

Western Women as Subject in Orientalist Texts: An Example of Lady Montagu's Turkish Embassy Letters

Oryantalist Metinlerde Özne Olarak Batılı Kadın: Lady Montagu'nun Türkiye Mektupları Örneği

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Abstract

Orientalism, which includes the West's images or discourses about the East, is an area where we can see examples in many fields such as travel books, literary works, or scientific studies. One of the most used images in orientalist texts is the woman and harem, bathhouse, slave market. In Orientalist texts, mostly produced by European men, women and their places are symbolized in a way that responds to Western men's desires, and a collection of Eastern narratives drawn through the eyes of the Western male-subject emerges. The Western women later travel to the East, creating works that differ from the Western-male perspective and reflect the female-gaze. In this study, the book *Turkish Embassy Letters* by Lady Worthley Montagu, who was in Istanbul between 1717-1718, will be scrutinized and the similarities and differences between Western female and male subjects given Eastern women will be shown.

Keywords: Orientalism, Edward Said, Lady Montagu, Woman narration, Letter, Travel texts.

Öz

Batı'nın Doğu hakkındaki imajları ya da söylemlerini içeren Oryantalizm seyahat metinleri, edebiyat eserleri, bilimsel çalışmalar gibi birçok alanda örneklerini görebileceğimiz bir alandır. Oryantalist metinlerde en çok kullanılan imajlardan biri kadın ve onun yer aldığı harem, hamam, köle pazarı gibi mekanlardır. Çoğunlukla Avrupalı erkekler tarafından üretilen Oryantalist metinlerde kadın ve onun içinde bulunduğu mekanlar Batılı erkeklerin arzularına cevap verecek şekilde sembolleştirilir ve ortaya Batılı erkek-öznenin gözünden çizilen bir Doğu anlatısı koleksiyonu çıkar. Batılı kadın seyyahlar da daha sonra Doğu'ya seyahat ederek Batılı-erkek bakışın metinlerinden ayrışan ve kadın-bakışını yansıtan eserler ortaya koyarlar. Bu çalışmada Bu çalışmada, 1717-1718 yılında İstanbul'da bulunan Lady Worthley Montagu'ya ait *Türkiye Mektupları* kitabı ele alınıp incelenecek ve Batılı kadın ve erkek öznelerin Doğulu kadına bakışındaki benzerlikler ve farklılıklar gösterilecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Oryantalizm, Edward Said, Lady Montagu, Kadın anlatısı, Mektup, Seyahat metinleri.

Introduction

This study aims to compare a Western female traveler's books with of males and reveal their similarities and differences based on Lady Montagu's *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. Before starting the discussion, definitions of the concept of Orientalism by different scholars have been given. Firstly, Orientalism is used by Western scientists and academics to recognize and identify the East. Over time, this definition has changed and, in a negative sense, has acquired a meaning that alienates and objectifies the East.

Edward Said, one of the greatest supporters of the negative meaning, gave Orientalism its meaning used in contemporary academic discussions. In many fields, from social sciences to art, from politics to anthropology, the imperialist West produced many works to dominate the East. The Eastern woman was also used functionally and became the object of Western men-subjects' desire. For this purpose, in the second part of the study, the works of Western male travelers, painters, and novelists about Eastern women and the major structure of these works are discussed.

Reina Lewis, in her book *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*, opposes Said's definition of Orientalism as a homogeneous discourse put forward by the colonialist-male sovereign subject and thus ignoring the role and position of Western women (Lewis, 2004, p.17). In time, the East has become an area where women

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travelers can also visit. European women, who conveyed their observations in these travels to the Western reader, resembled male-subjects in some ways but often differed. Considering that women travelers enter and observe the places where men cannot enter, the texts of women travelers have also undermined the male authority's discourse. Lady Montagu's *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, given as an example of it, is also a text that heterogenizes and complicates the Orientalist discourse.

Orientalism Theory of Edward Said

In contemporary studies, we found very different definitions of Orientalism, which have been discussed in different historical ways. Researchers classify these definitions as two main categories; negative and positive meanings (Bulut, 2016, s. 4). In the first category, which looks positively at the term Orientalism, academicians and scientists aim to investigate the two different cultural worlds (East and West) by comparing them objectively, observing the East, and introducing their knowledge about the East to the Western world. According to Bernard Lewis, the first Orientalists were "philologists concerned with the recovery, study, publication, and interpretation of texts. This was the first and most essential task that had to be undertaken before the serious study of such other matters as philosophy, theology, literature, and history became possible (Lewis, 1993, s. 101)." On the other hand, in the second category, which attributes a negative meaning, Orientalism is problematic in terms of its function and result in relations between societies and cultures. The most important representative of the second category in the contemporary world is Edward Said and his seminal work *Orientalism*.

Inspired by Foucault, Said emphasizes that the political discursive nature of knowledge is not objective and reveals the relationship between the West's imperialist interests to the East. According to Said, "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. Besides, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) (Said, 1979, s. 1)." Said observes the West's view of the East as an imperialist purpose in the academic and imaginary fields. Western orientalists who introduced the East as anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and linguists in the academic field and who wrote about it, make "ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' (Said, 1979, s. 2)" through their studies. If we contemplated this framework, there is an unequal relationship between the West and the East in the Orientalist perspective. Taking the late 18th century as a starting point, Said briefly defines Orientalism "as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage -and even produce- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively (Said, 1979, p. 3)."

In defining Orientalism, Said is concerned with the Orient's image produced on a discursive level rather than with thoughts about the actual East. It explores the relationships between East and West depending on the complex relations of power, domination, and hegemony at different stages. In this hegemonic relationship, the Eastern subject's practice, which is discursively related to the Western subject, is noteworthy. The East, which is the object of research, experience, and practice for a Western subject, was established with the human perspective that feeds on the West's political, cultural, and theoretical traditions and has been defined as entirely arbitrary. Western dominant discourse claims that the East is not able to represent itself. For this reason, the forms of representation created by Western Orientalists use the following ways to create the essence of Orientalist texts as transformed forms of Eastern knowledge: "to divide, deploy, schematize, tabulate, index, and record everything in sight (and out of sight); to make out of every observable detail a generalization

and out of every generalization an immutable law about the Oriental nature, temperament, mentality, custom, or type; and, above all, to transmute living reality into the stuff of texts, to possess (or think one possesses) actuality mainly because nothing in the Orient seems to resist one's powers (Said, 1979, s. 86)."

The View of the Male Subject in Orientalist Texts

As discussed above, Edward Said and other researchers have viewed Orientalism as an economic, cultural, and political phenomenon based on colonialism. In this context, the West objectifies the East by establishing it as a cultural, geographical, racial, and political unity; thus, making itself a sovereign and autonomous subject. Additionally, Said emphasizes two distinct meanings of Orientalism:

Orientalism is the generic term that I have been employing to describe the Western approach to the Orient; Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice. But in addition, I have been using the word to designate that collection of dreams, images, and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies East of the dividing line. These two aspects of Orientalism are not incongruent, since by use of them both Europe could advance securely and unmetaphorically upon the Orient (Said, 1979, p. 73).

As this quote shows Said, shows the distinction between the "latent" and "manifest" meaning of Orientalism. "Manifest" meaning is considered as an academic research field (linguistics, history, sociology, etc.), while the "latent" meaning deals with its unconscious areas such as dreams and images. For this reason, we can think of orientalist texts as both a branch of science and studies that produce unconscious desires. This "signifies how the "Orient" is at once an object of knowledge and an object of desire (Yeğenoğlu, 2001, p. 23)."

The Western subject, who sees the East as an "object of desire," feminizes it. This approach, which serves a colonial purpose, brings to the fore the East's immorality and lustfulness with instruments such as harem, hamam, slave market, concubines (cariye), and homosexuality. Western male subjects, who see the East as a "object of knowledge" and travel, frequently use these instruments in their texts. The inclusion of these instruments in the works of those who traveled to the East with titles such as photographers, painters, travelers, anthropologists, and linguists shows that Orientalism's unconscious aspects, which are its "latent" meaning, are predominant rather than the academic aspect "manifest."

According to Foucault, "toward the beginning of the eighteenth century, there emerged a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex (Foucault, 1978, p. 23). Sexuality has also been used as a discursive instrument in reflecting academic orientalist tendencies to the aesthetic field. Traveling is an activity that men in the past centuries have mostly done. For this reason, in the travel-based Eastern narratives, male-subjects use this sphere to the advantage of their desires. A patriarchal discourse succeeds in these narratives, and sexuality is also used functionally.

Orientalist travelers frequently use the themes of love, women, and eroticism in their Eastern travels. Since no one but themselves can experience these travels, they open up an unlimited fantasy field for narrators. For example, the harem, bathhouse and slave market paintings in Western art are mostly not based on observation. Especially during their travels to the Middle East, former French artists realized that Muslim women were not modeling, so they painted French models in their Paris studios. Orientalist painters, or any of the later studio photographers, portrayed Oriental subjects in sexual fantasies. Ottoman women in this century were designed "in ways that were sexual (the lascivious odalisque), temporal (the Orient as a zone out of time locked in a pre-modern past), social (unable to distinguish Ottoman class difference, Oriental women were pictured as either sultanas or slaves), and cultural (the ignorant, lazy harem woman) (Lewis, 2004, p. 7)." *La Grand Odalisque* (1814),

Odalisque et son esclave (1839), and *The Turkish Bath* (1862), by Dominique Ingres, can be given as illustrations of representations that deal with the theme of polygamy through female slavery.

Joanna De Groot points out that lust is produced differently in the presentation of gender and femininity in 19th-century texts and representations. In her opinion, it plays an active role in the power relations underlying the representations, in the formation and reconciliation of the male audience's own identity:

For these endlessly reproduced male fantasies of harems and dancing-girls, of gratification through domination, and of intimacy with subordinates, represented not only the indulgence of male desire and power but also one of the few means of dealing with the contradictions of masculinity and male needs as they developed at this period. The very existence of needs (personal, sexual, emotional) in men for which they sought satisfaction from women raised questions about the nature and limits of male domination. Male power, enshrined in law and custom, gave men sexual advantages over women, but it did not eliminate the reality of desire, attraction, and bonding between men and women (De Groot, 1989, p. 107).

The male gaze's view of the East as an object of desire is also seen in novels and travel books. The travelers of this period created a new genre with the texts they produced - which sometimes went to these travels, and sometimes they wrote without going - with numerous pulp fictions and erotic stories about Oriental women that heightened the desire of the Western reader and told about their secret adventures in tightly guarded harems (Schick, 2000, p.80). In the philosophical tale genre formed in post-Enlightenment literature, the European observer goes to the East and observes its culture and traditions. As can be seen in the stories exemplified in Giovanni Marana's *Espion Turque* and Montesquieu's *The Lettres Persanes*, the male observer also includes the voices of the people living there. These sounds are not separate from stereotyping. Especially in the stories, "The nature, physicality of the Eastern female and what makes her so dangerous is a natural lecherous. (Melman, 1992, p. 70)." The Eastern female subject, the other of the Enlightenment, is an object in terms of "enslaved by her sex and imprisoned by her femininity (Melman, 1992, p. 71)" even though she has her voice in the text.

The image of the East became the subject of the works of Romantic writers in the 19th century. A key text for Orientalist literature, *The Arabian Nights* or *The Thousand and One Nights*, was translated into English multiple times in the 19th century. After this translation, there is an increase in the publications that tell about the East in a fabulous way. As Valerie Kennedy states, that "of such Romantic works supplemented the influence of *The Arabian Nights* as George Gordon, Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812, 1814, and 1816) and his six Turkish Tales: *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1814), later the subject of an 1857 painting by Eugène Delacroix), *The Corsair* (1814), *Lara* (1814), *The Siege of Corinth* (1816), and *Parisina* (1816) (Kennedy, 2019, p. 222-223)." In *Lalla Rookh* (meaning rose and cheek), which consists of a series of love stories by Thomas Moore, the East is depicted as the place of tastes and desires. In this depiction, women are also the focal point of sexual attraction (Cavalerio, 2010, p.157). In Victor Hugo's work *Les Orientales*, written in 1825, the East is represented through images such as colors, barbaric savagery, harems, palaces, odalisques, concubines, women are thrown into the sea in sacks (Hugo, 2012).

Lady Montagu as a Women Orientalist and The Turkish Embassy Letters

In the texts we have reviewed above, we have shown the Western male subject's wholesale view on the East in the power-force-subject relationship. Although these texts contain diversity in themselves, these texts come together under the title of an "orientalist discourse." According to Said, West's discourses about the East is "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 the previous imagining,

or an amalgam of all these (Said, 1979, p. 177). "Western male-subject creates fantasy elements about himself in texts where he describes the East, which he looks at with sexist blindness. The spaces used in these fantasy elements are functional. He tries to explain it through inaccessible spaces such as hammam and harem. Yeğenoğlu explains the disappointment of Western men because of not being able to enter the prohibited places as follows:

Despite his ability to freely enter the Orient and move in and out as much as he wishes, the Western subject is frustrated by the closure of the space of the Oriental woman; he had no option but to speculate on the details of harem life, its mysteries, and the lascivious sexuality the other-sex enjoys behind that closed curtain. Furthermore, most Western travelers denounce the veil and its mystery, which is dropped in this "inner space." When the "inner" space is closed in this way, the only available means for the Western man is to rely on the Western woman's accounts of the harem's forbidden space, her description of the unveiled women, the details of their everyday life, etc. It is thus only through the assistance of the Western woman (for she is the only "foreigner" allowed to enter into the "forbidden zone") that the mysteries of this inaccessible "inner space" and the "essence" of the Orient secluded in it could be unconcealed; it is she who can remedy the longlasting lack of the Western subject (Yeğenoğlu, 2001, p. 74).

In Lady Worthley Montagu's letters, examples of the observations of the Western woman's gaze can be seen in the forbidden places that men cannot enter. Montagu, who came to Istanbul in 1716 because his husband was an ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, stayed in this city for about two years and wrote many letters to her friends in England explaining her impressions in Istanbul in sufficient detail. Because Montagu was also a woman, and entering women's spaces prohibited for men in Ottoman society made her letters more reliable and curious in the eyes of the Western reader.

Montagu emphasizes that she often tells the truth in her letters. The fact that the spaces that men cannot enter are open to her shows that she is ahead of men to reach the truth. In his letters, she often emphasizes that her observations are different from Western male travelers and that her account is more accurate and reliable because she can enter prohibited places as a female subject. In her letter to Anne Thistlethwayt of 1 April 1717, she refers to this situation:

You will perhaps be surprised at an account so different from what you have been entertained with by the common voyage-writers, who are very fond of speaking of what they don't know. It must be under a very particular character, or on some extraordinary occasion, when a Christian is permitted into the house of a man of quality; and their haréms are always forbidden ground. Thus, they can only speak of the outside, which makes no great appearance; and the women's apartments are all built backwards, removed from sight, and have no other prospect than the gardens, which are enclosed with very high walls. (Montagu, 1992, p. 409)

When Lady Montagu describes Eastern women, she deals with similar objects as male travelers. One of the metaphors she frequently uses is the "veil". The "veil" object is instrumentalized to tell the Orient's mystery in fictional or realistic texts of male subjects. European travelers assume that there is something behind the veil of the East, making it an object of study. With the veil, Eastern women are taken away from their freedom and enslaved. This always attracts the attention of the Western male subject. The veil also makes the woman mysterious, making it the object of desire of the Western male subject. In a letter, Montagu says, this "perpetual masquerade" worn by women gives them freedom so that they are untouchable and untraceable. Moreover, Montagu adds that women are entirely free to satisfy all their passions without getting caught (Montagu, 1992, p. 551) thanks to the veil. In this respect, Montagu's letters deviate from the male discourse. In her viewpoint, the veil is an instrument that liberates, not enslaves.

We argued that the Western male-gaze while describing the East through the Eastern female-other, works with sexual images and unconscious fantasies. One of the most important

of these symbols is spaces. Space is a fundamental element of existence, and hence identity; the self-flourishes in space and hence bears the indelible traces of what it calls "here" (Schick, 21). In Lady Montagu's letters, places are described in a similar way to Western men's fantastic narrative. Montagu uses the Turkish bath, one of the East's most intriguing places, in her letters in detail. In these depictions, which also refer to religious texts, the female-subject entering a space prohibited to men turns the Eastern woman into an object of desire in a way that satisfies the male perspective:

(...) 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. 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 shinningly 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 (Montagu, 1992, p. 350-351).

As seen in the hammam impression, the letters sometimes contain narratives that overlap with Western male subjects' Orientalist discourses. These contrasts in Montagu's letters are also seen in the different observations made to different interlocutors. On the one hand, he wrote in a letter to the Princess of Wales that although the climate of the East was better, it could never be as free as England (Montagu, 1992, p. 346); On the other hand, in another letter, he tells that the treatment of women is better than England and that women in the East are more disengaged than in the West (Montagu, 1992, p. 540).

Conclusion

This article discusses the nature of Orientalism that marginalizes the East and makes it a research object. The Western male-subject, who entered the East as a research field for a scientific purpose, has also implicitly made this area an object of his desire, besides his apparent purpose. To make the East an object of desire, women, and instruments such as the bath, harem, and veil, in which women are the main actors, were used in orientalist texts. Thus, in the travel books, novels, and other Western male-subject books, the Eastern woman became objectified and was imprisoned in the male gaze's dominant discourse. Since traveling is an activity accessible to men, the male gaze's extensive body of discourse has become unquestionable. This situation has changed over time with the travels of upper-class European women. The texts of women travelers were also added to the orientalist texts of men. According to Jacques Derrida, the notion of the supplement has two separate functions. In its first sense, a supplement is an addition that enriches the total. The second meaning is to substitute for something else (Derrida, 1977, p. 144-145). In this context, the texts produced by the woman-view are also supplements.

In one aspect, Montagu's letters repeat what is described in the texts of male travelers. He describes the sexuality of Eastern women in detail, making them an object of desire, especially in her gaze towards women. In this respect, the letters enrich the total Orientalist view. At some points, Montagu turns the narratives of Western male-discourse inside out. Having the advantage of being in places such as harem and baths where male observers cannot enter, Montagu explained her observations in these places, criticized the Orientalist discourse's texts in certain aspects, and questioned its reliability. Proving the Orientalist discourse's false stereotypes in her letters and gaining the reader's trust, Montagu strengthened her claim that he was telling the truth. In this regard, it fulfilled the substitution function of the supplement notion.

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