



## Literature's activist voice: Unraveling Montagu's advocacy through *The Turkish Embassy Letters*

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### Abstract

Literature serves as a potent tool in addressing societal, political, and cultural issues, enabling writers to raise awareness and champion change. This paper delves into the activist essence embedded in the literary works of an eighteenth-century European woman writer, Lady Wortley Montagu. Through the widely celebrated genre of letters, Montagu asserted her presence in a male-dominated society, challenging gender norms. In an era where women faced limited educational opportunities and were relegated to secondary status, Montagu used literature to advocate for equality. Montagu not only navigated the western literary canon but also challenged prevailing colonial narratives about non-European countries. Her scrutiny of the imaginative travel accounts from Europe, Asia, and Africa aimed at demystifying and countering the biased representations perpetuated by Western writers. The paper explores the contrasts drawn between East and West, highlighting Montagu's elevation of the subaltern in her travel narratives. A significant moment in Montagu's literary journey is her letter to Alexander Pope, marking her substantial claim in the English literary sphere. Expressing admiration for Arab poetry and culture, Montagu disrupted conventional perspectives. This paper asserts that literature provided Montagu with a platform to engage in vital activism, giving her a distinct space in the literary landscape of England.

**Keywords:** Activism, subaltern, western literary canon, letters, gender norms, colonial narratives

### Introduction

Literature can be both art and activism simultaneously. While it is an artistic expression that explores language, form, and creativity, it can also be a platform for advocating social and political change. Many works of literature balance aesthetic beauty and a commitment to raising awareness or challenging societal norms, embodying the dual roles of art and activism.

Great literary work is inherently activist—which does not mean didactic. Quite the opposite, great literary work is never propagandist; it respects the intelligence and agency of its readers. It does not use its power for manipulation, a cynical act.

It is activist because great literature intrinsically holds hope and the possibility of change. No matter how dark the topic might be—and some of civilization's most important works are dark indeed—great literature is about hope. By asking to be read, literature assumes human potential. (By Cheryl Parsons, Bay Area Book Festival Founder and Director)

Literature can be a form of activism by shedding light on social issues, challenging norms, and inspiring change. Through different genres of literature, whether drama, novel, poetry, letter, essay, or storytelling, authors can provoke critical thinking, evoke empathy, and motivate readers to engage with and question the world around them. Literature becomes a powerful tool for advocating social change and fostering a more conscious and informed society by addressing themes like inequality, injustice, or discrimination.

Women's writing often serves as a form of activism in literature because it challenges historical gender biases, amplifies women's voices, and addresses issues related to gender inequality. Through their narratives, female authors contribute to a more inclusive literary landscape, advocating

for women's rights, portraying diverse female experiences, and challenging stereotypes. In this way, women's writing becomes a powerful means of promoting social change and fostering a deeper understanding of gender dynamics, making it a form of activism within literature.

Writings of women, especially in a male-dominated and authoritative society, mostly speak about the oppression of the male gender, which is considered a superior gender. Reading Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *The Turkish Embassy Letters* discovers the activist role of literature. The text discussed was written by an aristocratic lady from the Pierrepont family, who was born in the nineties of the seventeenth century. She is best known for her letter, which provides valuable insights into eighteenth-century England and her travels.

### Literature Review

Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763) is a pivotal text in travel writing and women's literature. Scholars like Shirley Foster (2004) highlight Montagu's challenge to Orientalist tropes, offering nuanced portrayals of Ottoman culture. Mary Jo Kietzman (1998) [3] explores Montagu's cultural dislocation and identity negotiation. Postcolonial critiques (e.g., Nayar, 2016) [5] position Montagu's work as counter-hegemonic, subverting Western biases about the East

### Method of Study

The method of study for this research paper involves a qualitative textual analysis of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. The focus is on Montagu's letters as a form of activism, examining how she challenges gender norms, counters colonial narratives, and engages with Eastern cultures. Thematic coding is used to

analyze key themes in the letters, such as her depictions of the harem, advocacy for smallpox inoculation, and interactions with Ottoman society. This approach allows for an exploration of Montagu's literary strategies and their impact on 18th-century cultural perceptions.

### **The Turkish Embassy Letters**

"The Turkish Embassy Letters" by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is a collection of letters written during her travels to the Ottoman Empire in the early 18th century. Lady Mary provides vivid and detailed observations of Turkish society, culture, and customs in these letters. She offers insights into the lives of Ottoman women, describing their clothing, habits, and societal roles. One notable aspect of her letters is her advocacy for the practice of smallpox inoculation, which she encountered during her time in the Ottoman Empire. Lady Mary describes the process and its success in preventing smallpox, and upon her return to England, she actively promoted the procedure. Overall, "The Turkish Embassy Letters" is a valuable historical and cultural account, offering readers a glimpse into the exoticism of Turkish life as seen through the eyes of a keen and articulate observer.

The travel accounts of Montagu serve as an activist force because, through letters, Montagu had not only explored and claimed her dynamic position in contemporary European society but also challenged the prevailing gender norms with the help of an epistemological tool. While traveling to the Turkish Empire, consisting of South-eastern Europe and Southwestern Asia, she chose to be an interested participant, unlike the earlier male travel writers who were authoritative spectators. Her encounter with the Turkish culture provides an ethnographic context of the Turkish Empire and more of Turkish women's culture. This piece of literature is the epitome of activism, as Montagu had tried to break the gender norms by traveling outside the European countries, writing letters to persons of distinction, and challenging the authenticity of travel accounts of male travelers from Europe. She asserted that male travelers used the process (writing) to discover their masculinity while women travelers were fighting for something. Montague employed literature's activist forces in two ways: one when she tried to challenge the gender norms forwarded by patriarchal society and claimed her dynamic position in the European literary canon by addressing letters to celebrated writers like Alexander Pope, and two, when she challenged the authenticity of occidental travel narratives of male travelers. During her travel to the Ottoman Empire, Montagu closely observed the private sphere and claimed that the earlier travel narratives by male travelers were based on imagination, that too, from distant places. The royal family tag worked as a boon for Montagu, enabling her to escape the confinement of four walls and explore the outside world. Her boldness and mystery lie in her subject matter of discussion and the recipient of letters in the Western world from the Eastern world. She included the discussions and addressee very carefully to serve her purpose.

### **Assertion of female identity and challenging the gender norms through epistemological tools**

From the extensive title, *Letters of the Right Honourable Lady M——y W——y M——e: Written during her Travels in Europe, Asia, And Africa, To Persons of Distinction, Men of Letters, &c. in different PARTS of Europe. Which*

Contain, Among other Curious Relations, Accounts of the Policy and Manners of the Turks. Drawn from Sources that have been inaccessible to other Travellers Of the text, the author clears her intentions. To establish her identity in a world where the word male stood for power, possessiveness, and authority, she came out of the confined domestic space and explored the outside wall, to where her sex had never dreamt of going. Montagu wrote letters to persons of distinction, men of letters, to let the world know she could share her ideas with men of high caliber.

The preface to the letters was written by a lady praising Montagu. The preface looked like a document written by the same lady who wrote the letters, Montagu, very conveniently; she did not mention the author's name. She hid the identity of the preface writer; it suggests that a lady/woman in general can be a writer. The personal pronoun "I" emphasizes the assertion of female identity. As the lady said, Montagu possessed all the qualities of perfect writing, which signaled that a lady from the second sex could also achieve perfection in writing. Ladies have better purposes than lords; the traveling of ladies to a place has a better purpose than a male, and the travel accounts of males are trifles. The prefacer claimed that a lady writer is better at ornamenting a piece of writing, and the travel accounts of Montagu offer a true and accurate account of the customs and manners of the Ottoman Empire. "The reader will find a more true and accurate account of the customs and manners of the several nations with whom this lady conversed than he can in any other author." The preface writer claimed that the male travel writers did not attend the space, and they gave an imaginative and false description of the place.

Through the account of travel narratives, Montagu aims to achieve a different status for women. The status of women in the eighteenth century was miserable; a male-dominated society ill-treated them, they were the suffering sex, they were dependent as child bearers and homemakers, and the scope for education was limited for women. In such a turbulent period, Montagu addressed letters to the different ladies of Europe while she was in the Eastern countries. She addressed many letters to women; she made a bold claim that though education for women was limited, there were still fewer women. In her letters, the author talked about the different architectural projects, landscapes of the Ottoman Empire, and their military system. The broad awareness of Montagu shows that women were not backward and foolish as the males represented them. The author called her travel to the eastern countries as her project, "I shall not repent my project." An effort has been made to alter the dogmatic views of male writers toward the female. Montagu had the luxury of exchanging letters with her contemporaries to talk about day-to-day life, showing her desperate claim to earn a position in the patriarchal society. Letter writing in the eighteenth century was a primary means of communication. 'Tis certain we have but very imperfect accounts 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.(LET. XXVI)

Montagu claimed that the information and accounts given by the previous male travelers and merchants were fake because either they had never been to this part of the world or because of their short stay.

In writing to Alexander Pope, a prominent poet of her time, she aimed to challenge Western prejudices and encourage a more nuanced understanding of Eastern cultures. Letters to the celebrated poet Alexander Pope were a significant moment in Montagu's literary journey, where she marked her substantial claim in the English literary sphere. She boldly declared that she was well-read in literature by giving accounts of various literary figures like Addison, Theocritus, and Homer. She was aware of the literal translation and showed her ability by translating the Turkish verse into English.

### Reshaping the Colonial Representations

A writer from the Occidental world was found challenging the cultural discourses that have been the sources of representation of the culture and tradition of Oriental countries. By doing this, she was not only erasing the misconception about the Oriental countries but also claiming a space in the literary canon of European countries. The male writers of Western countries had adopted an inferior attitude towards Eastern countries in their writing. They identified themselves as Europeans and the other as non-European. They did not give them a separate identity. Montagu challenged the misinterpreted travel accounts of the writers, who gave a very narrow and demeaned view of the Eastern world.

Through these letters, Montagu was involved in Oriental cultural production during the eighteenth century. It highlights her works being influenced by colonial discourse but argues that she could offer a counter-hegemonic viewpoint. Despite being shaped by race and class dynamics, Montagu challenged dominant social and textual codes from a gender perspective, avoiding pervasive Orientalist tropes. The focus is on the harem as a central signifier in Orientalist discourse, seen as a forbidden space charged with erotic significance, allowing women access to experiential engagement, such as visiting the harem.

Montagu mentioned the Turkish bath in letter no. XXVI, where he defended the misleading representation of women in the Ottoman Empire by the male writers. They were perceived as objects of sex, and the European writers used the term "Exotic" to address them. In reply, Lady Montagu had written that the women of Turks were more disciplined and decent than those of England. The covering that they used served as a protection for them; the burkhas did not limit them. Instead, it freed them. She gave an accurate and detailed description of the Turkish bath and rejected the previous opinions about the private sphere. The women in that Turkish bath were as graceful as Milton's description of mothers. Montagu was pleased with the beauty and manners of the eastern women.

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 our general mother with.

I was charmed with their civility and beauty, and should have been very glad to pass more time with them. (LET.XXVI)

In her letter to Pope, the author describes her current location in Adrianople, near the banks of the Hebrus. The surroundings inspire thoughts of poetry and romance, with cypress trees, actual turtles, and the river's soothing sounds. The author observes the Turkish lifestyle, detailing how the Turks enjoy evenings in gardens by the river, drinking

coffee and listening to music. The gardeners, mainly Greeks, lived comfortably, supplying the city with fruits and herbs. The author reflects on the pastoral aspects of life, comparing them to Theocritus's depictions. The customs and attire described in Homer's works still resonate in Turkish culture. The paragraph concludes with a mention of Eastern manners, shedding light on scripture passages and the author sharing verses by Ibrahim Bassa for his contracted wife, reminiscent of the Song of Solomon. The author compares the poetry and culture of the Eastern and Western worlds and can identify the similarities. Through this letter, she tried to alter the inferior representation of Eastern culture and literary tradition.

### Conclusion

The Turkish embassy letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu can be viewed as activism literature due to Montagu's purposeful engagement with and critique of Turkish culture and society. Through her detailed observations and vivid descriptions, Montagu challenges Western stereotypes and misconceptions about the Ottoman Empire. She actively advocates for a more nuanced understanding of Turkish customs, presenting a counter-narrative that seeks to dismantle prejudiced views prevalent in her contemporary European society. Montagu's letters serve as a literary instrument for cultural exchange and empathy, promoting activism that encourages openness, tolerance, and reevaluating preconceived notions about the East. In shedding light on the richness of Turkish life, she implicitly advocates for cultural appreciation and challenges the prevailing biases of her time.

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