'⁴⁹ Furthermore, Martineau and Poole's accounts of

Eastern female social gatherings, both in the harem and bath, contain descriptions of old, deteriorating women. The attributes of old age, and unhealthiness in the Eastern women is loaded with moral judgment. Martineau and Poole, like the majority of Victorian writers, connected fastidiousness and indulgence of the flesh with moral degeneration. Regular washing, pampering, toileting, and appliance of cosmetics are acts of vanity that endanger morals. In this vein, Oriental women bathers are characterized as unattractive and physically weak because to the Victorians, they are morally and intellectually debilitated. Melman elaborates further on the moral characterization of Eastern women:

Unknowingly perhaps the nineteenth century ‘moralists’ echo the rationalist climatologists of the Enlightenment, who associated character and behavior with climate, geography and physical environment. The effects of climate, especially heat- both ‘natural’ heat and the artificially created heat of the bath- on the physical constitution of oriental women and their *libido* were constantly commented on by eighteenth century climatologists’.⁵⁰

Despite Martineau’s shock at the public bathers in Tiberias, *Eastern life* contains a few examples of her indulging in public washing. Whether bathing in a river, pool, or pond, she is open about her physical happiness when doing so. The contrast between Eastern bathing and her own public bathing evidences that ‘when bathing is disassociated from an oriental interior it becomes a purifying experience’.⁵¹

It is important to point out, that while Martineau and Nightingale describe the harem is a hell on earth, this hell is tempered by the presence of “white” residents, the fair-skinned Circassians and Georgians. Historically, the most frequently mentioned, drawn and praised races of the Oriental harems are the Circassians and the Georgians. The slaves which descend from these two ethnicities in the imperial harems of the Ottoman Empire, mainly those in Turkey and Egypt, are ranked above all other inmates, simply because of their white skin color. In *Letters From Egypt*, Nightingale comments that the Circassians and Georgians are ‘the most graceful and the most sensual-looking creatures [she] ever saw (like dancers).’⁵² Martineau in her diminutive chapter ‘The Harem’ cites that the mothers from these two races, produce ‘the finest children’⁵³ and without them the upper class in Egypt would be doomed.⁵⁴ Their admiration for these two groups may have been attributed to them being thought of as Christian:

Western writers and artists often considered Circassian and Georgian women Christian. In point of fact, much of the two land areas had converted to Islam in the seventeenth century. Thus but the nineteenth century, Circassian and Georgians practiced a provincial amalgam of the two religions. Perhaps the western understanding of their faith as Christian constituted a reading of their light skin color. Or the latter led to the former.⁵⁵

Harriet Martineau's cousin Lady Lucie Duff Gordon (1821-1869) wrote letters relating her residence in Egypt among the fellahin — inhabitants of the rural areas who work off the land — and she represents a different and polarized view to that of Martineau. Gordon contracted tuberculosis in 1851 and was advised to live in the Cape of Good Hope, wherein the weather would be kinder to her health. In 1861 she came to Egypt, and resided among the locals without her husband and daughter until her death. Her letters often criticize the way in which the English and Europeans treated and represented Arabs. She grew very fond of the Egyptian locals, and held a much esteemed place among them. Gordon thought that her cousin's book on Egypt, Martineau's *Eastern Life* had excellent descriptions, but she criticized the book's lack of empathy towards the people: 'she evidently knew and cared nothing about the people, and had the feeling of most English people, here that the difference in manners in a sort of impassable gulf, the truth being that their feelings and passions are just like our own.'⁵⁶

As a contemporary traveller Gordon criticizes the failures of travellers of the modern world:

It is curious that the old books of travel that I have read mention the natives of strange countries in a far more natural tone, and with far more attempt to discriminate character, than modern ones, e.g. Niebuhr's Travels here and in Arabia, Cooke's Voyages, and many others. Have we grown so very civilized since a hundred years that outlandish people seem like mere puppets, and not like real human beings?⁵⁷

Lucie Gordon's commentary reveals a critique about the way in which the establishment and growing power of the British Empire weakened its capacity to accept cultural diversity. Gordon dedicates several letters to the kindness and tolerance of Arab men towards their women, and she is indignant at Martineau's description of the Eastern domestic life. Gordon's own tolerance and liberal thinking was tested when she witnessed the love affair between Omar — her servant and guide — and her English maid Lucy. This affair resulted in an illegitimate child, and Gordon herself acted as midwife during the birth, but there is not any evidence in the text to suggest that Gordon chastised her English maid.⁵⁸ Gordon admired Omar, she relates many of their conversations, and the reader can glean her respect and admiration of the male Eastern mind. Gordon was an Arabophile, she sympathized with the women, but it was the local men of Luxor with whom she connected and socialized with. She even adopted the male fellahin dress, and was revered among the locals as the "great lady". Julia Pardoe, writing prior to Martineau, could see that the lack of education and seclusion of the Turkish ladies places them in an eternal mental space of innocence and contentment, which she seems to envy:

The almost total absence of education among Turkish women, and

the consequently limited range of their ideas, is another cause of that quiet, careless, indolent happiness that they enjoy[...]they have no factitious wants growing out of excessive mental refinement, and they do not, therefore, torment themselves with the myriad anxieties, and doubts, and chimeras, which would darken, and depress the spirit of more highly gifted female. Give her shawls, and diamonds, a spacious mansion Stamboul, and a sunny place on the Bosphorus, and a Turkish wife is the very type of happiness[...]a woman in person, but a child at heart.⁵⁹

Martineau, on the other hand, rejected the harem way of life in its entirety.

Martineau's attack on the harem, her pity for Egyptian women, who she concludes 'are the most studiously depressed and corrupted women whose condition... [she has] witnessed',⁶⁰ is consistent with what Spivak terms as 'epistemic violence':⁶¹ That is, the 'construction of a self-immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer.'⁶² Martineau and Nightingale use the Eastern women as mirrors which validate their own freedoms; they are the travellers, and movement signifies liberty, opposed to the stagnant Oriental women, stuck in the harem interior. Both Martineau and her Eighteenth century predecessor Wortley Montagu envisioned freedom, and both constructed it vis-à-vis the Oriental harem. Whereas Wortley Montagu envisioned the harem as a space of idealized physical, sexual and overall corporeal liberties, Martineau despised the harem for these very freedoms. In the harems of the Eastern Mediterranean, Martineau formed what she thought was the antithesis of a woman's freedom, the adversary of her intellectual and spiritual liberation. Martineau's idea of freedom was freedom from sensuality, whereas Wortley Montagu's was the opposite, but in both instances the harem aided the women to make their point to consider their own position as Western Women.

ENDNOTES

¹ Florence Nightingale to John Chapman, September 29, 1876, quoted in Maria Weston Chapman, *Memorials* (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1877), vol. 3. p. 479.

² Chapman, *Memorials*, p. 91

³ Joanne Shattock, ed., *Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 217.

⁴ Chapman, vol. 1, p.120.

⁵ Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (U.S.A: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 61.

⁶ Deborah Anne Logan, *Harriet Martineau's "Somewhat Remarkable" Life*, (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), p. 10.

⁷ For more on Martineau as a Woman of Letters, see Peterson, *Becoming a Woman of Letters*, pp. 61-95.

⁸ Logan, pp.78-79.

⁹ Logan, p.79.

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- ¹⁰ Harriet Martineau, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (London: C. Knight and Company, 1838), p.14.
- ¹¹ Logan, p.188.
- ¹² Chapman, vol3, p. 22.
- ¹³ Chapman, vol1, pp.131-132.
- ¹⁴ Peter Hulmes and Tim Youngs, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002), p. 64.
- ¹⁵ Harriet Martineau, *Eastern Life, Past and Present* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1848), p. 7. All subsequent references to Martineau are to this book unless stated otherwise.
- ¹⁶ Roderick Cavaliero, *Ottomania: The Romantics and the Myth of the Islamic Orient*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), p.121.
- ¹⁷ Harriet Martineau to Richard Monckton Milnes, 22 Feb. 1845, quoted in ed. Valerie Sanders, *Harriet Martineau: Selected Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.108.
- ¹⁸ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, p.18.
- ¹⁹ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, p. 140.
- ²⁰ Caroline Roberts, *The Woman and the Hour: Harriet Martineau and Victorian Ideologies* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 156.
- ²¹ Billie Melman, *Women's Orient* (Michigan, University of Michigan, 1992), p.235, originally quoted in the *Eclectic Review*.
- ²² Melman, p.242.
- ²³ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, pp. 246-247.
- ²⁴ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, p. 259.
- ²⁵ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, p. 260.
- ²⁶ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, p. 263.
- ²⁷ Florence Nightingale, *Letters From Egypt: A Journey on the Nile 1849-1850*, selected and introduced by Anthony Sattin (New York: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), p.28.
- ²⁸ Rosemary J. Mundhenk and LuAnn McCracken Fletcher, eds., *Victorian Prose: An Anthology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 308.
- ²⁹ Sophia Lane Poole, *The English Woman in Egypt* (Philadelphia: G.B. Zeiber & Co.,1845). All subsequent references to Poole are to this version of her book, unless otherwise stated.
- ³⁰ Poole, p. 142.
- ³¹ Poole, pp.142-143.
- ³² Sophia Lane Poole, *The English Woman in Egypt*, ed. Azza Kararah (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2003), p.183.
- ³³ Poole, p.45.
- ³⁴ Poole, p.12.
- ³⁵ Lott, p.134.
- ³⁶ Poole, pp. 140-141.
- ³⁷ Poole, p.132.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Poole, p.133.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ David Urquhart, *Spirit of the East*, vol. 2, p.387; quoted in Kararah, p. 126 n.
- ⁴⁴ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, p. 473.
- ⁴⁵ Poole, pp.226-227.
- ⁴⁶ Poole, p.179.
- ⁴⁷ Melman, p.112.
- ⁴⁸ Melman, p.113.
- ⁴⁹ Martineau, *Eastern Life* p. 268.
- ⁵⁰ Melman p. 135; for more on Eighteenth Century Climatology Melman cites the fifth book of Montesquieu's *De l'espert de lois* as the best example.
- ⁵¹ Melman, p. 134.
- ⁵² Florence Nightingale, p.208.
- ⁵³ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, p.157.
- ⁵⁴ ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Joan Del Plato, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), p.39.
- ⁵⁶ Lady Duff Gordon, *Letters From Egypt: 1862-1869* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p.3.
- ⁵⁷ Gordon, pp. 3-4.

⁵⁸ Gordon, 'Omar and sally have a baby'

⁵⁹ Pardoe, pp.102-103.

⁶⁰ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, p.270.

⁶¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, "Race," *Writing, and Difference*, 12.1 (Autumn, 1985), 243-261,
< <http://www.JSTOR.org/stable/1343469> > , p.251.

⁶² *ibid.*

John Frederick Lewis, *In the Bey's Garden* (1865)



Bridgeman Art Library / Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, Lancashire, UK

CHAPTER THREE

Isabel Burton: The Harem as a Bourgeois Home

In Chapters One and Two, the images of the Oriental harem are polarized, beginning with Wortley Montagu's "femtopia", leading up to Martineau's hell on earth. This chapter, however, contains a more complex view of the harem. Lady Isabel Burton's writings on Oriental domestic life display tolerance, rationalism, cross-culturalism and a step towards humanism. Her friendships, sympathy, and sometimes ambivalent attitude towards Oriental women and their lives disrupt the imperialistic ideology of the nineteenth century. At a time when the British Empire was at its height, Isabel Burton was able to communicate with her subject, participate, sympathize with the Oriental women, and construct an almost wholesome image of them. I will begin by interrogating her most prominent influence, her life and travel partner, Sir Richard Francis Burton. His views on Oriental sexual customs and manners stand in contrast to his wife's tempered and domesticated harem, yet they were influential in terms of nineteenth century attitudes towards the Orient and sexuality. The main focus of the chapter is Isabel Burton's travels in Syria, a country she fell in love with, and the friendly harem visit she retold, in which she interviewed the women, and structured a new understanding based on reciprocal respect of *their* culture, and *ours*.

Isabel Burton was an exemplary nineteenth-century wife, dedicating herself to her husband's comfort during his life and to protecting his reputation after his death. Sir Richard Burton's interest in a range of sexual practices led him to be regarded as somewhat infamous, but his biographer Byron Fairwell emphasises that 'Above all...Burton was an adventurer', and though 'his conclusions and theories were frequently bizarre, heretical or erroneous...his mind was capable of moving beyond the thoughts of other men.'¹ Burton is known for two major contributions to Oriental studies, the first is his disguised pilgrimage to Mecca and Al-Madinah in 1853; a journey that inspired the travel book *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Medinah and Mecca* (1855). In its time, this text was the most notable source about a pilgrimage undertaken by a non-Muslim. Burton's second textual venture was a risqué one; in 1885 he published *A Thousand Nights and a Night* which was an unexpurgated and unabridged translation of the *Arabian Nights*. In Western perceptions of the Muslim Orient, the *Arabian Nights* enjoyed the status of an ethnographical source on the sexual customs and manners of the Near East, particularly with regards to representations of Eastern women and harems. Mary Roberts in *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Literature* suggests that the *Arabian Nights* were read 'by the Victorian audience as a complex mix of fact and fantasy, the tales were

persistently interpreted as a record of the manners and customs of the East as well as a fictitious magic and the supernatural'.²

The *Arabian Nights* was first introduced into British households through Antoine Galland's French translation, published from 1704-1714. Although Galland's version was heavily euphemistic, masking the sexual nature of the *Nights*, it was still considered improper for consumption by the general populace. More than a century later, Edward Lane's 1840 translation became the popular choice; it was the first English edition and was heavily abridged and expurgated of any "dangerous" content that may offend Victorian sensibilities. The *Arabian Nights* had already established its popularity as a favourite story-book among Victorian households almost fifty years prior to Richard Burton's contribution. His version of the *Nights*, however, was not popular, due to its pornographic tendencies. Burton's translation was indebted to John Payne. Although he was neglected, Payne was the first to introduce an unexpurgated and lengthy edition of the *Arabian Nights*, based on the original, into the English speaking world. C Knipp rails that 'this parasite [Richard Burton] has survived to engulf its host.'³ Burton's edition reinstated the sexual references in Payne's translation and consequently had a limited release. Burton's *A Thousand Nights and a Night*, which contained a "Terminal Essay" on Eastern sexuality, was a mammoth ten volumes, followed by an additional six, and was 'printed by the Burton Club for private subscribers only'.⁴ Burton claimed that his book was the most authentic yet, as he felt his translation was not only an entertainment, but also a source of anthropological value. Previous translations were derided by Burton as 'degrad[ing] a *chef d'oeuvre* of the highest anthropological and ethnographical interest and importance to a mere fairy-book, a nice present for little boys'.⁵

The Victorians were a complex group. They tended to repress sexuality and were pre-occupied with morality that restrained literary production. Gustave Flaubert was legally prosecuted by the French government for *Madame Bovary* in 1856, George Eliot was chastised for discussing pregnancy in 1859, and Tennyson's *Maud and Other Poems* was banned for eight years. Furthermore, in the 1880s stories of a sexual monster like Jack the Ripper and articles on child prostitution in England fuelled sexual fear among the Victorians. Despite these constraints on sexuality, however, many Victorians did pursue research in sexology, and enjoyed their sexual fantasies, including pornography. Sir Richard Burton was a notable example. He was determined to produce what he felt was necessary information about the social and sexual customs of different nations, without being derailed by Victorian ideas of the truth of propriety and respectability, and to this aim he aided in founding the Anthropological Society in the 1860s. This Society was of course subject to chastisement, and it lost some members. Burton later established the Kama Shashtra Society in 1882, with the help of some like-minded friends, this was a private club that published books and circulated books that were considered illegal for public consumption at the time

Whichever copy of the *The Arabian Nights* British readers were familiar with, this book formed an image of the Oriental women in the minds of the Western public. The

frame story itself depicts women as lewd, promiscuous and lascivious. King Shahzaman is made a cuckold when his wife defiles their marriage bed with an African slave:

He had forgotten in his palace, somewhat he should have bought with him, so that he returned privily, and entered his apartments, where he found the Queen, his wife, asleep on his own carpet-bed, embracing with both arms, a black cook, with loathsome aspect and foul with kitchen grease and grime. When he saw this, the world waxed black before his sight, and he said “If such case happen while yet I am yet within sight of the city, what will be the doings of this damned whore during my long absence at my brother’s court?” So he drew his scymitar and, cutting the two in four pieces with a single blow⁶

Burton here reinforces the stereotype of the despotic and irrational Eastern man, liable to violence, and the scene is reminiscent of *Othello*, with one major exception; the woman is not pure like the fair-skinned, European Desdemona, she is an Eastern woman, committing the hideous act of adultery. Furthermore, the assault on the King’s ego is doubled; his wife betrayed him with his inferior in position, and supposedly his inferior race, “a black cook”. After this incident, King Shahzaman, visits his brother, Sultan Shahrayar, whose wife also betrays him with an African servant, after which Shahrayar decides to go on a vengeful blood campaign against all women, killing a virgin every night after consummating his relationship with her, with the exception of Scheherazade, the narrator of the stories told to Shahrayar.

In contrast to the negative depictions of the lascivious Queen, Scheherazade is introduced to readers as a woman possessing knowledge that rivals that of the noblest men:

...the elder [sister] had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of by-gone things and men; indeed it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the works of the poets and knew them by heart; she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred.⁷

Scheherazade’s voice is presented to readers as an authoritative one, and with the amount of knowledge she possesses, she may even be considered almost a masculine voice. She uses her knowledge as a means of controlling Shahrayar, she entices him, and keeps him sufficiently interested in her stories so that she escapes his misogynistic vengeance and stays alive to tell another instalment of the tale. Burton’s view of Oriental women occupied both extremes, she was either *femme fatale*, or she was an angel – an Eva or an Ava. For example, volume six of Burton’s *Nights* contains a

number of stories under the title ‘The Craft and Malice of Women’. The frame story alone, as I have illustrated, is a mysogenetic tale, justified by women’s supposed innate licentiousness: ‘there is no woman but who cuckoldeth her husband’⁸

Yet, the Oriental woman also figures as potentially noble in the *Nights*, especially in the “Terminal Essay”, Burton opens his section on women by commenting:

Many readers of these volumes have remarked to me with much astonishment that they find the female characters more remarkable for decision, action and manliness than the male; and are wonderstruck by their masterful attitude and by the supreme influence they exercise upon public and private life[....]Women, all the world over, are what men make them.⁹

In contrast to depictions of the Oriental woman as wicked and vile, Burton also wrote of positive female character types:

the false ascetic, the perfidious and murderous crone and the old hag-procuress[....]Yet not the less do we meet with examples of the dutiful daughter, the model lover matronly in her affection, the devoted wife, the perfect mother, the saintly devotee, the learned preacher, Univira the chaste widow and the self-sacrificing heroic woman.¹⁰

Schehrazade herself combines both kinds of women, she is praised for her knowledge, her goodness, yet her knowledge of sex, as represented in her tales, endangers her femininity and purity. Burton goes on to rebuke Europe for its eurocentricism, and praises the harem and Muslim polygamy:

The legal status of womankind in Al-Islam is exceptionally high, a fact of which Europe has often been assured, although the truth has not even yet penetrated into the popular brain. Nations are but superficial judges of one another: where customs differ they often remark only the salient distinctive points which, when examined, prove to be of minor importance. Europeans seeing and hearing that women in the East are “cloistered” ...that wives may not walk out with their husbands and cannot accompany them to “balls and parties”; moreover, that they are always liable, like the ancient Hebrew, to the mortification of the “sisterwife” have most ignorantly determined that they are mere serviles and that their lives are not worth living. Indeed, a learned lady, Miss Martineau, once visiting a Harem went into ecstasies of pity and sorrow because the poor things knew nothing of say trigonometry and the use of the globes.¹¹

On first glance, the reader may find it strange and paradoxical, that Sir Richard Burton displays more sympathy and tolerance towards Oriental women and their domestic structure, the harem, than the proto-feminist Martineau. However, as we have seen in Chapter Two, Martineau's argument against the harem may appear to stem from pure eurocentricism but this is to simplify her argument. It is Martineau's education and strong desire for women to be appreciated outside the domestic sphere that leads her to lament the condition of Oriental women, and as she also laments the place of British women. Thus, Burton's *Nights*, much as they demonstrate the Oriental women's innate corruption, is also a vindication of their goodness, sound judgement, their rights and secure position in Islam, unparalleled by any other in the Western world:

Custom, not contrary to law, invests the Mohammedan mother with despotic government of the homestead, slaves, servants and children, especially the latter: she alone directs their early education, their choice of faith, their marriage and their establishment in life; and in case of divorce she takes the daughters, the sons going to the sire. She has also liberty to leave her home, not only for one or two nights, but for a week or a fortnight, without consulting her husband ; and whilst she visits a strange household, the master and all males above fifteen] are forbidden the Harem. But the main point in favour of the Moslem wife is her being a "legal sharer": inheritance is secured to her by Koranic law; she must be dowered by the bridegroom to legalise marriage and all she gains is secured to her; whereas in England a "Married Woman's Property Act" was completed only in 1882 after many centuries of the grossest abuses.¹²

Burton intimates that in contrast to Europe, Islamic society is progressive, as it has endowed women with rights ten centuries before Britain. His defence and praise of Islamic society makes it difficult to place him within Said's Orientalist discourse.

Lady Isabel Burton, nee Isabel Arundell, was overwhelmed by her husband's notorious and illustrious career in the East; her companionship with such a colourful figure over-shadowed her own talent and contributions as a travel writer. Isabel Burton was born into a wealthy and esteemed Roman Catholic home. She grew up with ten siblings in the house of Wardour, and attended the convent of the Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre, where she excelled in writing and religious studies. Isabel Burton's marriage to Richard Burton caused a rift in her relationship with her parents on account of their strict Catholic background. She lived in a childless marriage, and her role was primarily to be the loyal and devoted companion of her famous explorer husband, and the editor of most of his books. After Richard Burton's death she valorised his career and legacy. She burned some of his manuscripts, including the last chapter of *The Perfumed Garden*, a book that included a section on pedastry and as Richard's notes on the subject, denying herself a considerable fortune in potential sales. W.H Wilkins, the posthumous co-writer of Isabel Burton's unfinished autobiography *The Romance of*

Isabel Burton (1897) claims that her motive for keeping this part of Richard Burton's book concealed was inspired by the fear for his lot in the afterlife.¹³

Isabel Burton produced two travel books on the Near East, the most famous being *The Inner life of Syria, Palestine, and the Holy Land: from my private journal* (1875). This book is a memoir of Burton's residence in the Eastern Mediterranean while accompanying her husband on his diplomatic duties in the East. She gives special treatment to domestic life. In the "Preface", she declares the object of her book: 'I wish to convey an idea of the life which an English woman may make for herself in the East.'¹⁴ Isabel Burton exemplifies femininity in the Victorian sense of the term, as she writes a domestic travelogue about things 'women would like to know'.¹⁵ Burton's narrative stands in contrast to Martineau's *Eastern Life: Past and Present*. Martineau adopted the traditionally masculine role of explorer and allocates only ten pages of her book to the domestic life of Eastern women, choosing to centre her account on archaeology, history, and theology. Isabel Burton consciously avoids all these "masculine" disciplines, writing: 'This book [*The Inner Life*] contains little History, Geography, or Politics, no science, Ethnography, Botany, Geology, Zoology, Mineralogy or Antiquities'¹⁶.

Almost a hundred years prior to Isabel Burton's publication, Wortley Montagu also choose to concentrate on the domestic in *The Turkish Embassy Letters* (1767); but she was fearless in her criticism of previous male travellers' writings on the harem and Muslim women's situation in the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, in her letters to male addressees, Wortley Montagu displayed her familiarity with architecture, and religion. Both Montagu and Martineau were celebrated figures in their own right. Martineau was an esteemed and profligate author; her successful literary and journalistic career made her the envy of accomplished British women writers of her time, most notably Elizabeth Gaskell, and Charlotte Bronte. Wortley Montagu was a celebrity among the people of her social circle and her *Embassy Letters* were widely circulated. Furthermore, she is considered the initiator of the tradition of British women's travel writing on the East. Isabel Burton, on the other hand, remained in the shadow of her husband's literary career, she worked hard to expurgate his image both in his life and more so after his death. Her own travel writing endeavours had little significance commercially. Burton's publication is evidence that she wished to voice her own views on what a career of an English woman in the East.

Isabel Burton begins her travel memoir by expounding on her love for Damascus, and claims that she is somewhat of an expert on Oriental life, whose observations are more reliable and authentic than those of a tourist. For nineteenth-century London dwellers like the Burtons, the desire to escape from industrialism to an unsullied land was very common. Isabel Burton describes London life as 'the life that man has made' and Eastern life is that which God has made: 'in which nature and you have to understand each other and agree, and where there is no third person to interfere[...]and where you are wrapt in the solemn, silent mystery of the romantic halo, of pure Oriental life.'¹⁷ Burton longs for the purity in Oriental life, the distance of the Orient, and its

allure as an untainted land is attractive to Isabel Burton. The Syrian desert provides a relief for her from the hustle and bustle of London's industrial life, and gives her 'a room of her own'. For upper middle-class British women like Burton, life was mostly spent indoors, and the desert provides freedom, both physically and intellectually. In England however, she faces restrictions on voicing her thoughts:

I cannot give my writings to the public in their crude state; in the present day the press has settled into a certain groove: the English reading public have drawn four lines which represent the height, length, breadth, and depth what they will read, and who wants to be read and to be welcomed must write within those lines.¹⁸

Isabel Burton is critical of the restraints on literary production, but she goes on to separate herself from the regular tourist wandering along the Eastern paths, whose lack of time and direction in their travels makes their writing on the East 'so very *fade*'¹⁹. In contrast to others, she believes herself to be an enlightened traveller: 'The truth begins to dawn after the first six months a conviction in a year; then you gradually improve yourself for Oriental life, and unfit yourself for that of Europe...I shall return to the east, Inshallah! to end my days there.'²⁰ She even uses the Arabic word *inshalla* — which in English mean God-willing—in its correct context. This displays an understanding of Eastern idiom and culture, and, as Edward Said points out in *Orientalism*, it cements her position as observer and master of the native language in a colonial context. Burton assures her readers, that her observations are derived from the eyes and ears of both a resident and lover of Oriental life.

In *The Inner Life* Burton breaks away temporarily from her English identity during a visit to the Turkish bath. She takes her readers on a virtual tour of the *hammam* and itemizes the stages of the process, in which she has indulged, and invites her readers to take part in the fun of cultural-cross dressing:

We will dress like natives[...]You will wear a pair of lemon-coloured slippers, pointed at the toes; white lined trousers[...]You will be covered with jewellery of all colours, sizes, shapes and sorts[...]your turban will be literally crusted and caked with it....I will also kolhl a few stars and crescents on your face[...]We will then put on our izar and mandils, and walk to the neighbouring harim.²¹

In this scene, Burton adopts the veil, the *izar*, and imitates the Syrian woman's dress to the tiniest detail and by applying Eastern cosmetics, kohl; she is actively participating in the indulgences of the flesh. This participation in acts of vanity is against Burton's Victorian sensibilities, however, in the Orient she is far removed from Britain, and is thus liberated from the codes of dress and decorum followed by her culture.

Kader Konuk identifies the term *ethnomasquerade* as the 'performance of an

ethnic identity through the mimicking of clothes, gestures, appearance, language, cultural codes, or other components of identity formation.²² Konuk goes on to link this to Bhabha's ideas on mimicry. Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* argues that mimicry is one of the most effective ways to disseminate knowledge and secure control over the colonized identity: 'Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reconstituted, recognizable other and constructed around the ambivalence created by the potential eradication of difference between the original and the copy.'²³ Furthermore, Burton's cross-cultural dressing, and especially her donning of the veil, validates her position as an authoritative observer and travel writer, as Roberts suggests, the veil 'was a potent symbol of the harem, and adopting this disguise underscored these women's [women travellers] unique access to these secluded domains [the harems].'²⁴

In 'Colonialism and Gender in the East: Representations of the harem in the Writings of Women Travellers' Shirley Foster argues:

If the colonialist opposition of civilized/uncivilized is thus enacted through clothes and the body, it follows that the dress of the observed, subjected to the gaze of the observer, will become part of the set of signifiers constructing that opposition. The woman visitor to the harem, confronted with sartorial difference, found herself, moreover, both performer and spectator, watcher and watched; she was thus metaphorically, if not literally, exposed in a way which not only threatened to destabilize her gendered identity but also invited her to re-examine her own society's conventions.²⁵

In contrast to Burton, Martineau, in her visit to Egypt in 1845, refused to participate in the *ethnomasquerade* and pointed out to her readers:

Yet I would not advise any Englishwoman to alter her dress or ways. She can never, in a mere passage through an Eastern country, make herself look like an Eastern woman; and an unsupported assumption of any native custom will obtain her no respect, but only make her appear ashamed of her own origins and ways.²⁶

Martineau here reminds her British readers of their cultural superiority over the degenerate East. Martineau's abhorrence of the harem system and its incorporation of polygamy hinders her ability to observe and experience the source culture, which is ultimately detrimental to her travel accounts. Furthermore, this notion of maintaining what separates the two races — British and Eastern — is not surprising, as Martineau would despise nothing more than to look like "the most miserable creatures on earth" that she described in the Egyptian harem. Although Martineau is the observer in the context of her travels and is thus in a position of power over her object of description — Eastern culture — Lesa Scholl in 'Translating Culture' argues that Martineau's stance on cultural cross-dressing 'reinforces Martineau's otherness, though rather than the otherness of the East, as she clearly shows her inability to assimilate'.²⁷

Burton's position amongst the Eastern women of the harem is ambivalent. She is an observer and recorder of events, but she is also a willing participant in the customs and rituals of Eastern women. Burton describes how delighted the Eastern crowd of harem women will be when she (and by implication the reader) enter: 'They will kiss us, take our hands, and with all the delight of children, lead us to the divan and sit around us'.²⁸ Burton, who is wearing Eastern costume in this scene, goes on to describe how the Eastern women are enthralled by their beautiful appearance, 'They find everything charming, and [say] how sweet we look in their clothes'.²⁹ Burton then comments on what would happen if she and her virtual companion were wearing their English riding clothes:

[...]they would examine every article, would want to know where it was bought, what it cost, how it was put on, and if they could find it in the "Suq." Their greatest happiness is to pull your hair down[...]to play with your hat. If you came in riding habit, they think you are dressed like men. A lady's cloth riding under garment, are an awful mystery to them, and they think how happy were are to dress like men, and follow our husbands like comrades, whilst nobody says a thing against us on that account. They envy us our knowledge, and independence, and they deplore the way they are kept, and their not being able to know or do anything.³⁰

Burton's gaze here is subverted, she is no longer in the subject position, that of implicit power. She becomes the exotic, the "other" and the spectacle, unbalancing the binaries of Centre/periphery, us/them, on which the travel paradigm, especially in the colonial context, was built. Furthermore, the harem women's gaze in this scene provides a mirror for the British subject, Burton, to see herself in novel form, as the observed. 'What occurs here is a reversal of viewing relations that signals the British woman's visibility inside the harem and inscribes her corporeally and sartorially "in the picture."'³¹

Burton invites her readers on a voyeuristic journey into the hammam or Turkish bath; she first explains the exhausting parts of Eastern bathing, the vigorous washing, scrubbing, and shampooing, after which she relates the agreeable parts of the experience:

We now return to the hall where we first undressed, enveloped in silk and woollen clothes, and reclines on divans. It is all strewn with flowers, incense is burned about us, cups of very hot, rather bitter coffee are handed to us, and narghi'les are placed in our mouths. A woman advances and kneads you like bread; you fall asleep during the process, which has almost the effect of mesmerism. When you awake you will find music and dancing, the girls chasing one another, eating sweets, cracking nuts, and

enjoying all sorts of fun.³²

Burton here describes the scene, as if she had been hypnotized, her passivity is evident; “cups of very hot, rather bitter coffee are handed to us, and narghi’les are placed in our mouths”. She immersed herself in the Oriental experience and physically took part in the hammam rituals and entertainment. She is unlike Wortley Montagu, who remained a vigilant spectator, she watched the naked Turkish women with admiration and intrigue and envy, but did not undress and remained an anomaly among the sea of nude women. Furthermore, Burton’s description of the bath insists on the presence of towels as the women bathed, Burton hints at undressing, although her text does not reveal whether or not there was complete nudity.

In *Turkish Harems and Circassian Homes* (1871), Annie Jane Harvey expressed her enjoyment of the Eastern bathing experience, but makes a moral comment on the effects of this kind of pampering:

Although a Turkish bath is certainly a most inviting luxury, and has temporarily a flattering effect on the skin, making it[...]exquisitely white, smooth, and soft, still...an undue indulgence in bathing has a deteriorating effect upon female beauty....The too devoted votaries of the bath, therefore, speedily become enervated both in mind and body, and whilst still young in years, fade into a premature old age. The indolence also which it creates does much to increase the tendency to undue corpulence, so destructive to the fair proportions of the Eastern woman.³³

Harvey shares Burton’s opinion of Eastern bathing, describing it as “a most inviting luxury”, however Harvey also comments on the side effects of the Oriental bathing experience, which have both corporeal and intellectual disadvantages: premature ageing, and indolence. Almost all women travellers have commented on the premature ageing of Eastern women as a result of excessive adornment, cleansing and being present in a sulphurous atmosphere. Pardoe in *City of The Sultan* comments on the “bather-women”: ‘the employees of the bath house are the most unsightly objects that can be imagined; from constantly living in sulphureous atmosphere, their skins have become of the colour of tobacco[...]they had, apparently, become aged like frosted apples; the skin had tightened over the muscles, and produced what to me at least seemed the most hideous feature of old age.’³⁴ These bather-women are de-humanized; they are the representation of the long term effects of Oriental bathing, Harvey also mentioned these bath house employees, ‘who were shrivelled and parched out of the semblance even of “wo-manity”’³⁵. By and large, the figure of an old, shrivelled up woman is reiterated in most Turkish bath accounts, perhaps as a reminder of the price of the indulgence of the flesh.

The habit of smoking and drinking coffee among Eastern peoples was well-known to Europeans. Women travellers, like Burton, enjoyed this custom, as it is attributed to

Eastern hospitality and recreation. Even Martineau, who would not affiliate herself with any Eastern habits, smoked the chibouk (another kind of smoking device, similar to the *narghíle*) and adopted the habit when she went back to England. The *narghíle* and chibouk, are both smoking devices similar to the shape of water pipe, the most prominent feature is the long tube or pipe; this ‘pipe is probably the most frequently used object in the tradition of harem pictures, and it most readily identifies the exotic harem locale.’³⁶ Coupled with the fact that only lower-class women and prostitutes smoked in public in nineteenth century Britain, women would withdraw from the room while the men smoked at Victorian dinner parties. Another habit attached to smoking was the viewing of paintings deemed “not proper” for the female sex to see. In the harem however, Burton enjoyed smoking and drinking coffee, like she enjoyed Eastern bathing; it was a masquerade, wherein she temporarily played the part of an Oriental woman, and embraced the dress, customs, and habits incurred by this role. In *City of the Sultan*, Julia Pardoe describes a scene wherein a Turkish woman is negligently smoking the chibouk, and Pardoe seems to vicariously live the experience through this Oriental woman:

...she smoked with as much grace and gusto as any Moslem of the Empire. They who cavil at the application of the word grace, have certainly never seen a young Turkish woman manage her chibouk—Nothing can be more coquettish...Such soft and studied attitudes— such long and slowly-drawn out respirations, having all the sentiment of a sigh without its sadness— such clasping and unclasping of the delicate fingers about the slender tube— no novice should venture to smoke beside a Turkish woman.³⁷

Pardoe attempts to temper the sexual undertones in this image with the word “grace”, but her erotically charged imagery contributes to the ‘long standing stereotypes, of the harem woman as sensuous, pliant, passive, even lascivious.’³⁸ In essence, the purpose of smoking is to induce passivity and relaxation. Pardoe here described smoking the chibouk as a visual pleasure, and a form of coquetry, only best performed by a Turkish woman. Furthermore, the long tube associated with this smoking device is a phallic image, which symbolizes power and pleasure, both at the hands, “the delicate fingers”, of the Turkish woman.

The concept of veiling, whether the harem or the yashmak, fascinated Europeans. Oriental women were living a “perpetual masquerade”, Wortley Montagu’s words. Whether in the harem, bath, or walking in the streets of Stamboul, Oriental women were free from male intrusion, free to be themselves under their masks, i.e. the veil. Richard Burton’s had some vexing views on Muslim veiling. In *A Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Medinah and Mecca* Burton suggests that the veil was a symbol of seduction. [It is] ‘the most coquettish article of women’s attire...It conceals coarse skins, fleshy noses, wide mouths and vanishing chins, while it sets off to best advantage what in these lands is almost always lustrous and liquid—the eye. Who has not remarked this at a masquerade ball?’³⁹ Burton’s notion here departs from his views in

“The Terminal Essay”, wherein the veil is a guardian of honour and chastity.⁴⁰ Burton here, corresponds with Lane’s view in *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836), and entertains the idea that the veil is a means of flirtation; it is a selective concealment and revealing that gives pleasure to the male gaze.⁴¹ This view was also shared by other Victorian travellers, in particular Sophia Pardoe, and Annie Jane Harvey. In *Turkish harems and Circassian Homes*, Harvey comments: We all agreed that no headdress is so becoming of the female face as the Turkish veil...So coquettish is the transparent muslin folded over the nose and mouth...that the delicate cloud seems but to heighten every charm...Far, very far is it from hiding the features from the profaning gaze of man’.⁴²

Isabel Burton’s conclusions on veiling differ from those of her husband; she conversed with the agents of the veil themselves; the women. In *Inner Life* she retells a conversation she had with the women of a Syrian harem, and observes their opinions on veiling: “We [the Eastern women] do not know what it is to unveil before a man. We should only do so if we meant to insult him, and no good woman would do this. We should feel ashamed, uncomfortable, and ill at ease.”⁴³ Although Richard Burton asserts that his wife shared his opinion in ‘The Terminal Essay’: that Muslim women veil out of the desire to be protected,⁴⁴ Isabel’s conversation with the harem ladies reveals that the women veil out of tradition, unfamiliarity with any other code of dress, and to accommodate masculine sensibilities.

During her friendly visit to the Syrian harem, Isabel Burton attempts to establish a familiarity with the harem women; both the dialogue and interest is reciprocal. Just as Burton is a visual oddity, donning different clothes and possessing different physical features, her lifestyle is also a curiosity to Eastern women. She is as much an informant of her own culture, as they are of theirs. Burton reports how the women were surprised by her childless marriage:

“How! Thou hast never had a child, O Lady!” —With much pity and more astonishment— “let us hope that Allah may be merciful and remove thy reproach...Listen to us, thy friends, who wish thy happiness.” I need not inflict their advice on my readers; suffice it to say that I have gone through hours of it, and have bought home a boxful of curiosities, all the best proofs of friendship and good will from my Eastern friends.⁴⁵

The Eastern ladies are astonished at Burton’s childless marriage, yet she displays no intimation of offence, but receives their advice graciously, and concludes that it is stemmed from their friendship and good will, as she is aware that the Muslim household is child-oriented. Islam permits a husband to marry a second wife if he desires offspring and his wife is sterile. However, equal treatment of wives is of course imperative, and as I have mentioned before, wives in Islamic marriages are granted divorce whenever they wish. Burton continues the conversation, and goes on to explain to the women what she perceives are the differences between their cultures:

Our lives and your lives are quite different. You are set apart to dwell amongst one another, mostly indoors, in a settled place; your lives would indeed be a failure without children[....]your ancestor, in the old law, exactly as to-day, could not 'meet his enemies at the gate' without being backed up by his stalwart sons and their sons[...]the family who could show the most fighting men were the most honoured and carried the greatest weight in their town or tribe[....]The men of our races marry one wife and a family will commonly be from six or eight to ten children[....]The English husband would not put his wife away for anything. I feel quite secure of my place.⁴⁶

Burton's explanation, is not only aimed at her audience in the harem, but also to her readers back home. She attempts to explicate the sexual customs and manners of the East in a logical manner, and does not appropriate it to Islam's supposed corporeality. She accepts that polygamy in the East stems from the willingness to increase tribal and communal defence against enemies and evils. When asked if she would be annoyed by a second wife, Burton responds: 'If I were brought up to it[...]it would come to me like any other custom; but that not being the case, I fear that number two would be made very uncomfortable'.⁴⁷ Burton displays a cultural openness, something which her Victorian predecessors, Harriet Martineau and Florence Nightingale, failed to accomplish. Both of these travel writers dismissed polygamy as a form of slavery, and appropriated the voice of the Eastern women, claiming that they are miserable creatures, and speak of the differences between the two races, Eastern and European, as "impassable". On the other hand Burton seems to have been affected by her husband's tolerance of different sexual customs and manners.

Children are typically valued in Eastern families, but for a long time, harem women were viewed as being innately negligent mothers. In *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, Mary Wollstonecraft likens aristocratic women to women of the seraglio:

They dress, they paint, and nickname God's creatures. Surely these weak beings are only fit for a seraglio! Can they be expected to govern a family with judgement, or take care of the poor babes which they bring into the world?⁴⁸

Wollstonecraft criticizes the lifestyle of both aristocratic women and women of the seraglio. The luxury and excessive concentration on frivolity is detrimental to their abilities as caregivers. Her opinion on seraglio mothers is representative of the Western attitudes towards Eastern women and family life. The structure of the harem, with its polygamy, indolent lifestyle; smoking, bathing, excessive adornment, and sensuality, was a toxic

breeding ground for children. According to Western observers, the harem women were ignorant and uneducated; therefore they could not be teachers to their children. ‘For Wollstonecraft and many nineteenth-century observers, the spiritual generosity of motherhood could not be achieved in the context of a vain self-love. Because harem women were considered vain they de facto could not be proper mothers.’⁴⁹

However, some travellers noted how great caring Eastern mothers are, one notable example is Annie Jane Harvey, who comments:

A Turkish women[...]rapidly becomes old, and after a few years of youth, finds her principle happiness in the care of her children[...]as mothers their tenderness is unequalled, but their fault here is over-indulgence of the children, who, until ten or twelve years of age are permitted to everything they like.⁵⁰

Harvey’s commentary on the tenderness of Turkish mothers is conditional, they are good mothers “after a few years of youth”, suggesting that at that time they are no longer fruitful or attractive to their husbands; therefore, they are free to be good care-givers.

Burton’s *Inner Life of Syria, Palestine and the Holy Lands*, is an example of a British woman actively attempting to locate herself in the East. Her visit to the harem and the bath show her ability as a traveller to take opportunities to understand the locale and their traditions. Although she believes in the righteousness of her system of belief, she does not wish to enforce it on different cultures: ‘I will not induce El-Islam to adopt monogamy’⁵¹ Furthermore her closing paragraph in the harem chapter, demonstrates her true view of the Eastern women:

...we must qualify the idea that we have in Europe...that there is *no* education in a harem. Reading and writing are only means, not ends. The object of education is to make us wise, to teach us the right use of life. Our hostesses know everything that is going on around them.... [They] advise their husbands even in political difficulties. Can we do more?...some ride, dance, sing and play, as well in *their* way as we do in ours[...]almost all can recite poetry and tales by the hour..Finally in the depth and fervour of their religious belief— many of my friends are quite equal to us in *their* way.⁵²

Burton tells her readers, that even though there are differences in culture and custom, Eastern and Western women have similar interests and abilities, but each group is accustomed to a different way of doing things. Burton, more than any of her predecessors, attempts to establish familiarity rather than difference between the harem and home. She does not idealize the harem, nor does she belittle and disparage it, she maintains that

sensibilities, concepts, relations are relative, and difference does not entail antagonism, like in the case of Martineau, and Nightingale.

ENDNOTES

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⁶ R.Burton, *Nights*, i, p.4.

⁷ R.Burton, *Nights*, i, p.15.

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¹⁶ I. Burton, 'preface', p. vii.

¹⁷ I. Burton, i, p.2.

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²⁰ I. Burton, i, pp.2-3.

²¹ I. Burton, i, pp.147-148.

²² Kader Konuk, 'Ethnomasquerade in Ottoman-European Encounters: Reenacting Lady Mary Wortley Montagu', *Criticism*, vol.46.3, (2004), pp. 393-414, in *JSTOR* <<http://www.JSTOR.org/stable/3509480>>, [accessed 20 Feb 2013], p. 393.

²³ Homi Bhaba, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Francis&Taylor,1994), p.85.

²⁴ Roberts, p.93

²⁵ Shirley Foster, 'Colonialism and Gender in the East: Representations of the Harem in the Writings of Women Travellers', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 34, *Nineteenth-Century Travel Writing* (2004), pp. 6-17, in *JSTOR*, <<http://www.JSTOR.org/stable/3509480>>, [accessed 1Dec 2012], p.11.

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²⁷ Lesa scholl, 'Translating Culture', *Travel Writing Form and Empire*, ed. Julia Kuehn and Paul Semthurst, (London, New York: Routledge, 2009),p. 118.

²⁸ I. Burton, i, p.148

²⁹ Ibid.

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³² I. Burton,i, p.145.

³³ Harvey, p. 81.

³⁴ Pardoe, i, p.135.

³⁵ Harvey, p.75.

³⁶ DelPlato, p.111.

³⁷ Pardoe, i, p.238-239.

³⁸ Delplato, p.117

³⁹ Sir Richard Francis Burton, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, Vol.I, Isabel Burton, ed. (New Delhi : Asian Educational Services, 1994, p. 337.

⁴⁰ R. Burton, *The Nights*, x, p.198.

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⁴³ I. Burton, i , p. 155.

⁴⁴ R. Burton, *The Nights*, x , p.198

⁴⁵ I. Burton, i, p. 153.

⁴⁶ I.Burton, i,p.154

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, ed. Miriam Brody, 1792 (London: penguin Books, 1988) p.83.

⁴⁹ Joan Del Plato, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), p. 172.

⁵⁰ Harvey, p. 11-12.

⁵¹ I.Burton, p. 163.

⁵² I.Burton, p.165

CONCLUSIONS

...an opportunity has been afforded me of, Asmodeus-like, uplifting that impenetrable veil, to accomplish what had hitherto baffled all the exertions of European travellers.¹

So wrote Emilinne Lott in her travel-memoir *The Governess in Egypt: Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople* (1865). She was part of a tradition of women travellers who created a career in the Near East, as they unveiled that impenetrable harem, the sacred quarters of the Muslim household. Lott's analogy is significant as it contains a misconception associated with the West's view of Oriental sexual customs and manners. In Benfield's classification of demons, Aesmodeus is the Prince of Lechery, one of the seven princes of hell; he is responsible for twisting man's desires and leading him into wantonness. The harem is imagined by Lott as a locus for excessive corporeal pleasures, mirroring Pope's warning to Wortley Montagu that on her entering Turkey she was entering 'the free region of Adultery'²:

I shall hear, how the very first night you lay at Pera, you had a Vision of Mahomet's Paradise, and happily awaked without a soul; from which blessed instant the beautiful Body was left at full liberty to perform all the agreeable functions it was made for.³

This thesis has journeyed into the lives of three British women, focusing on their careers and travels in the Orient during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It has attempted to demonstrate how problematic it is to locate women's travel writing within Said's 'closed system'⁴ and the 'coherent subject matter'⁵ that he characterizes as *Orientalism*. His essentialist view, that 'every European in what he could say about the Orient, was a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric'⁶ reaffirms those unequal power relations he intended to attack and reform, and is ultimately reductive. Ali Behdad comments that 'Said's postcolonial discourse of victimhood paradoxically positions itself within the conforming matrix of identification it strives to subvert and reifies the very distinctions it wants to supersede, *Orientalism* this uncritically reproduces the stereotype of the orientalist as the infallible master whose power of representation allows him or her to dominate indisputably the victimizes Oriental.'⁷ The nuances in the texts of the women travellers I have analyzed in this thesis disrupt Said's discourse of binary oppositions, us/them, civilized/uncivilized, which are ultimately so detrimental to cross-cultural communication and understanding.

The harems that Mary Wortley Montagu, Harriet Martineau, Isabel Burton and their counterparts constructed are varied, but they share some common themes and depictions. Lott's memoir on Ottoman domestic life sheds light on some of the common tropes, conventions, features and nuances in the multitude of British women's harem accounts and is also valuable for the way in which it reflects evolving and shifting attitudes. British women noted the array of different races which constitute domestic life in the Near East, and Lott observed this characteristic in the Imperial harem in Egypt:

The census of the Imperial Harem must be about three hundred souls, the majority of whom are of Circassian, Greek, Caucasian, Egyptian, and Ethiopian origin. Most of them are totally unacquainted with their parentage, or even the land of their nativity. They are all subservient to the Kadens[who are chiefly natives of Salonica and Circassia, and] who in their turn pay implicit obedience to the commands, whims, and caprices of the Sultana of the year, "the lady with the ivory scepter".⁸

John Frederick Lewis's (1804-1874) harem paintings likewise illustrate the heterogeneity of races in the harem; his painting 'Life in the Harem, Cairo' (1858) is one notable example. Lewis depicts a woman sitting on the divan, holding a bunch of flowers, which could symbolize femininity or fertility. The painting depicts the Oriental women dressed in beautiful robes, rather than in the nude, elevating their aesthetic from oversexed women to domestic beauties. Lewis also represents polygamy in the harem, and hierarchies of class; the lady on the divan, is served by another woman holding the tray, who is followed by a black servant.

Harem accounts often contained exhaustive description of the Eastern women's dress and accessories. British women also observed the habit of smoking, which was regarded as symbolic of the overall indolent ambiance of the harem. Lott's account is particularly unflattering:

She was attired in a dirty, crumpled, light-colored muslin dress and trousers, sat *à la Turque*, doubled up like a clasped knife, without shoes or stockings, smoking a cigarette. Her waist was encircled with a white gauze handkerchief, having the four corners embroidered with gold thread. It was fastened round, so as to leave two ends hanging down like the lappet of a riding-habit. Her feet were encased in *babouohes*, "slippers without heels".⁹

In *The Governess In Egypt*, Lott continuously characterizes Eastern women as dirty and ugly. To be sure, this was not true of the majority of accounts on Oriental domestic life, especially those describing the elite households and their women, Pardoe is one notable example. Lott's condescending views may have emanated from her feelings of inferiority, which any servile naturally harbours against her/his

superior. This is coupled by the fact that Lott's time of employment in the vice-regal household in Egypt coincided with Britain's imperial age; she served Britain's cultural "other", a situation that must have seemed very perplexing to her.

Wortley Montagu exalted the Turkish women's beauty, yet most of the women travellers who anteceded her did not describe the Turkish women so favourably. Harvey writes of the Turkish bath, 'There was a remarkable want of beauty. With the exception of the pretty Georgian, there was scarcely a good-looking woman in the room.'¹⁰ Lott's description of the Egyptian women enunciates the same view:

In front of the divan, behind, and on each side of me, stood a bevy of the ladies of the Harem... I failed to discover the slightest trace of loveliness in any of them. On the contrary, most of their countenances were pale as ashes, exceedingly disagreeable; fat and globular in figure; in short, so rotund, that they gave me the idea of large full moons; nearly all were *passee*. Their photographs were as hideous and hag-like as the witches in the opening scene of Macbeth¹¹

The Ottoman women have been transformed from Wortley Montagu's Miltonic Eves to Macbeth's witches. Wortley Montagu saw the Turkish as a refined people, leading a life of ideal indolence and diversion, Craven on the other hand, constructed the Turks as philistines, in the following passage she reveals her vision for Turkey:

Can any rational being, dear Sir, see nature without the least assistance from fine art, in all her grace and beauty, stretching out her liberal hand to industry, and not wish to do her justice? Yes, I confess, I wish to see a colony of honest English families here; establishing manufacturers such as England produces...waking the indolent Turk from his gilded slumbers....This is no visionary or poetical figure- it is the honest wish of one who considers all mankind as one family.¹²

Here the beginnings of a colonial and imperialistic voice are evident, as Steven H. Clarke puts it, 'the East is no longer an exotic playpen, but a land ripe for the type of colonial appropriation already under way in India'.¹³

From Lady Elizabeth Craven onwards, descriptions of the Eastern women were moralized. Whereas Wortley Montagu casts herself as an aesthetic subject, in an effort to desexualize Turkish women, Craven, and other nineteenth century women travellers moralized their descriptions of Oriental women. Women of the harem were regarded as leading a voluptuous lifestyle, spending their time smoking, eating sweetmeats and bonbons, bathing, applying cosmetics, gossiping, telling tales, and, of course, preparing themselves for the Sultan's pleasure. Del Plato comments that this life, 'characterized by indulgence in physicality –

appetites and the flesh— cannot be rewarded.’¹⁴ In her ‘Harem’ chapter, Martineau concludes that Eastern women are ‘soulless’¹⁵ because they are concupiscent:

There cannot be a woman of them all who is not dwarfed and withered in mind and soul by being kept wholly engrossed with that one interest,—detained at that stage in existence which, though most important in its place, is so as a means to ulterior ends. The ignorance is fearful enough; but the grossness is revolting.¹⁶

Martineau euphemistically refers to the Eastern women’s rampant sexual desire, which is offensive to her British sensibilities, and even more so to her own sensibilities as a proto-feminist and an abolitionist.¹⁷

Not all representations of harem women were as disparaging as those of Martineau and Lott. As I have demonstrated, there are some women who appreciated the domestic harmony among the harem women, like Poole. She even likens the harem dynamic to that of a convent: ‘The ideas entertained by many in Europe of the immorality of the harem are, I believe, erroneous. True it is, that the chief ladies have much power which they might abuse ; but the slaves of these ladies are subject to the strictest surveillance ; and the discipline which is exercised over the younger women in the Eastern harem can only be compared to that which is established in the convent.’¹⁸ The Oriental women are domesticated, and their morality is elevated. John Lewis’s painting ‘In the Bey’s Garden’(1865) is similar to pre-Raphaelite painter Charles Collins’ ‘Convent thoughts’(1850-1851).



Charles Collins, ‘Convent Thoughts’, (1850-1851)¹⁹
 <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:ConventThoughtsCollins.jpg>>, [accessed 2 April 2013]

Elizabeth Malcolm draws a comparison between these works of art depicting women who could not seem to be more different, an Oriental woman, and a nun: It seems that Lewis has adapted the elements of Collins' painting to represent the Islamic paradise, also a garden. The butterflies at the bottom of the painting give weight to this reading as they convey the soul to paradise. By modelling his harem painting on a religious painting, Lewis elevates the status of the harem woman and makes a statement for the tolerance of Islam as an equally spiritual and civilized faith. This is important because the Christian West had long feared the supposed threat of Islam.²⁰

The complexity of representations, from the over-sexed soulless woman, to the pure, moral and spiritual, depicted by Poole, Wortley Montagu, Pardoe, Harvey and Lewis critique Said's Oriental paradigm, disrupting the discourse of duality, of civilized/uncivilized, pure/licentious. The freedom of Ottoman women was highlighted by most British women travellers, with the exception of Martineau and Nightingale. Ottoman women had freedom of mobility and freedom from intrusion provided by the veil. Moreover, the Ottoman woman's freedom to control their money and property, their house affairs, their bodies, even from their husbands, was envied by eighteenth and nineteenth century British women.

Each of the three principle travellers this thesis has interrogated, Mary Wortley Montagu, Harriet Martineau and Isabel Burton, creates her own harem, projecting her desires, fears and agendas onto a physical space, to construct an imaginary harem. Wortley Montagu envisioned the harem as a "femtopia", an ideal space for women to indulge in diversions, baths, visits, and even sexual liaisons without any fear of chastisement from their patriarchs. She displayed a tolerance towards Islam and to Muslim women. Moreover, she envied the voluptuous lifestyle of the Ottomans, regarding it as in some ways preferable to the rational, subdued lifestyle of the Enlightenment. Harriet Martineau's concept of freedom is the antithesis of her predecessor Wortley Montagu. Martineau's view of the harem has been considered by some critics as Eurocentric. While this is a possible explanation for her antagonism, my opinion is that her proto-feminist attitudes are what prompted her strong disapproval of Oriental domestic life and sexual customs and manners. The harem represented everything that Martineau hated about the situation of women back in England: their seclusion, their exclusion from public work, and their restriction to the devoted roles of mother and wife. In contrast, Martineau desired a life for women outside of the private sphere, where they could be useful to society both in and out of the home. She projects this desire onto the harem, finding it wanting when measured against her early feminist sensibilities. The last lady traveller of my thesis, Isabel Burton, admired the Orient for the freedom she found in its landscape and nature. Her construction of the harem intimates her understanding of moral and cultural relativism. She was influenced by her famous husband's latitudinarian views on Arab sexual customs and manners, although her attitudes also bear the imprint of her Victorian moral code and world view. In spite

of the ambiguities and complexities of her discussion of the harem, Burton's views build the first blocks of a bridge towards a mutual respect, and understanding between East and West.

The commonalities and divergences present in the descriptions of the harem in the travel writing of Wortley Montague, Martineau and Burton highlight the need to break free from the limitations of essentialism and simplistic binaries. Yes, these women were all British, all fundamentally moral in their outlook, and all shaped by imperial views of British 'superiority'. Yet they were also alert to both the deficiencies of their own society — particularly Martineau — and the many strengths of the Eastern world to which they were given access. Their gender, which limited them in some respects, became an asset during their travels. Because they were women, they were given entry into the world of the harem and were thus able to write from actual experience rather than report and assumption. Privileged to look behind the veil, they write of a space and a place that is full of complexity and diversity: a place of relaxation and indolence, a place of freedom from the constraints of clothing and the male gaze, a place of sexual pleasure, a place of female solidarity and friendship. At times this world charmed because of its exoticism, its difference. At times it horrified and repelled precisely because of its otherness, its 'non-Britishness'. At times it instilled contradictory emotions of envy and suspicion. When contrasted with Lott's one-dimensional, euro-centric harangue, the nuanced attitudes of my three lady travellers are thrown into relief. Their travel letters and diaries provide a valuable insight into both the challenges of being an adventurous, intellectual women in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain and the different, yet at times curiously similar, experiences of Eastern women inhabiting the separate, powerful world of the harem.

ENDNOTES

¹ Emmeline Lott, *The Governess in Egypt: Harem Life in Egypt and Constantinople* (Philadelphia: T.B Peterson & Brothers, 1865), viii.

²Eds. Theresa Heffernan, Daniel O'Quinn, *Lady Mary Montagu Turkish Embassy Letters*, ed. Theresa Heffernan and Daniel O'Quinn p. 236.

³ Ibid, p.237

⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, p.79.

⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, p.202.

⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 204.

⁷ Ali Behdad, *Belated Travellers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 12.

⁸ Lott, pp.326-327.

⁹ Lott, p.62.

¹⁰ Harvey, p. 80.

¹¹ Lott, p. 63.

¹² Craven, pp.188-189

¹³ Steven. H Clark, *Travel Writing and Empire : Postcolonial Theory in Transit* (London: Zed Books, 1990), p. 121.

¹⁴ Joan Del Plato, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures* (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), p. 164.

¹⁵ Martineau, *Eastern Life*, p. 155.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Del Plato, p. 164.

¹⁸ Poole, p. 167

¹⁹ <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:ConventThoughtsCollins.jpg>>, [accessed April, 2013]

¹⁹ Elizabeth Malcolm, 'Self-Censorship in the Harem Paintings of J.F. Lewis', 1997, <<http://www.angelfire.com/ny4/eamward/hareem.htm>>, [accessed 5 April, 2013].

APPENDIX 1

To understand the special place Muslim polygamy and sexual customs and manners occupied, it is useful to survey the historical, political and cultural contexts that informed the writings of travellers, as Edward Said comments: ‘All texts are worldly, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted’.¹

The proliferation of negative stereotypes attributed to the Oriental woman and her domestic position in Muslim society throughout Europe, may have been rooted in the ambivalent relationship between the Near East and the West. By the time Wortley Montagu visited Turkey in 1717 the Turks and Europe had co-existed in relative peace for a hundred and fifty years, since the battle of Lepanto in 1572. Throughout this period the Ottoman Empire remained a locus of political threat and gain to Europe, and a place of mercantile and monetary significance. However this period of relative peace and economic exchange only emerged after centuries of conflict, with Europe wary of the reach and power of the Islam. The most determining factor in Western-Oriental relationships lay in the proximity of ideas between both religions, Christianity and Islam. As Albert Hourani demonstrates in *Islam in European Thought*:

Christians and Muslims presented a religious and intellectual challenge to each other....For Muslim thinkers, the status of Christianity was clear. Jesus was one of the line of authentic prophets which had culminated in Muhammad, ‘the Seal of Prophets’, and his authentic message was essentially the same as that of MuhammadFor Christians the matter was more difficult. They knew that Muslims believed in one God, who might be regarded, in His nature and operations, as being the God whom Christians worshipped, but they could not easily accept that Muhammad was an authentic prophet.²

The proximity of geographical locations made contact between Christians and Muslims inevitable, and the similarities in the Islamic faith accounted for a ‘spiritual kinship’³, which Christians found difficult to accept. Moreover, there was a core disagreement between both religions. Islam denies ‘the central doctrines of Christianity: the Incarnation and Crucifixion, and therefore also the Trinity and the Atonement’⁴. Islam thus emerged as a rival; ‘an offshoot or a heresy of Christianity.’⁵ To be sure, for a long stretch of time, and up until the renaissance, Islam maintained a sovereignty and power over the world, much superior to that of Europe. In *Islam and the West*, Bernard Lewis investigates the history of conflict and interchange of power between Christendom and Islam. In the introduction, he illustrates the height of the Islamic Empire:

Islam was a world empire and a world civilization extending over three continents, inhabited by many different races, including within itself the seats of the ancient civilizations of Egypt and the Fertile Crescent, to which soon were added Iran and northern India. Muslims had inherited the philosophy and the science of Greece, which Europe did not discover for centuries to come; the wisdom and statecraft of Iran; and much even of the Eastern Christian and Byzantine heritage.⁶

The vastness and diversity of the Islamic Empire presupposed its eminence in science and economy. Furthermore its people and polity were strengthened by faith, and most importantly, by the unity of language. ‘In the Arabic language the Islamic world possessed a medium of communication without equal in pre-modern Christendom—a language of government and commerce, science and philosophy, religion and law, with a rich and diverse literature that in scope, variety, and sophistication was as unparalleled as it was unprecedented.’⁷ In contrast, Europe remained dark and divided; ‘Compared with Islam, Christendom was indeed poor, small, backward, and monochromatic. Split into squabbling, petty kingdoms, its churches divided by schism and heresy, with constant quarrels between the churches of Rome and the East, it was disputed between two emperors and for a while even two popes.’⁸

The Golden Age of the Islamic Empire spanned from the mid-700s and declined in the years that followed the Mogul invasion in 1258. Although the Moguls followed adopted Islam, their ruling methods were tribal. During Islam’s more prosperous years, Christendom weakened along with Rome, as more and more countries entered the Islamic state and faith, ‘All but the easternmost provinces of the Islamic realm had been taken from Christian ruler’⁹. An imminent fear of the number of conversions instigated the guardians of Christendom to study Islam and its followers, and constitute a discipline which centuries later would be designated as Orientalism.¹⁰ In the monasteries of western Europe, studious monks learned Arabic, translated the Qur’an, and studied other Muslim texts, with a double purpose—first, the immediate aim of saving Christian souls from conversion to Islam and, second, the more distant hope of converting Muslims to Christianity.¹¹ It is not surprising then, that Muslim scholars and travellers, at the height of the Islamic Empire saw Europe as ‘a remote, unexplored wilderness inhabited by exotic, picturesque, and rather primitive people from whom there was nothing to fear and less to learn.’¹² Ironically, there would be a reversal of fortune centuries later, and this same description would be used by Western travellers to depict Oriental lands.

A mixture of fear and interest fuelled the study of Islam and its followers and in his landmark study *Orientalism*, Edward Said points out that Orientalism (the discipline) originated as a means to control the threat of this ‘fraudulent new version’ of Christianity, called Islam:

If the mind must suddenly deal with what it takes to be a radically new form of life-as Islam appeared to Europe in the early Middle Ages — the

response on the whole is conservative and defensive... The threat is muted, familiar values impose themselves, and in the end the mind reduces the pressure upon it by accommodating things to itself as either “original” or “repetitious.” Islam thereafter is “handled”: its novelty and its suggestiveness are brought under control so that relatively nuanced discriminations are now made that would have been impossible had the raw novelty of Islam been left unattended. The Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between the West's contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in--or fear of--novelty.¹³

In keeping with Said's comments, are the ways in which European scholars depicted the harem, the micro-cosmic entity of the Orient's customs and manners, as a locus of fear, disgust and desire. By the late eighteenth century and continuing into the nineteenth century, the West had developed an obsession with the Muslim model of marriage, as it presented an enviable and tempting alternative to monogamy:

A largely Protestant and especially British phenomenon, the culture of affective monogamy took greatest hold among middle-class Britons from the later eighteenth through the nineteenth century, but its reach was bit limited to one side of the Channel, as the impassioned rhetoric of perhaps its greatest prophet, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, clearly attests. And though the rhetoric of monogamous love was always more thoroughgoing than its practice, even those who regularly transgressed its ordinances could still find themselves dreaming of a better place elsewhere, a masculine paradises in which access to many women was not just tacitly overlooked but actively encouraged.¹⁴

It may prove insightful here to contextualize Muslim polygamy, which was sanctioned under special circumstances. The verse permitting polygamy was revealed to the Prophet after the battle of Uhud (625), which had left Muslims in a deplorable state; weak in numbers, many women widowed, and children orphaned. A Quran verse was revealed to help alleviate the state of Muslims; father their orphans, care for their women, and increase their numerical strength: ‘If you fear that you cannot do justice to orphans, marry such women as seem good to you, two, or three or four, but if you fear that you will not do justice then marry only one...’ (3:4).

Furthermore, in verse 129 of the same chapter, God suggests that equal treatment in a polygamous relationship is close to impossible: (but not for women as a whole, surely – doesn't the verse speak of treating the wives equally): ‘And it will not be within your power to treat your wives with equal fairness, however much you may desire it...’ (129:4) Islam's sanction of polygamy is thus circumstantial rather than the norm. Furthermore, the contrast between verses 3 and 129 here demonstrates that Islam did not actively encourage the practice of multiple wives for multiple pleasures. On the contrary, polygamy had its roots in a necessary measurement, regulated and taken for the political, social and

economical amelioration of the Muslim community at a time of crisis.

To be sure, by the mid 1800s, polygamy in Muslim households was an upper-class privilege:

In Ottoman Egypt in the 1840s few men had more than one wife, though the practice of using a slave as a concubine was widely practised. Polygamy was largely confined to men of rank or wealth. The harem was always intended to be a sacred and secret place and over the years it was accessible only to other women, the immediate male members of the household, to children and to eunuchs. What went on inside it became the subject of conjecture and myth, most of which clustered round the person and powers of its head.¹⁵

Islam considers everyone born free, and encourages Manumission. It must be noted that concubines in Islam received full marital rights, their children were legitimized, and they had equal status to the other wives of a polygamous Muslim household. Furthermore there were strict impositions on who was qualified to be a concubine to avoid misuse. Prophet Mohammad's treatment of Maria Qitiba and Rehana is exemplary; he exalted them, and Maria bore a child that was very dear to him, Ibrahim. In pre-Islamic times, elite households of the Arab peninsula were in the habit of misusing their woman slaves as concubines, and then renouncing all parentage of the children they have with them.

Islamic teachings thus came to reform a corrupt system, and prevent the mixing of lineages. Well known male historians and travellers to the Near East in the seventeenth century depicted the Orient as a place of unwarranted sex and excess. The accounts of Jean Dumont (1667-1727), Aaron Hill (1685-1750) and Paul Ryacaut (1629-1700), unanimously describe Oriental men as effeminate, "Turks are opposite to us in almost all respects." They wear long, dress-like habits and "crouch down to Piss, like Women"¹⁶. Adding to these preposterous descriptions, is the claim that Turks are inclined to sodomy, 'the strange and curs'd Pollution of *inverted Nature*'¹⁷. While Oriental men are feminine, their women 'are accounted the most lascivious and immodest of all women, and excel in the most refined and ingenious subtiles to steal their pleasures'¹⁸. Male travellers to the Orient in the nineteenth century held similar views, a prominent example is the object of Gustave Flaubert's sexual liaisons, his Egyptian courtesan, *Kuchuk Hanem*. Flaubert's encounters with this woman 'produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her.'¹⁹ Furthermore, Flaubert argues that "the oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction between one man and another man."²⁰ But, while men's accounts of the harem are pure fantasy, women's harem writings were based on empirical knowledge. Wortley Montagu's letters on Ottoman domestic life vehemently rebuke

male travellers contrived and crude statements about Ottoman sexuality. Other female writers chosen for this thesis are similarly restrained in their assessments.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983). p. 4.
- ² Albert Hourani, *Islam in European Thought*, (Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.4.
- ³ Hourani, p.9.
- ⁴ Hourani, p. 8.
- ⁵ Hourani, p.10
- ⁶ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.8.
- ⁷ Lewis, p.8.
- ⁸ Lewis, p. 9.
- ⁹ Lewis, p.13.
- ¹⁰ Lewis, p.13.
- ¹¹ Lewis, p.13.
- ¹² Lewis, pp.13-14.
- ¹³ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p.59.
- ¹⁴ Yeazall, p. 5.
- ¹⁵ Roderick Cavaliero, *Ottomania The Romantics and the Myth of the Islamic Orient* (London, New York: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010),p. 14.
- ¹⁶ Jean Dumont, *A New Voyage to the Levant*, fourth edition (London,1705), p. 149, quoted in Elizabeth A. Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 29.
- ¹⁷ Aaron Hill, *A Full and Just Account of the Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (London: Printed for the author and sold by John Mayo, 1709), p. 83, quoted in Bohls, p.29.
- ¹⁸ Paul Ryacaut, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, (London: Printed for C. Brome, 1668), p. 153, quoted in Bohls, p. 29.
- ¹⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, p.6.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Said, *Orientalism*, p. 187.

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