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TRAVELS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE  
ETHNOGRAPHY OF GENDER AND ISLAM IN ISTANBUL AND EGYPT

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis takes an in-depth look at letters from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, written by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (d.1762) and Lady Lucie Duff Gordon (d.1869). Both women were from the upper classes of London society and they wrote extensively about their experiences as they traveled through Turkey and Egypt. Elizabeth Fernea asserts that Lady Montagu was one of the earliest examples of an ethnographer of Middle Eastern women. I assert, however, that Lady Duff Gordon is the more effective ethnographer of gender and religion for a variety of reasons. Considering social factors of England and Egypt at this time, the letters of Lady Duff Gordon serve as a better example of historical ethnography; her work makes a distinctive contribution to our understanding of Islam and gender in Egypt and the Middle East.

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## Introduction

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 you will find the charm of novelty in my letters, and no longer reproach me, that I tell you nothing extraordinary. <sup>1</sup>

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to the Princess of Wales, from Adrianople, 1717

I write to you out of the real Arabian Nights. Well may the Prophet (whose name be exalted) smile when he looks on Cairo. It is a golden existence, all sunshine and poetry, and I must add, kindness and civility. <sup>2</sup>

Lady Lucie Duff Gordon to her mother, Sarah Austin, from Cairo, 1862

Letters create a setting for history in a way that other sources do not. They provide personal insight into places and experiences that are invaluable to creating accurate pictures of history and cultures that develop within history. With this in mind, the select quotations above highlight some letters that need to be given more attention as an essential part of the history of the study gender and religion. These are the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (d.1762) and Lady Lucie Duff Gordon (d.1869), and they serve the function of creating a woman's perspective of a time and place that was relatively misunderstood to many of their peers at the time. Both women attempt to dismantle misconceptions about Islam and the Middle East, showing their

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* Edited by Lord Wharnccliffe, London: Swan Sonnenschein & co., 1893, 283-284.

<sup>2</sup> Lady Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt* London: R.Brimley Johnson, 1902, 19.

ability to accept and understand other cultures on a personal level. Early in life, these women showed a desire to learn, especially when it came to foreign languages, and both were exposed to the upper echelons of British society from a young age. Although both women came from London high society, their backgrounds and upbringings also contained many differences that served to make their letters unique. Lady Montagu was a product of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British aristocracy that was predicated on positive social perception and conforming to the opinions of the social class as a whole. Lady Duff Gordon was part of the intellectual upper-middle class, and while she was very social by nature, her social circles did not dominate her experiences as her time in the Middle East progressed. The personal lives of both of these women had a significant impact on their experiences and the commentary they provided through their letters.

Considering these differences, however, their letters still arrived at some of the same conclusions regarding gender, Islam, and the culture of the Middle East. Despite conflicting audiences and temperament when it came to conforming to societal norms, these women both provided surprisingly honest commentary about their experiences in the Middle East. Montagu's upper class audience did not stop her from stating her opinion, regardless if she was writing to another high society woman, or a member of the clergy. Duff Gordon became less and less concerned with pleasing the recipients of her letters over time, becoming more enamored with the culture of Egypt during her journey. Taking an in-depth look at the experiences of these women and the history that surrounds them sets to place in them in a distinctive position in history as early ethnographers, in a time when many were not paying attention to the actual culture of the Middle East, gender, and religion. Without intending to, these women helped to define the field of early ethnography and helped to increase the understanding of cultures little known to the European world.

Since these letters were originally written, there have been many attempts to understand and analyze them. In the case of Mary Montagu, her work has been highly scrutinized since her

letters were originally published during her lifetime. At first, her family was unwilling to publish them, due to the fact that their candid nature was outside of the acceptable norm for British high society, and it was thought that they would do nothing but damage the family's reputation.<sup>3</sup> There is also evidence to suggest that she went to great lengths to shield her family from the intense scrutiny of her social status. In fact, her first version of the "Turkish Embassy Letters" as they would come to be called, were heavily edited by Mary herself, and included journal entries, emphasizing the travel description rather than disproving common stereotypes about the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Despite this, the letters were published in full for the first time in 1763, after she made arrangements to have them published after her death.<sup>5</sup> The letters were divisive upon their initial publication, and continue to be meticulously analyzed by scholars.

Over the years, many have attempted to study and analyze her writing with varying success and opinion. For example, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea praises her ability to accurately depict Middle Eastern women while also disproving some of the more common stereotypes of the Middle East at the time.<sup>6</sup> Some historians however, do not believe that she made any significant contribution to understanding the Middle East. Arthur J. Weitzman comments, for example, that many historians group Mary Montagu with other European travelers who were merely enamored with the idea of the Arabian Nights, rather than possessing a genuine interest to study and understand the East in their travels.<sup>7</sup> Mary is described as someone who cared little about understanding the Middle East, and was focused on writing travel descriptions that would amaze her friends. Regardless of the conclusions, there has been intense debate over the significance and

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<sup>3</sup> "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu," *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. 2nd ed. Vol. 18. Detroit: Gale, 2004. 291-293.

<sup>4</sup> Anna Secor, and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, "Orientalism, gender and class in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish embassy letters: to persons of distinction, men of letters &c," *Ecumene: A Journal Of Environment - Culture - Meaning* 6, (1999): 379.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, "An Early Ethnographer of Middle Eastern Women: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (Oct., 1981), 330.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur J. Weitzman, "Voyeurism and Aesthetics in the Turkish Bath: Lady Mary's School of Female Beauty," *Comparative Literature Studies* 39, no. 4 (2002): 348.

impact with which Lady Montagu's letters have had, and still have, on the public's understanding of the cultural history of the Middle East. For the purposes of this thesis, the letters that are used is the version published by Lord Wharncliffe in 1893, and are said to represent the entire manuscript of Lady Mary's writings, despite edits made to previous editions.<sup>8</sup> It is through this more complete edition that the ethnographic value of Lady Montagu's letters can be fully realized.

Along with Lady Montagu, the letters of Lady Lucie Duff Gordon have also been edited and published in multiple formats since they were first written. The first edition of the letters was published by her daughter, Janet Ross, as part of a compilation of women's letters titled *Three Generations of Englishwomen*, which included letters by her mother Sarah Austin, among others, in 1882.<sup>9</sup> There are very significant issues with the Janet Ross publications that need to be addressed, as it is very obvious that they were edited and censored by Ross throughout.<sup>10</sup> Although the Duff Gordon letters are much less well known than the Montagu letters, there is still evidence that they were heavily edited by her family members, in this case her daughter.

The different print editions of the letters are also often accompanied by introductions, as with one later edition that Janet Ross was involved in. This edition, published by R. Brimley Johnson in 1902 includes an introduction by George Meredith, and should be noted for the contradictory manner with which he addresses the letters, as his argument is often contrary to the tone that Lucie takes throughout her travels.<sup>11</sup> The discontinuity of this introduction, coupled with her daughter's known willingness to censor Lucie's letters are important to consider throughout the analysis, and must bring Lucie's letters under scrutiny. Along with this version of the letters, another edition published in 1866 was also utilized in my analysis of her letters, as a way of

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Letters And Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* Edited by Lord Wharncliffe, London: Swan Sonnenschein & co., 1893, iv.

<sup>9</sup> Kathleen Frank, *A Passage to Egypt: The Life of Lucie Duff Gordon* Houghton Mifflin New York 1994 , 362.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*.



comparing potential discrepancies, considering the nature of the Meredith introduction in the version published in 1902. Although the original manuscripts were unable to be used in this case, the use of two different editions is crucial to understanding where differences may come into effect with regards to censorship and broadening the scope of content that could potentially be missed using only one set of letters.

Regardless of the editing and changes made to the letters, their impact on the history of interpretation of the Middle East is significant. Both women dispelled many of the stereotypes and misconceptions held about the Middle East in their respective time periods. They did this by writing about their experiences as pseudo-members of the communities within which they lived. The purpose of this paper is to show the extent with which both women broke down the stereotypes of Islam as being a barbaric religion, especially when gender relations are considered. To some extent, both women discovered that the relationship between men and women was not as strained and abusive as was construed in the West. These ideas are further supported by their roles as early ethnographers. As explained by Fernea in her article on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Mary was an early ethnographer as she, “communicate[d] the humanity of peoples of another culture” through her descriptive writing and willingness to separate stereotypes from her actual experience.<sup>12</sup> This idea, that there is an attempt to depict the cultures of the Middle East as human, rather than something that is sub-human, applies to both the writings of Montagu and Duff Gordon.

Within the last century, ethnography has emerged as a compelling and diverse field, meant to study specific societies on an intimate cultural level. By definition, ethnography is, “a method of studying cultures in which researchers immerse themselves in ways of life to perceive them as they are lived and then recount and interpret their fieldwork to help their readers

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<sup>12</sup> Fernea, “An Early Ethnographer,” 330.

understand what it is like to be a part of the cultures studied.”<sup>13</sup> Although this is a broad definition, and does not hint at the complexity that is involved in the field, it is still useful in placing the letters of Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon within history. The work of these two women is ethnographically important as both women lived within the distinct cultures of Istanbul and Egypt and attempted to describe and explain much that they saw on a daily basis. It is this basis of ethnography that is used in order to explain the gender and religious discussion in the letters, and is the main context used for analysis of the letters in this paper. There are many complexities to ethnography and how it is conducted, mainly with the use of scientific data versus the use of a narrative style study, which will be discussed further in this thesis. However, looking at the letters of Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon serves as a way to study the origins of this field and how effectively the women describe the cultures they experienced.

When looking into the study of ethnography in Chapter 3, I use two specific examples to better understand the field and the debate that surrounds the different techniques within it. The first one is *Veiled Sentiments* by Lila Abu Lughod, a woman of Jordanian descent who lives with Bedouin tribe in the desert of Western Egypt in order to better understand their culture and lifestyle.<sup>14</sup> Within her writing, Abu Lughod lives and works as a member of the community in order to properly describe and explain the culture of the tribe and how this culture is represented in the poetry that they create. This piece of literature serves as one example of ethnography of the narrative perspective. Rather than gathering data and developing statistics to explain cultural phenomena, Abu Lughod relies on experience and a written narrative of her time spent in Egypt to portray the cultural aspects of the Bedouin tribe she lives with. This style is important to keep

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<sup>13</sup> Keith Cunningham, "Ethnography," *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*. Ed. Charlie T. McCormick and Kim Kennedy White. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011. 439-441.

<sup>14</sup> Lila Abu- Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* Berkley: University of California Press, 1986, 1-35.

in mind going forward, as both Montagu and Duff Gordon use a similar technique, although it occurred before the formalized field of ethnography.

The second ethnography used to frame this project is *The Pure and Powerful* by Nadia Abu Zahra.<sup>15</sup> The focus of her research is the shrine of al-Sayidda Zaynab, a shrine in Egypt dedicated to one of the Prophet Muhammad's granddaughters. In a very similar fashion to Abu Lughod, Abu Zahra lived among the people surrounding this shrine in order to better understand the culture surrounding it. How she differs from Abu Lughod, however, is her emphasis on statistical data to support her findings and theories developed in her work. In fact, she stops short of discrediting the narrative approach that is used within the field of ethnography, the method that is preferred by Abu Lughod, claiming that it creates broad generalizations that do not represent the culture being studied in an accurate manner. Taking both methods into account is important to this project in numerous ways. Mainly, understanding the debate and scope of ethnography helps to show the progression of the field and how the letters of Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon contributed to it. In some ways, their letters were early representations of what the field of ethnography would become and how it could impact that study of culture in the Middle East. Using ethnography as the framework of this analysis is the most effective way to understand the letters and the emphasis placed on personal experience to capture cultural history.

Keeping in mind the ideas of ethnography, it is essential to understand the history and background of each woman in order to better appreciate their interpretations of the societies in which they were living. In the cases of Abu Lughod and Abu Zahra, their personal experiences and background influenced the lenses with which they viewed the societies they were studying. In Abu Lughod's case, her background influenced the access she had to the Bedouin culture she was studying, as her Jordanian roots and her family's belief in Islam significantly increased the role

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<sup>15</sup>Nadia Abu-Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful: Studies in Contemporary Muslim Society* Reading: Ithaca Press, 1997, xi-xviii.

she was able to have in the Bedouin society.<sup>16</sup> This is extremely important when looking at the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Born in late 17<sup>th</sup> century London, Mary was a product of the upper class and was destined to remain there for the rest of her life.<sup>17</sup> Despite this, she showed a great deal of independence from a young age, advancing her own education when she was young and eloping with Edward Montagu, despite her father's plans to marry her to someone else.<sup>18</sup> Mary was never known for being a restrained individual, with many of her letters inciting censorship and controversy among British upper class society and her family, as discussed previously. Although the censorship is something that cannot be ignored when looking at the content of the letters, her personality would indicate that they reflect her honesty and candor when it comes to portraying the culture of society and Istanbul at the time.

Along with the personal background of Lady Montagu, understanding Istanbul at this time is also important in understanding the culture to which Mary was more than likely exposed, and this is discussed in Chapter 1. The Ottoman Empire at the time was experiencing a relative peace after being at war with many different European countries, and was still considered a major European power of the time. Mary also experienced what is called "The Age of Tulips", where there was general prosperity in architecture and infrastructure within the city.<sup>19</sup> The Turkish government was having success as a major power within Europe and the city reflected this success. Along with this, it is important to understand that Mary's main exposure to Turkish society was with the upper class, as she herself was a member of the upper class. Although she had exposure to the other levels of Turkish society, this was not her main experience. This does not detract from her account, but rather it is framed in a more specific place in time and culture.

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<sup>16</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* Oxford University Press New York 1999, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Garay, "Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley (1689–1762)," *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*. Ed. Anne Commire. Vol. 11. Detroit: Yorkin Publications, 2002, 305-306.

<sup>19</sup> Kahraman Sakul, "Ahmed III (b. 1673-d. 1736) (r. 1703–1730)," *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*. Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters. New York: Facts on File, 2009, 25.

Understanding where both women come from within their own societies is very important in framing their letters. As I explain in Chapter 2, although Lady Duff Gordon wrote letters that were similar to Lady Montagu's, the context with which they are viewed is very different and helps to distinguish them from one another. The time in which Lady Duff Gordon wrote her letters was over one hundred years after Lady Montagu, and England changed significantly in that time period. Lucie Duff Gordon was born in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, and lived through much of the Victorian age in London.<sup>20</sup> She was also being raised by parents with academic backgrounds, focused on the seeking of knowledge and open discussion, as I discuss in detail in chapter two.<sup>21</sup> They fostered this ideal in Lucie from a young age, and she showed a propensity for language and translation throughout her family's travels. After marrying Sir Alexander Duff Gordon, she contracted tuberculosis and her condition forced her to move to a drier climate and she moved to Egypt, allowing her to study the culture through her many travels throughout the country.<sup>22</sup> Although she was forced to go to Egypt because of unfortunate health circumstances, she was able to provide an insight into the complexities of Islam and gender interaction in the country.

While Lucie displayed her personal experiences of Egypt through her letters, it is important to understand the Egypt that she was experiencing at that time. Egypt was under the rule of Khedive Ismail Pasha, who was one of the grandsons of Muhammad Ali. During this time, Ismail showed a great interest in modernizing Egypt according to European standards and many of the projects within Egypt reflected this ideal. Ismail focused on modernizing infrastructure, mainly through the completion of the Suez Canal and the construction of small railways.<sup>23</sup>

Despite going bankrupt shortly after Lady Duff Gordon passed away, Egypt was changing during

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<sup>20</sup>Christine Stolba, "Duff-Gordon, Lucie (1821–1869)," *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*. Ed. Anne Commire. Vol. 4. Detroit: Yorkin Publications, 2002. 809-814.

<sup>21</sup> Frank, *A Passage to Egypt: The Life of Lucie Duff Gordon*, 34.

<sup>22</sup> Stolba, "Duff Gordon, Lucie," 812-813.

<sup>23</sup>Robert L. Tignor, "Pasha, Isma'il 1830–1895," *History of World Trade Since 1450*. Ed. John J. McCusker. Vol. 2. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006, 559.

her travels. The impact of the industrialization and modernization of the country is important to note when looking at her experiences and commentary on her journey. Although not as affluent as Lady Montagu, Lady Duff Gordon was of the upper middle class, and associated with people of similar social status in Egypt. Although she did not associate with this part of society exclusively, it did impact her experiences and helps to place them in an even more specific context. Also like Lady Montagu, Lady Duff Gordon's observations should not be discredited for this reason, but rather examined with the context that she knew.

Despite the different context with which both sets of letters need to be placed, there are many similarities. The purpose of this project is to examine the writings of both Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon in order to examine these similarities and what they can tell us about Islam, gender, and the interaction of British women in Muslim cultures. The level with which both women accepted aspects of Islam, and of gender roles within their respective societies, speak volumes about their beliefs about ideas that are socially constructed. Both women showed a propensity to defend Islam against its detractors. Many times within their letters, they attempt to make Islam more relatable and dispel both rumors and negative stereotypes that surround it for their audiences. Both women show an interest in reading and understanding the Qur'an and its teachings, while also recognizing that European interpretations of it often depict it as an evil and violent book. Both women attempt to dismantle many of the European misperceptions of Islam throughout their travels, and in turn show their character as women open to change and difference.

Another important theme to be examined in these letters is the matter of gender, which I explore further in both Chapters 4 and 5. During the lives of Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon, women were undervalued and ignored in much of society. Coupled with these, there were many misperceptions about the status of women around the world, especially in the Middle East. Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon help to expose some of these myths about women,

while also commenting on the myths about men and how they interact with women. Gender within Istanbul and Egypt was not what many European observers made it out to be, as many women were treated very well by men, and in some cases, had freedoms that many women in Europe did not possess. Because of their gender, Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon had access to women that many males would not have in studying culture in the Middle East, allowing them to truly understand what it meant to be a woman in those societies.

Finally, the themes of gender and religion often intersected within the letters of Mary and Lucie. Within the context of Islam, many believed gender relations to be skewed towards male dominance and cruelty that was religiously dictated through the Qur'an or other Islamic laws. However, as I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, this is contrary to many of the experiences that Lucie and Mary have throughout their journeys. They both speak of the respect with which men treat women, and how often they had their perceptions changed in witnessing normal human interaction. In many cases, both mentioned women being religious, but also being able to command respect from others around them. Within the letters, Mary and Lucie reveal that the interaction between gender and Islam is not as evil as many perceived it to be, and they attempted to prove this to the audience by making Islam and the people they encounter seem more relatable. Regardless of whom they were writing to, the level of honesty they wrote with on this subject showed a great respect for the societies in which they were living.

With all of this in mind, the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Lady Lucie Duff Gordon paint a picture of the Middle East for the audience to experience, but they also say much about them as individuals. Despite what European society dictated at the time, both women showed a propensity towards understanding and tolerance of the gender and religious relations within their areas of the Middle East. They showed a basic understanding of the complex interaction that Islam played in gender relations, and on a basic level understood that European society created a false picture of what Middle Eastern society was like. Within the context of

ethnography, it can be argued that these women were early contributors to the field, especially with relation to gender and Islam. Both women, to some extent, lived within the communities as part time members, although at times they were restricted by their own social status. Regardless of their access and restrictions, their observations still prove invaluable as a case study in gender relations within Islam during the times they lived. This project will further explore this assertion and attempt to dissect the letters of these two women within the scope of ethnography, and the interaction of Islam and gender that was not known to many of the time.



## Chapter 1

### The Life and Experiences of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu

Thus, you see, dear sister, that the manners of mankind do not differ so widely as our voyage writers would make us believe. Perhaps it would be more entertaining to add a few surprising customs of my own invention; but nothing seems to me so agreeable as the truth, and I believe nothing so acceptable to you.<sup>24</sup>

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to the Countess of Mar, from Adrianople, 1717

Despite this being at the end of one of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters from Istanbul, the honesty she speaks of would prove to be the defining characteristic for her correspondence as a whole. The 18<sup>th</sup> century marked another time in the early modern era that saw many changes in the world. New ways of thinking were emerging, as many people began to travel more frequently, gaining knowledge of different parts of the world that were previously unknown. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was one of many who spread this knowledge of new worlds to a broader audience in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. She lived during this changing time and can be seen as an individual who provided a perspective that while not appreciated during her own time, has significant implications for the study of history and the writing of her time. During her short stay in Turkey from 1717-1718, in what are now known as the Embassy Letters, Lady Montagu described many different aspects of Turkish society. Her commentary on religion and women's issues were compatible with the spirit of Enlightenment that was sweeping Europe. Although most of her experiences were within the upper class society of the Ottoman Empire, her letters

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<sup>24</sup> Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Letters And Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* Edited by Lord Wharncliffe, London: Swan Sonnenschein & co., 1893, 300.

give us a rare view into Turkish society at this time. With this, she also reflected and refuted many of the common social mores and values of Great Britain.

Lady Montagu's path to notoriety, and on some levels, infamy, started with a storied upbringing that no doubt influenced her actions and experiences later in life. Born Mary Pierrepont in London in 1689, she had little interaction with her parents from an early age, her mother having passed away while her father was particularly distant for the majority of her childhood.<sup>25</sup> For much of her upbringing, she relied on educating herself, as the schooling provided to her was inadequate and very basic, she recalled that her governess was "ignorant and superstitious" and she realized her own ambition would be more useful to her than her formal education.<sup>26</sup> She refused to rely on the education provided to her, and she taught herself many languages over the years, including Latin, so much so that she was able to read many of the classics of her own volition. She thereby showed early signs of the independence that she would develop later in life and her desire to accomplish things regardless of the limits placed on her. Mary also voiced her concern over the lack of women's education and the treatment of educated women, going so far to say that, "There is hardly a character in the world more despicable or more liable to universal ridicule than that of a learned woman."<sup>27</sup> Mary showed an awareness of her situation in life, and although there were limits to what she could do, she showed independence that she knew was uncommon when it came to her own education.

She further showed this independence in her intentions to marry Edward Montagu, despite her father's efforts to marry her to another man. She began her correspondence with Montagu risking a damaged reputation, as women did not commonly write to men during this

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<sup>25</sup>"Montagu, Mary Wortley: Introduction," *Feminism in Literature: A Gale Critical Companion*. Ed. Jessica Bomarito and Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 1: Antiquity-18th Century, Topics & Authors. Detroit: Gale, 2005, 393-394.

<sup>26</sup> Anna Secor, "Orientalism, gender and class in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish embassy letters: to persons of distinction, men of letters &c," *Ecumene: A Journal Of Environment - Culture - Meaning* 6, (1999), 377.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

time.<sup>28</sup> Writing candidly to men about love and mutual support can be said to represent a, “vanguard of changing gender relations” for the time.<sup>29</sup> In fact, her elopement later created a divided opinion among her peers and social class, with many disapproving of her desire to disobey her father’s wishes.<sup>30</sup> Despite the risks, Mary ended up eloping with Edward in 1712, further solidifying her role as a rebellious woman of the time.<sup>31</sup> This life event proved to have broader implications for Lady Montagu’s future, and foreshadowed the rejection of some stereotypical gender roles that dominated her social circles during this time.

With her fortuitous marriage to Lord Montagu, Mary began the path of becoming a prominent travel writer in her own time and for years to come. Lord Montagu was a politician and was prominent within the Whig Party after the Party regained control of Parliament. He was later appointed the ambassador to Turkey in 1716 after gaining this new political power. Mary then moved to Istanbul, where she began her famous correspondence until returning to England in 1718.<sup>32</sup> To a certain extent, however, her marriage to Montagu was not particularly happy, and Mary showed much of her discontent early on as she grew tired of his detachment during the early stages of their marriage. In one example, she exclaims, “You write seldom and with so much indifference as shows you hardly think of me at all.... If your inclination is gone I had rather never receive a letter from you than one which in lieu of comfort for your absence gives me pain even beyond it.”<sup>33</sup> It became obvious that the marriage had lost its early romance, only enhanced by their extended periods of separation. With their physical separation, as Lord

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<sup>28</sup> Kathleen Garay, "Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley (1689–1762)," *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*. Ed. Anne Commire. Vol. 11. Detroit: Yorkin Publications, 2002. 305-312.

<sup>29</sup> Secor, “Orientalism, gender, and class”, 378.

<sup>30</sup> Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* Oxford University Press New York 1999, 57.

<sup>31</sup> "Montagu, Mary Wortley: Introduction," *Feminism in Literature: A Gale Critical Companion*. Ed. Jessica Bomarito and Jeffrey W. Hunter.

<sup>32</sup> Garay, “Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley,” 306.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

Montagu was in London while Mary was in the country-side, the couple had issues maintaining their relationship, with Lord Montagu often accusing Mary of having affairs with other men.<sup>34</sup>

This letter, sent to her husband while he was working in London, shows the strain on their relationship. The unhappiness of their marriage, coupled with her independent childhood, could only have contributed to her independent nature as a whole. Through much of her life until this point, she was forced to live with a sense of self-sufficiency, with the lack of attention received from her father and her husband. Her experiences early in life contribute to the tone of her writing, as she rarely feels the need to mask anything she is feeling and rarely represses her thoughts. There is a level of fearlessness that is important to note when looking at her writing as a whole, and also helps to establish the honesty and authenticity when looking at the letters for historic and cultural value.

The influence of her aristocratic lifestyle is extremely important in examining the life of Mary Montagu and the perspective it provides to her experiences and correspondence. Her father was the Duke of Kingston and a significant member in the gentry of that time.<sup>35</sup> England at the time was also conducive to the aristocratic lifestyle, with much of the upper classes land was secure due to the Enclosure Acts.<sup>36</sup> The aristocracy was a prominent group that had extraordinary power within England at that time, and Mary seemed to enjoy this atmosphere from a very young age. Her personality was fit for upper class social circles of that time, as she was educated and was personable. It also seems that she was manipulated into being sociable from a young age, with many suggesting that her father used her penchant for the public eye and her attention seeking behavior as a way of enticing his guests and friends into his elite circle.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu," *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. 2nd ed. Vol. 18. Detroit: Gale, 2004. 291-293.

<sup>36</sup> Secor, "Orientalism, gender, and class," 377.

<sup>37</sup> Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 12-13.

In these upper level circles she interacted with many intellectuals of the time. These interactions on an intellectual level only increased with her marriage to Lord Montagu.<sup>38</sup> One of her closest friends within these circles was Alexander Pope and she was accustomed to dealing with situations in high society in everyday life.<sup>39</sup> This would establish a pattern and lifestyle for her throughout her life, and it is important in considering the type of people that she would come into contact with in England and abroad in Turkey. On her way to Istanbul, for example, she stopped in Vienna in 1716 to meet with the Empress Amelia of the Hapsburg Family, and described the event in detail to the Countess of Mar, saying,

I had there the pleasure of seeing a diversion wholly new to me, but which is the common amusement of this court. The empress herself was seated on a little throne at the end of a fine alley in the garden, and on each side of her were ranged two parties of her ladies of honour with other young ladies of quality, headed by the two young archduchesses, all dressed in their hair full of jewels, with fine light guns in their hands.<sup>40</sup>

This description of a very lavish encounter with royalty is just one example of what Lady Montagu was exposed to throughout her adult life and is indicative of the kind of lifestyle that she led, even away from her home in England.

Her perspectives on Turkish society need to be understood with this in mind, as she was exposed to the Turkish aristocratic class more often than any other. With her elevated social standing, it would be only natural for her to meet with and interact with those of a similar class, especially with her husband actively working with other dignitaries in Istanbul. Taking this into consideration, Montagu's perspective may give an incomplete view of what Turkish society was like as a whole. The amount of exposure to lower classes of Turkish society may be unclear and may have been purposely filtered as a way of making these letters more appealing to her

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>39</sup>"Lady Mary Wortley Montagu," *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 291-293.

<sup>40</sup>Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 242.

audience. The people that she wrote for were most likely from the upper class also, and perspectives on the lower classes of society may not have interested them. Montagu herself may have restricted her experiences in the letters, or she may not have come in contact with the middle and lower classes of Turkish society. Regardless, it is important to take these circumstances into account when analyzing her correspondence.

Although her exposure to other classes may have been limited, Lady Montagu was not known for censoring her letters during her early correspondence and was often very candid when it came to her communication, especially for a woman of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Her letters were considered so bold in fact, that her family attempted to have them destroyed, and her daughter later burned one of her journals because of worries about her personal social standing.<sup>41</sup> Lady Montagu showed flamboyancy in her writing that was uncommon for many people of that time, especially women. She was candid about relationships and the ideas of courtship and love that she believed to be true of the time. While talking about gossip to a friend, she comments on the women in Vienna and how, “that perplexing word reputation has quite another meaning here than what you give it at London; and getting a lover is so far from losing, that ‘tis properly getting reputation; ladies being much more respected in regard to the rank of their lovers, than that of their husbands.”<sup>42</sup> She seems to take delight in the freedoms that women possessed in Vienna, and is not shy about saying so. It is almost as if she wishes she could participate in the culture, which is not surprising considering the issues with her relationship with her husband. Through this correspondence and other commentary just like it, it is easy to see the issues that would arise with Mary’s writing, considering the social stigmas surrounding women and their limited role within society. There was a lack of women within the world of substantial letter writing at the time, and

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<sup>41</sup>"Lady Mary Wortley Montagu," *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. 291-293.

<sup>42</sup> Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 244.

women faced intense scrutiny, especially in the upper classes.<sup>43</sup> Lady Montagu often times displays ideas contrary to what many believed during this time, making her a target for ridicule in her social circles. She often goes against the normal ideas of the time in her writing, and her ideas can be seen, “as Enlightenment strategy to provide a comparative perspective to the two cultures.”<sup>44</sup> This perspective, then, put Mary into a position of intense scrutiny among the upper class of England.

Although the tone of the letters was unusual for the time, this tone may have been indicative of a changing world both for British women and also Western culture, extending into the Ottoman Empire. At the time in which Mary lived, Istanbul was experiencing changes heading into the early modern world. The Ottoman Empire, although not as powerful as a few centuries earlier, was still a significant player in Europe. The time in which Mary experienced Turkey was a time in which relative peace was close to being accomplished after several years of war within Europe. The Ottoman Empire dealt with multiple conflicts with the Russians and the Austrians during Mary’s stay, resulting in wins and losses for the empire, although it eventually lost Belgrade to the Hapsburg Empire.<sup>45</sup> The Ottoman Empire still had limited power within Europe despite this. At this time, Ahmed III ruled the Empire, and he was responsible for a time of peace known as the Age of Tulips.<sup>46</sup>

Although Mary left shortly before the time the Age of Tulips was said to have begun, there is no doubt that she was seeing some of the effects of the prosperity that this period brought to Istanbul and the Ottoman Empire. The Tulip Era was named for a new enchantment with rare

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<sup>43</sup>Secor, “Orientalism, gender, and class,” 378-379.

<sup>44</sup> Arthur J. Weitzman, “Voyeurism and Aesthetics in the Turkish Bath: Lady Mary's School of Female Beauty,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 39, no. 4 (2002), 353.

<sup>45</sup>Kahraman Sakul, “Ahmed III (b. 1673-d. 1736) (r. 1703–1730),” *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*. Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters. New York: Facts on File, 2009. 24-26

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

tulip gardens as a way of showing wealth and status within the Empire and throughout Europe.<sup>47</sup> This was also a time of general prosperity, when Ahmed was attempting to create new buildings and infrastructure for the public. He created new schools, gardens, and palaces to display the grandeur of his empire, while also attempting to revive elements of classical Islamic civilization.<sup>48</sup> These improvements were made in a desire to impress those in the Western world as a way of further solidifying Ottoman power. The modernization of Istanbul was a method used to further solidify Ottoman influence within Europe.

It is within these developments in Istanbul that Lady Montagu was experiencing the culture of Turkish society. She showed an intense interest in the place that she would call home for two years and marveled at the different mosques that she saw and was interested in learning the different languages. She writes most favorably of the Hagia Sophia and the mosque of Suleiman, and marvels at their beauty and intricacy.<sup>49</sup> While also acknowledging that she has no knowledge of architecture, she has a healthy appreciation for the buildings that create the history of “Constantinople”. She even acknowledges the superiority of certain aspects of the city, claiming, “That of the Valide is the largest of all, built entirely of marble, the most prodigious and, I think, the most beautiful structure I ever saw... Between friends, St. Paul’s church would make a pitiful figure near it.”<sup>50</sup> In addition to her comparison to a prominent Christian architectural feat, she is impressed by the sheer beauty of the architecture that she is seeing and experiencing.

Within these experiences, she also comments on several instances in which she deals with the religion of Islam. Despite the contentious nature of religion during Montagu’s lifetime, she showed a willingness to understand the religion of Islam while in Istanbul. More often than not,

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<sup>47</sup> Ernest Tucker, "Empire, Ottoman," *History of World Trade Since 1450*. Ed. John J. McCusker. Vol. 1. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. 240-244.

<sup>48</sup> Şakul, "Ahmed III (b. 1673-d. 1736) (r. 1703–1730)," 24-26.

<sup>49</sup> Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 353-356.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.



she took to defending Islam, despite many of the misconceptions that surrounded the religion in Europe during this time. At one point in her correspondence she laments at not being able to read the Qur'an, as she believes it has been misconstrued by many people outside of the Islamic world. She remarks further that, "I have since heard impartial Christians speak of it in the same manner; And I don't doubt that but all our translations are from copies got from the Greek priests, who would not fail to falsify it with the extremity of malice."<sup>51</sup> Through this statement she shows that she was aware of the vicious stereotypes that are used in Europe to depict those who believe in Islam, and does not shy away from proclaiming the opposite, despite that fact that she was writing to an Abbott from London. Corresponding with a religious leader only enhanced her conviction with which she defends Islam, rather than restrain her convictions, which would have been the natural reaction for some.

Not only does she complain about the way European society and religion handle the interpretation of Islam, she also shows a desire to understand it, as she does recognize that it is something completely different than anything she has ever encountered. As she grows in her experience, however, she realizes that, "Mahometism is divided into as many sects as Christianity; and the first institution as much neglected and obscured by interpretations."<sup>52</sup> She is acutely aware of the conflict that different interpretations of religion create amongst people in different societies, stating that Christianity is no different than Islam in this case. She also attempts to create a connection between Islam and a more commonly known religion, Christianity, so that her audience may have a better understanding of what Islam actually is.

It is also interesting to note her flexibility when it comes to different religious traditions and her willingness to question popular beliefs and practices. This toleration of religion had its roots early on in her marriage to Lord Montagu, as she often corresponded with two bishops

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 289.

named Tenison and Burnet, both of whom were socially progressive for the time and were proponents of the Church of England becoming more open to other Protestant denominations.<sup>53</sup> No doubt this had significant influence on her willingness to accept other religions. Later in her adult years, Europe was experiencing the Enlightenment, and new ideas and theories of freethinking were being established. For example, Deism, or the idea of a “natural religion” was becoming more prominent in the public consciousness.<sup>54</sup> Throughout her travels, Lady Montagu was clearly aware of these new concepts and applies them to her travels in order to explain this part of the world to her audience. Lady Montagu even mentions that “the most prevailing opinion, if you search into the effendis, is plain deism,” when referring to the differences in Islamic beliefs.<sup>55</sup> She uses it in a way such that she knows it is common enough to use the term without having to explain it. She also uses it as a way to explain Islam and to dispel the negative connotations that surround it, while also showing her knowledge of religious thought at the time. The mention of these ideas also indicates that she is open to them and this is also shown in her relative acceptance of Islam as well. She does not approach Islam with prejudice, but rather with a desire to understand it and a willingness to explain it to others in an unbiased way.

With the acceptance of Islam also came a sense of humanity that was not very common for many people of this time. Lady Montagu felt the need to help Turkish society in many ways along with trying to dispel the myths surrounding it. In 1715 prior to arriving in Turkey, Lady Montagu contracted smallpox and it left her severely disfigured, forever scarring her features that were considered beautiful at the time.<sup>56</sup> This history of disease, which affected other members of her family, had a deep impact on her and would come back to prominence in her life once she reached Turkey. During her stay there, she encountered a method of smallpox inoculation that

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<sup>53</sup> Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 87-88.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, “An Early Ethnographer of Middle Eastern Women: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762),” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (Oct., 1981), 330-331.

<sup>55</sup> Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 289.

<sup>56</sup> Garay, “Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley (1689–1762),” 308.

was extremely effective in combating the disease. She was so impressed with this method that she later had her son inoculated and was a key proponent of this method. She would later go on to write about it as a way of promoting it throughout the rest of Europe.<sup>57</sup> Although it was not a common practice for those of Europe and she faced scrutiny for promoting it, Montagu used this as an opportunity to further display the medical advances of places other than Europe. She showed a belief in the effectiveness of this new method of smallpox prevention, showing faith in another culture that the majority of Western Europeans would have seen as an act of stupidity.

Along with her surprising level of acceptance of Islam, she also has a certain level of respect for Turkish women, and often attempts to dispel the European notions that surround them. Initially, she talks about the general politeness of Turkish women, stating that

I know no European court where the ladies would have behaved themselves in so polite a manner to a stranger. I believe in the whole there were two hundred women, and yet none of those disdainful smiles, or satiric whispers, that never fail in our assemblies when any body appears that is not dressed exactly in the fashion.<sup>58</sup>

She is clearly taken by surprise by their politeness, and from this it is easy to deduce that women within the European aristocracy were not as kind. From this observation, it is obvious that the women in upper class European society do not readily accept those that do not conform to the societal norms. She is quick to praise the women of the Turkish court in this instance, rather than degrade them in the way that many did during that time. She even challenges the derogatory view of the harem prevalent among Europeans. Often times, the harem was depicted as a place where there was, “sexual violence of the Turk against his Christian victim.”<sup>59</sup> Lady Montagu directly combats this idea, stating that the Sultan goes to a woman’s apartment if he chooses and “Neither

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<sup>57</sup> "Montagu, Mary Wortley: Introduction," *Feminism in Literature: A Gale Critical Companion*. Ed. Jessica Bomarito and Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 1: Antiquity-18th Century, Topics & Authors. Detroit: Gale, 2005, 393-394.

<sup>58</sup> Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 285.

<sup>59</sup> Fariba Zarinebaf, “Crime and Punishment in Istanbul : 1700-1800,” Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 15.

is there any such thing as her creeping in at the bed's feet."<sup>60</sup> She feels the need to comment directly, confident that the European views of the harem were ill-informed. She takes a common description of a Turkish man preying on women in his harem and tries to recast this idea in order to create a new idea of what Middle East is like.

Probably the most interesting aspect of Lady Montagu's views of Turkish women is her unique opinion on how the veil is used. Within this time frame, it is mainly used to shield women from sight in public places. However, Montagu sees the veil as a liberating force within Turkish society, and something that helps women to lead fulfilling lives. In a rather lengthy description of Turkish women's dress, she begins by saying that "Tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have." She continues further, later making the point that,

You may guess how effectually this disguises them [so] that there is no distinguishing the great lady from her slave. '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.<sup>61</sup>

This is interesting as she notes that it is impossible to distinguish social class among women if they are veiled, and the freedom that comes with this lack of class distinction in public. Rather than seeing the veil as a mode of suffocation for the woman, Montagu sees it as something that encourages self-expression, rather than hinders it.

Despite her belief that Turkish women were proper and had vehicles for liberation with the veil, they were still treated poorly within Turkish society. She alludes to it in the comments on the veil previously stated, but also comments on it overtly when writing about the issue of slavery. She actually finds slavery within Turkey to be relatively humane, stating that, "they are

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<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, "An Early Ethnographer of Middle Eastern Women: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)," 333.

<sup>61</sup> Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 298-299.

never ill-used, and their slavery is, in my opinion, no worse than servitude all over the world.”<sup>62</sup> It is important to understand that the slave trade was still a common occurrence throughout the world at this time, and the British slave trade was a vital part of the economy and its colonization of the Americas.<sup>63</sup> Her tone when writing about it however, seems to be one of resigned consent. She accepts it as a normal part of life, rather than objecting to the institution as a whole. This statement shows how she cannot completely avoid the common thought and practices of those similar to her in Europe, and how this type of thinking indeed had an influence on her views of the world.

However, as she continues to discuss the topic, she states that the buying and selling of women is atrocious, saying that, ” Men buy women with an eye to evil. In my opinion, they are bought and sold as publicly and more infamously in all our Christian great cities.”<sup>64</sup> This is a shift from her previous idea of accepting slavery, in that she thinks the treatment of women in this institution is inhumane. Although she does not issue a call to action or elaborate much past this statement, she still is questioning the institution itself, which is more than many in European society could say at the time. As slavery was such a fundamental market to European economic development in colonizing the new places, and did not end until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the questioning of slavery was limited during this time. Lady Montagu’s questioning of the institution in any sense, although not quite overt, was not common during this period of history. Although her tone is one of resigned acceptance, her questioning of the matter, especially as it pertains to women, shows an awareness of humanity in Lady Montagu’s character that was often times missing in this period.

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 357.

<sup>63</sup>David J. Clarke, "Empire, British: 1450–1783," *History of World Trade Since 1450*. Ed. John J. McCaskey. Vol. 1. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006, 222-224.

<sup>64</sup>Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 357.

Much of Lady Montagu's work aimed to make Turkey and Turkish society more relatable to her audience. She did this by comparing experiences that she has while in Istanbul to similar experiences that her audience may have back in England. As stated previously, Lady Montagu often compares Islam to Christianity to make the religion more relatable and less strange to the audience. This is one way of making the people of Turkish society seem more human as "she likens their appearance or behavior to a figure, an institution, or an object with which the audience is familiar."<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Warnock Fernea in a noteworthy essay argues that Lady Montagu is one of the first female ethnographers because of this technique she used. Although not formally trained as such, Lady Montagu was still able to reconcile ideas of the East with common practices in the West, in order to dispel common myths that existed about the East during this time. She did this by making comparisons to common things within British society, in order to show that the humanity within the culture she is living by making it more relatable. In a 2002 article, Arthur Weitzman maintains that Montagu's use of the word "barbarous" in one particular instance shows her desire to use a commonly used word to describe Turkish people, but attempts to use as a way to show its misuse. More specifically, she uses it to show how it is misused to describe Turkish people in British society. In the specific instance, Lady Montagu references Fatima, the wife of the grand Vizier, describing her eloquence and grace, but also pointing out the fact that she was "educated in a country we call barbarous." She is making the claim that the word "barbarous" is used based on old stereotypes, and does not accurately represent Turkish society from her perspective.<sup>66</sup> She uses Fatima's intelligence to highlight the stereotypical ways of describing Istanbul, and how these stereotypes can be wrong.

The critical reception for Lady Montagu's work is suggestive since she is often depicted as someone who defied the writing style of many typical women of that time. The commentary on

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<sup>65</sup>Fernea, "An Early Ethnographer of Middle Eastern Women," 330.

<sup>66</sup> Arthur J. Weitzman, "Voyeurism and Aesthetics," 352.

her work continued after her death, with 19<sup>th</sup> Century critics claiming that her work was, “masculine due to the confidence, intelligence, and honesty apparent in her writing.”<sup>67</sup> She later faced criticism from Alexander Pope after she spurned his romantic advances, and he would write often about the content of her character. He accused her of adultery as well as having venereal disease in an effort to create scandal around her and her writings.<sup>68</sup> Her reputation was never quite the same in the social circles that she was involved in after Pope’s harsh criticism of her character. Even more recent scholarly analysis characterizes Montagu as naïve despite her good intentions, and some consider her work little more than superficial travel writings and descriptions that ignore some of the gruesome experiences of Turkish women.<sup>69</sup> There can be a case made for her writings not moving past the basic level of descriptions, as well as the limits placed on her because of her social status. Despite this, her work is still seen as one influential in early feminist thought and provide substantial insight into the East.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s work is important to understanding the time and place in which she is writing and is essential to understanding the relationship between Europe and the East as a whole. Despite her shortcomings and the influence of British aristocratic society, Lady Montagu was able to paint a more accurate picture of the East for her audience. Her commentary on women, Islam, and the culture of Turkish society were a way of showing those close to her what the East was really like, and allowed for many to see the East in a more humane way than was normal for that time. By comparing many of her experiences, especially those that had to do with Islam, to things that were common in Europe, Mary attempted to bridge the gap between cultures and give her audience a more relatable sense of Turkey. Although there were times when the influence of common British society ideals, such as the acceptance of slavery, came through in her writing, they were the outliers in an otherwise very open and accepting set of letters. This

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<sup>67</sup> "Montagu, Mary Wortley: Introduction," *Feminism in Literature: A Gale Critical Companion*.

<sup>68</sup> Garay, "Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley (1689–1762)," 309.

<sup>69</sup> Weitzman, "Voyuerism and Aesthetics," 347.

accepting nature of her letters allows them to be used as a source of looking into the past with some level of accuracy, and creates an idea of the East that is somewhat different than the stereotypes portrayed of that time.



## Chapter 2

### The Life and Experiences of Lucie Duff Gordon

19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe was defined by change and ushered in many of the facets of modern day society. Technology and industry were changing, as well as societal norms and expectations. These two combined interests led to many different changes on a social scale. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, a British woman by the name of Lucie Duff Gordon, or Lady Duff Gordon, would come to further push the boundaries of what was socially acceptable, both through her actions and her commentary on societal issues. Her letters sent from Egypt provide a unique insight into Egyptian society of that time, one that is often misunderstood. While her home society in Great Britain had a very different view of the world, Lady Duff Gordon attempted to recreate Egyptian society for her many readers and companions, showing a perspective of a society that was often overlooked as little more than a target of colonial expansion. She touched on issues ranging from religion and women's roles in society in a fairly candid manner. Through her personal thoughts, the reader gets a picture of North Africa and the East that is not typically thought of during this time, especially with regards to social views of gender and religion. While she is not devoid of colonialist ideas, she does display a sense of openness that was fairly uncommon for this time.

The scope of Lady Duff Gordon's letters is supplemented and clearly complicated by what was actually going on in Egypt during this time period. During the time in which she lived, Egypt seemed to be expanding economically and culturally. This was the attempt made by Pasha Ismail to join the European world order and solidify a place for the Ottoman Empire on the world stage. Her everyday writings during her travels create an overly favorable picture of a period in Egyptian history, which was distinctive, but not necessarily indicative of the progress Egypt was making as a nation. The advancements made by Ismail to modernize Egypt gave the illusion of progress, but in reality, Egypt was developing problems that would stall its rise in the future.

Lady Duff Gordon's presence in this period makes for an interesting case study, but also serves as a reminder that an individual's writing, especially in travel letters, can represent a narrow perspective of what is actually happening within the society being documented.

Before reading the content of the letters, it is important to note some of the other characteristics that make them unique. Her daughter, Janet Ross, originally compiled the letters shortly after her death as part of a compilation of other women authors of the time. While it is not necessarily clear, it is important to take into account that editing may have been done. The tone of the letters seems fairly consistent, but this must also be scrutinized when looking at the letters as a whole. Lucie's voice clearly shows through the letters over an extended period of time. That all the writers in the compilation were women marked the obvious intention to target this particular publication for a female audience. Editing for such may have been relatively straightforward as Ross likely surmised that her mother wrote with that same audience in mind. Indeed there are indications that Lucie wrote these letters with every intention of having them collected and compiled by her family after her death.<sup>70</sup> This makes the candor of the letters all the more surprising, as she does not seem to attempt to adjust her writing style knowing that this letters will someday have a public audience.

However, later editions may have been detrimental to the intent of the letters, especially the 1902 print edition. The introduction, written by George Meredith, seems to completely miss the point of Lady Duff Gordon's travels, and frames the letters in a way that misrepresents the ideas she meant to portray through her writings.

The service she did them was a greater service done to her country, by giving these quivering creatures of the baked land proof that a Christian Englishwoman could be companionable, tender,

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<sup>70</sup> Allan Ramsay, "The Egyptian letters of Lucie Duff Gordon," *Contemporary Review* 292.1697 (2010): 224.

beneficently motherly with them, despite the reputed insurmountable barriers of alien race and religion.<sup>71</sup>

This is just one example of the tone of the introduction that is at odds with what Lucie Duff Gordon tried to accomplish with these letters. He refers to the people of Egypt as “quivering creatures” and the country itself as “the baked land” and claims that religion and race were barriers that were incapable of being overcome. This type of language and tone was used as a way of belittling the people written about in Lucie’s writing, when further examination of her letters shows that was not her intent. Although there are examples of colonial bias in her writings, it did not come to dominate her work. Lucie Gordon rarely pitied those she was surrounded by in Egypt, and did not indicate that she thought herself to be above them. The tone of the introduction is clearly meant to direct the audience into a stereotypical colonialist mindset, as the English motivations of expansion were still very much dominant in the public sphere.<sup>72</sup>

Despite the colonialist mindset that dominated many of the Western powers at this time, Lucie’s upbringing was not indicative of the support of societal norms at the time. Growing up in London, England, she had significant exposure to academia, with both her parents being heavily involved with prominent intellectuals of the time. Born Lucie Austin, her parents Sarah and John Austin were both academics dedicated to improving society at the time. John was a prominent legal scholar and published works on jurisprudence that were quite influential. John Stuart Mill was a young follower of John Austin and said to have shaped many of his views on law and politics.<sup>73</sup> From a young age, Lucie was exposed to some of the more influential minds in Europe at the time. In addition to her exposure to academia, she was also accustomed to traveling, as her parents’ academic pursuits sent the family all over Europe. Often times, this was when her family

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<sup>71</sup>Lady Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt* London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1902, xii.

<sup>72</sup> Charisse Gendron, "Lucie Duff Gordon's "Letters from Egypt," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, Volume 17 Number 2 (1 April 1986), 49-50.

<sup>73</sup>Christine Stolba, "Duff-Gordon, Lucie (1821–1869)," *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia*. Ed. Anne Commire. Vol. 4. Detroit: Yorkin Publications, 2002, 809-814.

was the happiest, and as her biographer Katherine Frank claims, “travel, for Lucie, would always be associated with well-being and wholeness.”<sup>74</sup> This exposure to alternative ideas as well as her early experience in traveling and living among other cultures is important in the understanding of Lucie’s later attitudes and beliefs when writing about her experiences in the Middle East.

The company the Austins kept influenced Lucie’s education. Although John Austin was a well-learned man, much can be said for the influence that Lucie’s mother, Sarah, may have had on her. Sarah was an avid reader and writer, and was known to be a productive translator and was able to pick up many languages. She also held correspondence with people such as Alexander de Tocqueville, among other prominent minds of that time.<sup>75</sup> The influence of her mother only increased as her father struggled in his own career, and Sarah was forced to become the primary wage earner in the family.<sup>76</sup> This focus on language and translation no doubt played a major role in Lucie’s development at a young age and set the stage for her educational and private pursuits later in life.

The academic lifestyle set by her parents came to dictate that upper middle class society that she would come to inhabit for the rest of her life. After several year of moving around with her family, she settled down with her husband, Sir Alexander Duff Gordon in 1840, and lived in London. While there she lived a lifestyle that was very out of the ordinary for women of that time. In addition to having contact with writers such as Charles Dickens, she worked to translate several different books from multiple languages, such as German and French, having learned these languages from her earlier family travels. Her mother’s penchant for learning languages and translation clearly interested Lucie and led to some minor success in these areas. Many of these

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<sup>74</sup> Kathleen Frank, *A Passage to Egypt: The Life of Lucie Duff Gordon* Houghton Mifflin New York 1994, 38.

<sup>75</sup> Stolba, "Duff-Gordon, Lucie (1821–1869)," 810.

<sup>76</sup> Frank, *A Passage to Egypt*, 44.

translations would be printed in multiple editions and were well received in that time.<sup>77</sup> She quickly created a reputation as an academic and someone who was admired by many within her social circle. As a woman within the Victorian age, Lucie,

was a classic Victorian grand woman, one who powerfully impressed those around her by seeming to rise, almost supernaturally, above what was then the frankly limited intellectual condition of women. The powers Duff Gordon wielded were beauty, a sympathetic nature, and possession of what was admirably known as “masculine” reason.<sup>78</sup>

The reputation that Lucie created for herself was impressive to many that she met, gaining important credibility for herself and her work. The lifestyle she created at a young age would persist throughout the rest of her life, even as fate intervened in a way that she could have not have expected.

The year 1851 was a turning point for Lady Duff Gordon that would set her on the path to what she is most known for today. This was the year that she was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and her health dictated her travels in the following years up until her death. Her diagnosis pushed her to seek a warmer, drier climate in order to alleviate her coughing fits, leading her to travel to Africa and eventually settle in Egypt. The absence of her family and friends was apparent throughout her trip, as financial difficulties prevented them from joining her on her journey.<sup>79</sup> Although this was an unfortunate way for her to live her final years, it led her to keep normal correspondence with the people she had left behind. It is in this correspondence that Lady Duff Gordon provides a unique insight into a society that was often misunderstood from outside observers, as well as her own personality and beliefs that were atypical of the time.

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<sup>77</sup> “Gordon, Lucie Duff , Lady Duff Gordon (1821–1869),” Lila Marz Harper in Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, online ed., ed. Lawrence Goldman, Oxford: OUP.

<sup>78</sup> Gendron, “Letters from Egypt,” 51.

<sup>79</sup> Helen Wheatley, “From Traveler to Notable: Lady Duff Gordon in Upper Egypt, 1862-1869,” *Journal of World History*. no. 1 (1992), 88.

While Lady Duff Gordon immersed herself within a new society and reporting back to her loved ones, it is important to understand the attitudes toward non-western countries that many within the Western world had during this time. As displayed earlier in George Meredith's introduction to the letters, Gordon did not come from a time and place that was tolerant towards those that were different. Those adherent to ideals outside of what the West deemed to be reflective of proper society were considered members of lesser societies. 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe was rooted in a system of patriarchy and colonialism that sought to see other nations become subservient to those that could rise to the top. Typical Victorian thought was rooted in theories that justified "legitimizing its domination of other societies," and were, "shortly corroborated by 'evidence' gathered in those societies by missionaries and others, whose observations came to form the emergent study of anthropology."<sup>80</sup> Studies of foreign cultures were used to support the ideas that foreign societies were less sophisticated than European societies.

At the same time that colonialist ideas were in full force, the early feminist movement was beginning, and its ideas were becoming more common within some circles in Europe. Unfortunately, these new ideas of women's empowerment within the feminist movement were often taken advantage of and were secondary to other issues of the time. Ideas that were emerging as a way to create a new society for women became a way of justifying the domination of other countries by others, and it has been said that,

the Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriated the language of feminism in the service of its assault on the religions and cultures of other? men, and particular on Islam, in order to give an aura of moral justification to that assault at the very same time as it combated feminism within its own society...<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* New Haven: Yale University, 1992, 151.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 152.

Rather than focusing on addressing the issues discussed within feminist discourse in British society at the time, these feminist ideas were only being used to further the colonialist cause.

Even as feminist dialogue was growing within Britain, it was not taken seriously with respect to those women living within Britain at the time. However, this dialogue was ironically used to justify the supposed backwardness of “other” men, because other men subjugated women to lesser roles in their “other” societies. There was a double standard with regards to women in Britain and the colonized world that was a key factor in justifying the continued use of colonization. Understanding what type of patriarchal society Lady Duff Gordon was a product of is important in showing the content of her character and how, if at all, these patriarchal attitudes affected her own opinions and ideas.

Creating a context for these letters is a key factor into understanding the type of society that was in place at the time of Lady Duff Gordon’s travel throughout Egypt. The Khedive in Egypt at this time was Ismail Pasha, who was the grandson of Muhammad Ali. Ismail showed a passion for modernizing Egypt to meet the new standards of the time, industrializing the economy and society to meet the new demands of the changing economy and industry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>82</sup>. Ismail was a key contributor in revitalizing Egypt and its route towards progress started by Muhammad Ali. The demand for Egyptian cotton went up as a result of the American Civil War, and Ismail used this as an opportunity to create wealth and prosperity for Egypt. While improving infrastructure, he also finished the digging of the Suez Canal, one of the largest and most publicized construction projects of that time, as well as creating a series of lesser canals and railways. The improvements made by Ismail in Egypt were a way of sending a message to the

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<sup>82</sup>Robert L. Tignor, "Pasha, Isma'il 1830–1895," *History of World Trade Since 1450*. Ed. John J. McCusker. Vol. 2. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006, 559.

Western world that Egypt was ready to join the world as a modern power, and shed its identity as a lesser nation.

Although Ismail intended to bring Egypt into what was then the modern age, his actions only further delayed the development of Egypt as an independent country in the long run. As Ismail continued with the expansion of Egypt, he also continued to borrow money from the British government. He was betting on the future prosperity of Egypt as a country to repay the debt and hoping that in the long term it would allow Egypt to grow economically and socially. However, Ismail's actions brought out acute negative consequences for the economy of Egypt and the country as a whole. By 1876, Egypt was bankrupt and was over one billion dollars in debt, and was forced to sell its shares in the Suez Canal. This did little to ease the financial situation, and forced European powers to intervene and resulted in a growing nationalist movement that was beginning to grow in force.<sup>83</sup>

The combination of the nationalist movement and the growing debt problem was enough for the British and the French to seize control of many of Egypt's government agencies, led to Ismail being deposed in 1879, with the British taking over completely three years later.<sup>84</sup> The involvement of Western powers in Egypt was ongoing during this time, as the region was coveted as a further expansion of European power.<sup>85</sup> The European mindset was dominated by expansionism in order to further solidify power with a growing world. Although the intentions may have been for the greater good and improvement of Egypt's future, the reforms made by Ismail, led to the complete takeover of Egypt by major European powers in the long run, and created the colonized state that Ismail was desperately trying to avoid.

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<sup>83</sup> Tignor, "Pasha, Isma'il 1830–1895," 559.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Robert F. Hunter, "Egypt under the successors of Muhammad 'Ali," *The Cambridge History of Egypt*. 1st ed. Vol. 2. Cambridge: 1998, 180.



Prior to the rule of Pasha Ismail, Egypt underwent significant change at the hands of major European powers, and these changes were accelerated as Ismail led Egypt further into debt.<sup>86</sup> In an attempt to compete with French influence in Algeria and Tunisia, Britain worked to maintain control of Egyptian trade in many different ways. It was extremely important geopolitically, as it lay in between Britain and its major colonial holding, India. Having a permanent hold in the region would allow for more security politically and financially as Britain pursued its desire to remain a global power. It was of major political and economic interest to the British, with the ability to provide new resources and business opportunities for economic expansion. The link between Egypt and Britain was much stronger than some were made to believe, and Britain did what it could to influence the economic and social structure of Egypt for its own purposes. Even as the Khedives gained independence from Ottoman Empire, they required the political support of Britain to do so.<sup>87</sup> Despite the attempt to make the government of Egypt look like it was a separate entity, it never left the shadow of Great Britain's help, and this led to the major political changes in later years.

The Egypt that Lady Duff Gordon was experiencing was very different as a result of these ongoing political, social, and economical factors. The short time that she was there proved to be very different in every sense, compared to any other time before or after. It is important to take these factors into account when looking at the letters of Lady Duff Gordon. Egypt under Pasha Ismail seemed uncharacteristically affluent, as was mentioned before. The new developments within construction and infrastructure were ways to deceive people inside and outside of the country that Egypt really had made it to the forefront of the modern world at that time. Many of the things that Lady Duff Gordon experienced may not have truly been indicative of the true culture and society in Egypt at that time. The observations made by Lady Duff Gordon

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.,187-188.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 184.

need to be highly scrutinized because of this distorted vision of what Egypt was like, as well as a distorted view of popular opinion in Britain, making it difficult to truly understand her writings.

There is also something to be said for the efforts of Ismail to create a version of European society in Egypt. All of the changes made in the economic sector can also be seen as strides to become more European, economically and socially. Ismail was educated in Europe and spoke French, while having a general affinity for the European culture at the time.<sup>88</sup> The increased exposure to European ideas and values as a result of trade and travel was unavoidable, and the economic and developmental boom of the time is an indicator of what lengths Ismail was willing to go to stay as a primary player within the European world. The encouragement of Europeans visiting Egypt, as well hiring them within the government for various positions, further increased the European presence in Egypt. With this increased presence there was also a spread of their ideals.<sup>89</sup> While assuming Ismail wanted to become more European in nature may be a product of the colonialist mindset, the actual influence that Europe had on Egypt during this time is unmistakable and it can be said that the lack of control of this influence is what led to the downfall of the independent Egyptian state.

While it is important to understand that her letters are coming from an odd period of time in Egyptian history, it is also important to note that this allows for a different view of Egypt that many others would see. There are countless examples of her exploring the potential in the people that she interacted with, and there is a certain sense of hope in her writing when remarking upon Egyptian society. There are many aspects of Lady Duff Gordon's letters that are intriguing and provide a valuable insight into what Egypt was like in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

In this respect, she tends to describe Egypt and her experiences in two different ways. On one hand, she explains that the people she comes across are very dignified and pleasant to interact

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

with. When describing her interaction with one person in particular she notes that, “the most striking thing is the sweetness and delicacy of feeling, the horror of hurting anyone...”<sup>90</sup> She remarks that judging an entire population based on one person is not accurate, but even this simple statement shows that she does not fully follow the colonialist thinking of the time by refusing to believe that those outside of Europe were inherently barbaric. There are many instances in which she is quick to praise the people that she meets, and speaks highly of the native Egyptians. Lady Duff Gordon establishes herself as a social person from the beginning of her correspondence and it is very obvious that she enjoys interacting with people, regardless of social, cultural, or religious distinction.

Although she is often quick to praise, she is also quick to point out the negative conditions under which many of the people lived during this time period. At the outset of her journey in Cairo, she is quick to note the conditions the city was in, and her view was not favorable. “The reverse of the brilliant side of the medal is sad enough: deserted palaces, and crowded hovels scarce good enough for pigstyes... and the children are shocking from bad food, dirt, and overwork...”<sup>91</sup> Though Gordon commented frequently on the squalor the people lived in, she, significantly, tended to not use a patronizing tone when talking about these living conditions.

However, occasional glimpses into Gordon’s letters reveal elements of colonialist thinking. In one letter to her husband, she laments that he is not there with her and says, “you would like the people, poor things! they are complete children, but amiable children.”<sup>92</sup> By comparing them to “children”, she displays her view of herself as a parent, or someone who is more experienced and cultured than the “children” being parented. In this sense, “children” is meant to belittle the people of Egypt and show the level of immaturity the society has when

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<sup>90</sup>Janet Ann Duff-Gordon Ross, 1842, *Three Generations of English Women: Memoirs And Correspondence of Mrs. John Taylor, Mrs. Sarah Austin, And Lady Duff Gordon* London: J. Murray, 1888, 252.

<sup>91</sup> Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt* London: R. Brimley Johnson, 20-21.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

compared to European society. Although she displays an open-mindedness that is uncommon for that time, she still is clearly influenced by the prejudices of the time.

Lady Duff Gordon's colonialist perspective is also evident in her manner of differentiating between races in Egypt. She makes it a point to distinguish "Arabs" from "Blacks", as if one was superior to the other in an obvious way. She makes this distinction in a letter to her mother noting that, "When I call my crew black, don't think of negroes. They are elegantly shaped Arabs and all gentlemen in manners..."<sup>93</sup> She feels the need to make this distinction to her mother, which, it is important to note, shows a certain level of racism in her writing. In a way, she is trying to provide peace of mind to her mother that she is safe on her travels, implying that "Arabs" are safer than "negroes" in this case. Items like this that are present in her letters show that she was not completely separated from the society she came from, one that was still struggling with slavery and racial divide in many parts of the world. There is a level of indoctrination left from British society, one that believes that "other" societies are inherently beneath the West. Lucie still saw the world through the lens of a white middle class woman from Victorian England, and that was a view that believed in the racial superiority of some over others.

Remarkably, Lady Duff Gordon is overwhelmingly positive towards the religion of Islam throughout her travels. Throughout her letters, she inserts common religious phrases, such as *inshallah*, meaning *God willing*, and it is very common phrase in used in the Muslim world. These phrases are not used in a disparaging way, but rather she adds them to her own personal discourse, showing her willingness to adopt local customs and courtesies, while also exposing her audience to these customs. Later in her travels she also compares Christianity and Islam in a way that is somewhat surprising, stating that, "Leviticus and Deuteronomy are very heathenish compared to the law of the Koran, or to the early days of Abraham."<sup>94</sup> Not only does she question

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>94</sup> Duff-Gordon Ross, *Three Generations of English Women*, 252.

the law specifically stated in the Bible, but actually infers that Quranic law may be more reasonable.

Her ability to look at Islam in an unbiased way is striking and highly distinctive, and she shows a willingness to adopt different Muslim customs into her everyday lifestyle. This may also be a product of being brought up as a Unitarian, which may have influenced her willingness to accept different religious practices and beliefs. There is evidence to suggest that Lucie was a supporter of religious toleration from as early as age fourteen, and believed in the acceptance of all faiths, regardless of her own personal beliefs.<sup>95</sup> Long before she was exposed to Islam, she supported religious toleration, even though this thought may have initially been intended for religions to which she was already exposed. Lady Duff Gordon shows a willingness to accept other belief systems, and her growth into the acceptance of Islam is indicative of her nature as an open person, and solidifies her role as someone who was atypical of the time in which she lived.

Lady Duff Gordon also comments more specifically on the different practices within Islam, and comments on the level of piety that many Muslims used when practicing Islam. Muslim piety to her was, “so unlike what Europeans think it: it is so full of tender emotions, so much more sentimental than we imagine, and it is wonderfully strong.”<sup>96</sup> She remarks further about Omar, her travel companion, and how he prayed for healing for her illness. She was mesmerized by the level of compassion that he was capable of showing for her, and that in turn made her look at Islam in a favorable light. Lucie recognized that she had to separate European society from Egyptian society in order to recognize and disprove the negative stereotypes created in Europe about the Middle East.<sup>97</sup> Her first hand experiences with practicing Muslims did much to humanize them in Gordon’s eyes, and dispelled for her many of the myths that were perpetuated about Islam during this time.

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<sup>95</sup> Frank, *A Passage to Egypt*, 80.

<sup>96</sup> Duff-Gordon, *Three Generations of English Women*, 246.

<sup>97</sup> Gendron, "Letters from Egypt," 57-58.

It is also important to look into the changes that were taking place culturally within Islam during this time. Egypt was a place of multiple religions and cultures, and people coexisted for a time prior to the British take-over later in the century. This is the sort of society that Lady Duff Gordon was exposed to during her travels, especially when interacting with the elites of Egypt during this time. Most elites were either Muslim or Copt and blended Egyptian and Turkish values, including that of education and Arabic as a main language rather than Turkish.<sup>98</sup> Culturally, Lady Duff Gordon was not interacting with a homogenous society, but rather, was interacting with a blend of different cultures and religions of that time. Even though she dealt with elite classes of the time, she also interacted with the common folk, and had many similar encounters with them as well.

Within this changing society, Islam was also undergoing significant changes during Lady Duff Gordon's time, and these changes continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, long after Gordon had passed. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a time of modernization and this allowed people access to information that was not available prior to this time. Islam benefitted from these changes. The first printing press was developed in Egypt in the 1820s and played a significant role in the development of Islam in the years that followed, as it allowed the Qur'an and other religious writings to be accessible to more people.<sup>99</sup> One such development was the rise to prominence of Muhammad Abduh. Not only did he write a commentary on the Qur'an that was made accessible to the public through the printing press, he also was a proponent of attempting to reconcile the modern age with the devotion that many believed to be required in Islam at the time.<sup>100</sup>

Although Abduh was not as prominent during Lady Duff Gordon's life time as he would be leading up to the British takeover, his beliefs and prominence are still of some significance.

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<sup>98</sup>Ehud R Toledano, "Social and economic change in the long nineteenth century," *The Cambridge History of Egypt*. 1st ed. Vol. 2. Cambridge: 1998, 266.

<sup>99</sup>Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* 4th Edition. New York: Routledge, 2012, 239.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

Even though Abduh may not have directly influenced Gordon, she still lived in a time when ideas about Islam were changing, due in part to his influence. There was a level of desire within those in everyday society that wished to continue on the path of modernization and shed some of the traditional views that were incompatible with how society was developing at that time. New ideas about the practice of Islam were developing and major changes were beginning to take place. These early changes to Islam would come to dictate the discourse between traditionalism and modernity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and is a persisting issue with its roots in history.

While she provides many of her own personal insights to the correspondence, Lady Duff Gordon also provides distinct insight into what the Egyptian people thought of Europe at the time. It seemed as if the people she encountered were very aware of what was thought of them from around the world. Her one companion, referred to as Sheyk Yoosef, laughs at an outlandish depiction of a biblical scene in *Hilton* magazine. Lady Duff Gordon articulated his thoughts stating, "I cordially agree with Yoosuf's art criticism. *Fancy* pictures of Eastern things are hopelessly absurd, and fancy poems, too."<sup>101</sup> Although Lady Duff Gordon applies her own commentary to the situation, it is very obvious that Yoosuf believes that Western depictions of the east are oftentimes completely off base. As stated previously, there were many negative stereotypes about the east that were continually represented in European culture. While it is not shocking that these depictions are inaccurate, it is of note that the people of Egypt were aware of these inaccurate depictions of the East.

In addition to the self-awareness many people in the East possessed, Lady Duff Gordon ran into people in her travels that also had opinions on what was happening in the West. They were aware of what was going on culturally and socially around the world, despite belief to the contrary. This is best described in an observation made by Lucie on the upper classes of Egypt that she encountered.

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<sup>101</sup>Duff-Gordon Ross, *Three Generations of English Women*, 254.

The English would be a little surprised at Arab judgments of them. They admit our veracity and honesty, and like us on the whole, but they blame the men for their conduct to women. They are shocked at the way Englishmen talk about hareem among themselves, and think the English hard and unkind to their wives and to women in general.<sup>102</sup>

The treatment of women in the East during this time was often the point of intense discussion among Europeans. The discourse was often focused on the plight of the women in the East as a result of the East's supposed inherent backwardness. In this passage however, Lady Duff Gordon juxtaposes the conditions of women in Europe as described by Arab men with her own views of the condition of women in Egypt. "I now begin to understand the condition of the women, and the Muslim sentiments and maxims regarding them. There is a good deal of chivalry in some respects, and in the respectable lower and middle classes, the result is not so bad."<sup>103</sup> These two sentiments expressed by Lady Duff Gordon not only show that stereotypes of the East were parochial and value-laden, but they also show insight into the perceived subservient role of women. Non-Western societies were not peculiarly exploitative in the treatment of women in society at this time.

While there are many examples of Lady Duff Gordon's unusual opinions of the Egyptian people, these opinions were not necessarily indicative of Egyptian society for much longer after her death. At the time in which Duff Gordon lived in Egypt the country was undergoing transformative changes particularly as the rural society underwent industrialization. Quite literally, she was writing letters that "give us a microcosm of Egyptian rural life on the point of extinction."<sup>104</sup> The historical background in which these letters were set is important in

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>103</sup> Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, 1821-1869, *Letters From Egypt, 1863-65 / by Lady Duff Gordon*, 3d ed. London: Macmillan, 1866, 91.

<sup>104</sup> Allan Ramsay, "The Egyptian letters of Lucie Duff Gordon," *Contemporary Review* 292.1697 (2010): 224.



understanding what exactly she was experiencing and how her experiences tell the story of that time.

Understanding these writings is key in gathering insight into what was going on in Egypt in that time period, as well as major social attitudes that had developed in Great Britain. Lady Duff Gordon provides societal and political insight through her everyday writings, and allows for a greater societal understanding that has less of a European, colonialist, bias than some other works from this same time. The letters of Lady Duff Gordon serve as an invaluable case study into the lives of those living in North Africa during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It also provides insight into the impact that British society had on Lady Duff Gordon. The prevailing British thinking of the time seemed to have a modest and measured impact on her characteristic individuality. It is a small window of history that allows for the further examination of different societal perspectives of the time coming from two different perspectives. Her work serves as a European woman's perspective on traveling through Egypt, but also serves as a look into what those living in Egypt thought of Europeans at the time. This is a perspective that is often ignored and it is refreshing to see it through her eyes. The topics she discusses are broad in variety and are meant to be informative as well as to provide personal experience to her loved ones back in England. Throughout these discussions however, she rarely fits the stereotypical mold of an upper middle class citizen of that time, and the close mindedness that is often associated with it. Lady Duff Gordon serves as the exception to the mold and in turn provides a unique and more appropriate view of a different culture during this time.

## Chapter 3

### An Ethnographic Perspective

The importance of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Lady Lucie Duff Gordon is not to be understated when it comes to understanding the different cultures of the world in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon's role in chronicling cultures so different from their own makes them significant figures in travel writing and cultural learning. To a certain extent, their writings were not necessarily from the position of travelers, but rather as women who became immersed in the culture of the places in which they lived. With this in mind, these two women can be described as early ethnographers who opened the door to different cultures because of their in-depth relationship with some of the local populations of the places they visited. Viewing their writing in terms of ethnography and in comparison to the genre of formal letter writing will allow for a closer examination of their abilities to look into the cultures of Egypt and Istanbul. Using the context of these women within an ethnographic context will help place them within the history of women in ethnography.

More importantly, an ethnographic context highlights the importance of these letters over other types of letters written at the time, such as official government correspondence and other superficial travel writings. Letters used for the purpose of official foreign correspondence, for example, generally do not show the genuine emotion and feeling behind the experiences in a different culture. This is key to understanding the impact that these women had in accurately relaying another culture to the people of Western Europe. Rather than simply writing about their travels as many did during this time, they gave a detailed understanding of the cultures within which they lived, by making comparisons to things that were familiar to the audience. Their genuine impressions were used to create a more accurate and ethnographic picture of the Middle East.

Firstly, defining what ethnography is exactly is important in placing the letters of Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon within the field using a modern context. One useful definition of the field of ethnography is: “a method of studying cultures in which researchers immerse themselves in ways of life to perceive them as they are lived and then recount and interpret their fieldwork to help their readers understand what it is like to be a part of the cultures studied.”<sup>105</sup> The key difference between travel writing and ethnography, therefore, is working and living within the communities being studied to personally experience and take part in the culture and to allow for a more accurate and realistic description. The idea is to participate as fully as possible within the culture and lifestyle that is the focus of study, rather than make claims and assertions based on third party observation. With this immersion, the results are seemingly more accurate, as the source is more readily available and understood from an inside perspective. Although this seems pretty straightforward, there are some limits to what ethnography is and what it can accomplish. The field of ethnography struggles to balance the role of science and empirical evidence versus simple observation and personal insight. These issues create conflict in the field, but they also create diversity and different approaches to the study of ethnography, allowing for different perspectives on how to interpret different cultures.

The examination of these letters as examples of ethnographic insight can be seen through the lens of some modern day ethnographies from similar places in the Middle East. In a 1986 book written by Lila Abu Lughod titled *Veiled Sentiments*, a book I briefly mentioned in the Introduction, the author recounts her experiences living within a Bedouin community in the Western Desert of Egypt. Within her introduction to this account, she explains that her intention was to use this experience as part of a deliberate research project, where she would live and become a part of a Bedouin community for almost two years. Through this experience, she was

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<sup>105</sup>Keith Cunningham, "Ethnography," *Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Beliefs, Customs, Tales, Music, and Art*. Ed. Charlie T. McCormick and Kim Kennedy White. 2nd ed. Vol. 2. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011, 439-441.

not just researching, but rather was living and working to become an active member within the community. However, her journey to becoming a valued member of the community was not as simple as it would seem. There were some limits to her experience that are pertinent to the similar, though not formally ethnographic, experiences of Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon.

Abu Lughod's experience in Egypt reveals the significant amount of effort involved in her becoming a part of the Bedouin society. She was not necessarily invited into the community at first because of the traditional lifestyle that they led and her status as an unmarried woman. Her father understood the issue with this, as he was an Arab of Jordanian descent, and understood that a woman travelling alone would be seen as odd, and would have a difficult time being accepted by the community.<sup>106</sup> With some help from her father and his heritage as an Arab and a Muslim, however, she found a community within which to live. As he went with her to the village, she noticed that the "introduction to the community profoundly affected my position and the nature of the work I could do."<sup>107</sup> Lughod further stresses that she was identified as a Muslim and an Arab because of her father and that "most assumed that I shared with them a fundamental identity as a Muslim, and my father's speech was no doubt so sprinkled with religious phrases that they believed in his piety, which in turn rubbed off on me."<sup>108</sup> In this situation, she relied on shared traits with the community to be accepted, rather than becoming a part of the community in her own way. Her status as a single woman was an issue that needed her father's credibility to overcome.

Despite some of her limitations, mainly as a single female, Lughod discusses how she was able to eventually overcome these limitations to make her experience meaningful. Eventually, she came to be seen as a member of the community, not a special guest that is treated

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<sup>106</sup>Lila Abu Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, 11.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

differently as a sign of respect. She participated fully in the community's work and activities as if she were a daughter of the community, allowing her the insight that may be missed by an outside presence.<sup>109</sup> There are significant advantages, then, to being truly considered part of the community in this instance, despite obstacles that need to be overcome. For example, Abu Lughod acquired an authentic grassroots insight into the world of women, which in this case was very restricted due to the traditional interactions between men and women in this Bedouin society.<sup>110</sup> This kind of access is limited to outsiders, and although Abu Lughod initially ran into problems, she overcame them to effectively study this distinct culture. Abu Lughod's place within the society ultimately made her effective in the field of ethnography.

Although Lila Abu Lughod based much of her research on recording the oral poetry created by the Bedouins, as well as her own personal experiences within this society, these are not the only techniques available to ethnographers in creating cultural profiles of different societies. Another way is by using empirical data as the main foundation to substantiate different aspects of the culture being studied. There is more of an emphasis on the use of the scientific method when creating ethnographies based on different cultures in some instances.<sup>111</sup> This is one of the many ways in which ethnography can be seen as a dynamic field, and there is a lot of diversity in analyses. There is intense debate, however, on the emphasis of personal experience versus physical data, in creating portraits of different societies. The scientific and literary forms the field of ethnography takes create different ways in which the field can be used and interpreted. In her 1997 book *The Pure and Powerful*, Nadia Abu-Zahra emphasizes the science behind her study of the shrine of al-Sayidda Zaynab in Egypt, one of the granddaughters of the Prophet

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>111</sup> Cunningham, "Ethnography," 439-440.

Muhammad.<sup>112</sup> The emphasis Abu Zahra places on statistical data, however, is much different than that of Abu Lughod, and something worth exploring when trying to understand modern techniques in ethnography.

From the outset of her study, Nadia Abu-Zahra makes it very clear that her analysis is based on statistical data collected throughout her time studying the activities around the shrine of al-Sayidda Zaynab. When explaining her process of research and analysis, she explains that the, “lack of fieldwork data leads also to unsubstantiated generalizations which conceal and gloss over complex and intricate social relationships.”<sup>113</sup> The fieldwork in this instance is the main body of research that needs to be used within ethnography, and this fieldwork consists of statistics collected from the culture being studied. Zahra makes it very clear that she believes statistical analysis to be the proper basis for ethnographic conclusions and these statistics help to refute the stereotypes and generalizations that have defined the culture of this area.<sup>114</sup> She refutes assertions that Abu Lughod made in another article, indicating that Abu Lughod’s claims about the differences between the men’s and women’s religious practices in Islam are flawed because of their general and ambiguous nature.<sup>115</sup> In a sense, she is criticizing Abu Lughod for the literary and personal nature of her analysis, and her lack of quantifiable data to support her claims. Though these approaches are markedly different, both constitute legitimate modes of ethnographic research, thus showing the diversity of the field. The field of ethnography is dynamic and this is important to remember when attempting to place the letters of Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon within the field.

Specifically referencing the works of Lady Montagu, there has been considerable debate as to whether or not her letters provided an early ethnographic treatment of the Middle East, or

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<sup>112</sup> Nadia Abu Zahra, *The Pure and Powerful: Studies in Contemporary Muslim Society* Reading: Ithaca Press, 1997, xiv.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., xiv.

whether such letters offered merely superficial descriptions riddled with Western bias. Looking at the facts of her stay in Istanbul, as mentioned in Chapter 1, it is clear that she did not live amongst the common people. Her status as an upper class woman predisposed to living amongst other Europeans also staying in Istanbul at the time. Unlike Abu Lughod, she was not working and living among the people that she was describing, rather, Montagu generally played the role of the outside observer.

It is not disputed the Montagu had limitations in her ability to truly live among the people. Many of them, in fact, were not her doing, but rather were created by outside factors. As Secor notes in her 1999 article, Mary possessed a moderate feminist stance, but was restricted by the public image that was required of women within her social circle, and states that her view showed, “a woman’s ability to reason at the same time as reinforcing the ‘natural’ domination of men in society.”<sup>116</sup> Her social status restricted the ways in which she could express herself in many respects, making it very difficult for her to even attempt and live among the people of Istanbul if she was inclined to do so.

Despite her limitations, Lady Montagu made attempts to draw out accurate and unbiased depictions of the Middle East, free of the stereotypical descriptions and assumptions that she had become familiar with in Europe. She was sensitive to the limitations of European-centered descriptions of the East and she, “felt ambivalent about travel books of her era. On the one hand, she complained that the travelers to the Orient whose accounts she read very carefully in preparation for her journey in 1716 were often inaccurate especially about the life led by Turkish women.”<sup>117</sup> She was aware that previous European travel writers had created a skewed version of the East that was not compatible with reality. She was mindful to try to avoid demonizing the

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<sup>116</sup>Anna Secor and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, "Orientalism, gender and class in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish embassy letters: to persons of distinction, men of letters &c," *Ecumene: A Journal Of Environment - Culture - Meaning* 6, (1999), 381.

<sup>117</sup> Arthur J. Weitzman, "Voyeurism and Aesthetics in the Turkish Bath: Lady Mary's School of Female Beauty," *Comparative Literature Studies* 39, no. 4 (2002), 349.

Turkish people, as many of that time were inclined to do.<sup>118</sup> Her self awareness combined with the ability to reach her own conclusions of a foreign society are essential in defining her as a primitive ethnographer, and these traits will be reinforced with further examination of her letters later in this paper.

Compared with Lady Montagu, Lady Duff Gordon apparently did not live under, or submit to, the social restrictions of Lady Montagu. Her living conditions were much different than Montagu's, as she was of limited means while living in Egypt, although she still associated with the same social circles. Her relationship with Omar, her travel guide and companion, was also extremely important, as this provided exposure to the everyday life of an Egyptian citizen. Much like the case of Abu Lughod through the influence of her father, Omar's previous good standing allowed for Lady Duff Gordon to experience things as one of the people, and was given access to areas she may not have had without him. Over time Lucie developed a, "growing identification with what she was coming to feel was the true Egypt, and an indication, too, of her growing alienation from the Europeans..."<sup>119</sup> Lucie seemed to truly adopt the culture of Egypt over time, despite some of her initial predispositions to common European thought as mentioned in Chapter 2.

After examining the field of ethnography in a modern context, another important component to the letters of Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon is the fact they were meant as personal letters, rather than official correspondence. Both women wrote frequently to their family members and very close friends while traveling abroad. However, this type of writing is very different than official correspondence of the time. While official correspondence can be useful in creating an idea of the culture of different places, the lack of personal reflection can create an absence of true insight into other countries. One example comes from the British Ambassador to

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<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 357.

<sup>119</sup>Kathleen Frank, *A Passage to Egypt: The Life of Lucie Duff Gordon* Houghton Mifflin New York 1994, 250-251.



Iran, James Morier, who wrote about his experiences within Tehran in the years 1808 and 1809. Although the letters recount his personal experience, the letters do not go into great detail in expressing personal opinion.

In fact, there seems to be little attempt to understand the culture of Tehran at the time. During one portrayal of the death of Hussein for example, Morier took exception to the amount of grief displayed by some of the viewers, stating that, “In some I could perceive real tears stealing down their cheeks, but in most I suspect that the grief was as much a piece of acting, as the tragedy which excited it.”<sup>120</sup> Rather than try to understand the scene around him, he merely described it as if it were any other kind of mundane experience. This distinction is important when looking at this as an example of something that is not ethnography. There was not much attempt to explain who Hussein was, or why his death was significant in the context of Islam. Rather, it was meant for a simple description of Tehran and showed little connection to the culture. This is just one example of the way in which these letters were meant to be more formal and restrained than personal correspondence.

In addition to simple and restrained correspondence, Morier also used his letters as a vehicle to belittle the society in Tehran. Through such letters, Morier often made comparisons that were demeaning to Persian society, as a way of substantiating his superiority over the native people by his status as an ambassador and an English citizen. For example, upon arrival to Tehran, Morier comments that, “even in the most uncivilized of nations the host pays the first attentions to his guests.”<sup>121</sup> In addition to perpetuating the idea of the uncivilized nature of their hosts, he compared the palace to an English stable in one instance.<sup>122</sup> Morier’s comparison drew a negative, unflattering portrait of upper society life in Tehran. It is meant to create an

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<sup>120</sup>James Morier, *A Journey Through Persia, Armenia, and Asia Minor, to Constantinople, in the years 1808 and 1809* Philadelphia: M. Carey, and Wells and Lilly, 1816, 198.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 191.

understanding of Persia as a place that is inherently lesser than England. These types of depictions were essential to Morier's writing, as creating a picture of the Middle East as barbaric was key in the justification of expansion, and, "justified the economic domination and exploitation of foreign markets with scandalous stories that testified to the essentially uncivilized behavior of distant neighbors."<sup>123</sup> Rather than striving for a positive understanding of another culture, Morier supported the idea that the Western world was superior to the East, as that supported the views of the government he represented. As he was in a position of power as an ambassador, he also lacked the contact with the people of Tehran and did not do much to incorporate himself within society. Most of his experience was the formal experience of an ambassador, limiting what cultural meaning he was able to display through his letters.

Scholar Elizabeth Fernea claims that Lady Montagu is, "one of the earliest ethnographers of Middle Eastern Women" as she employs techniques to display the humanity of another culture, but this assertion can also apply to Lady Duff Gordon as well.<sup>124</sup> Understanding the basis of ethnography along with what formal letter writing of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain was like is extremely important in placing the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu within history. Fernea highlights the importance of the display of humanity and the empathy for other cultures evident in an effective ethnographic piece. The openness and candor with which Montagu wrote the letters is important because this informality allowed for a more realistic expression of personal insight drawing out of personal experience and interactions. Understanding what ethnography is, as well as understanding what formal letter writing was like from this time period, are essential to interpreting and dissecting Lady Montagu's writings and enhancing an appreciation for the value of the letters as a bridge to another culture.

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<sup>123</sup>Teresa Heffernan, "Feminism Against the East/West Divide: Lady Mary's Turkish Embassy Letters," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33.2 (2000), 203.

<sup>124</sup>Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, "An Early Ethnographer of Middle Eastern Women: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)" *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (Oct., 1981), 330.

There are numerous examples in which Lady Montagu's writings can be placed within the larger study of ethnography. As Fernea explains, she uses some of the same techniques that many ethnographers use when describing a cultural identity. When commenting on Lady Montagu's description of a Turkish bath, Fernea states that,

To make the scene and the people in the scene especially sympathetic and human to her English reader, Lady Mary here employs one of the basic techniques of a conscientious ethnographer trying to communicate the humanity of the peoples of another culture. She likens their appearance or behavior to a figure, an institution, or an object with which the audience is familiar.<sup>125</sup>

This kind of explanation by comparison is very common throughout Lady Montagu's letters, and is one of the main ways in which she relays her experience to the audience. By taking something that was very common for her social circles of the time and using it to relate to her audience, Montagu effectively humanized a "foreign," otherwise obscure, culture. As Abu Lughod highlights in her study, personal anecdotes that create relevant comparisons are integral to effective ethnography, thereby allowing the audience to identify with the culture being described.

In another example, she attempts to describe the women of the court in European terms so that her friend back in England can understand the grandeur of the women she comes into contact with everyday.

It must be owned, that every beauty is more common here than with us. 'Tis surprising to see a young woman that is not very handsome. They have naturally the most beautiful complexions 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.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>126</sup> Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Letters And Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* Edited by Lord Wharncliffe, London: Swan Sonnenschein & co., 1893, 298.

Lady Montagu compares the beauty of the Istanbul women to that of the court in England, commenting on the sheer amount of beautiful women around her, while also taking care not to insult her friend, the Countess of Mar, in any way by stating that the English court is the “fairest in Christendom”. Lady Montagu recognizes that the beauty of women is something that her audience can relate to in this instance, because it is something that is of great importance to them, and she uses it to create a picture of what life in the Turkish court was like.

Nevertheless, there are limits to Montagu’s writings and her effectiveness as a true ethnographer. One main limit to her effectiveness is her status as an upper class citizen. As previously stated in Chapter 1, she had plenty of interaction with the court in Istanbul, but had very little interaction with any other social classes within Turkey. In one instance, she even passed by a plague-ridden area without knowing what kind of tragedies were taking place there until after she was passed them, commenting, “I was so well deceived that I knew nothing of the matter.”<sup>127</sup> It is unclear the degree to which her ignorance of the wider range of social classes was intentional or simply circumstantial; but clearly her limited exposure to the city’s mass population marks a limit on her effectiveness as an ethnographer in the modern sense. An essential part of ethnography is living and working within the community and not necessarily standing out as someone separate. Many of Lady Montagu’s insights are purely from an observational standpoint and do not indicate any real kind of integration into the culture of Istanbul. The tone of her writing indicates that she was of the upper class and does not have the desire to integrate into any class beneath her. Although they are open-minded observations, they are still limited in what kind of description they can create for an outside party by their nature.

The writings of Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, although lesser known than the works of Lady Montagu, proved just as useful in tracking the history of women in ethnography. She uses many of the same techniques in her writing the Montagu uses to describe her surroundings. Gordon also

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 307.

made comparisons of local and regional cultural phenomena to European institutions in order to give her audience a better understanding what life in Egypt was like for its inhabitants. In one example, she explains the differences between a Christian and Muslim in prayer. “The Muslim looks serious, and often warlike, as he stands at prayer. The Christian just keeps his everyday face. When the Muslim gets into a state of devotional frenzy he does not think of making a face, and it is quite tremendous.”<sup>128</sup> It is a simple description, but she uses a common institution such as that of Christian prayer, to draw a comparison to what Muslim prayer can be like. Religion also may be a topic of interest for her target audience and she uses it to capture the attention of those she is writing for.

There is also evidence to suggest that Lady Duff Gordon was much more active within the other, lower classes of the community, and apparently much more so than Lady Montagu. Although this may have had to do with her virtual independence traveling without any male European companions, she did not hesitate to see parts of Egypt that others were reluctant to see. In one instance, she recounts her experience in the lower class areas of Cairo, writing, “The more I see of the back-slums of Cairo, the more in love I am with it. The oldest European towns are tame and regular in comparison, and the people are so pleasant. If you smile at anything that amuses you, you get the kindest, brightest smiles in return.”<sup>129</sup> She had a genuine affection for the people she met, and was aware of her surroundings in a way that shows her willingness to integrate with the local community on a basic level, more so than she would have back in the impoverished areas of England. Even though the level of integration can be considered minimal, especially when compared with the experiences of Abu Lughod, who was a legitimate contributor to the Bedouin society, by working and living as a daughter of the community, it is important to note that Lady Duff Gordon saw many different aspects of society rather than just the ones

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<sup>128</sup> Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt* London: R.Brimley Johnson, 1902, 66-67.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

pertinent to her own social status, and was willing to portray them in a positive light for her audience.

In addition to her general acceptance of the culture and varied classes in Egypt, Gordon's relationship with her companion Omar was to her advantage in having a better understanding of what Egyptian culture was like from an inside perspective. Their relationship was one of mutual respect and affection, to the point where Lady Duff Gordon thought of him as a member of her family. They taught each other their native languages, and Omar accompanied Lady Duff Gordon on most of her excursions throughout Egypt. One experience, in which Gordon is particularly ill and a European servant of a diplomat rudely attempted to meet with her despite her illness, led to a heated exchange between this servant and Omar. As she describes it, "Omar, when he found him in my house, went and ordered him out. I was ill in bed, and knew nothing till it was done, and when I asked Omar how he came to do it, he told me to be civil to him if I saw him as it was not for me to know what he was." She expressed her shock at Omar's actions towards such a "gentleman", but nonetheless exclaims "It is the fresh proof of the feeling of actual equality among men that lies at the bottom of such great inequality of position."<sup>130</sup>

This observation is important in that it shows some insight into a unique cultural exchange. Mainly, Lucie experienced a real exchange between men that had significant cultural undertones that she otherwise would not have seen had Omar not been her companion. In this case, she was incorporated into a part of Omar's community and his experience as a citizen of Egypt, rather than Omar being incorporated into the life of a European woman. Her last comment reflects on the inferiority impressed upon different cultures by many in Western society that is hard to understand unless experienced first hand, and one that many women would not have experienced at all at this time. These kinds of exchanges within the letters of Lucie Duff Gordon exemplify an early ethnography, in that she was functionally incorporated into Egyptian society.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 76.

Much like Lady Montagu, Lady Duff Gordon was limited too in the range of her experiences when traveling through Egypt that hindered the effectiveness of her letters as a fully compelling form of ethnography. Although traveling through Egypt on her own, she was still followed by an entourage that catered to her many needs. Omar often took care of her accommodations and modes of travel, and she hardly had to fend for herself. In the same incident with the servant man, Lady Duff Gordon seems surprised by the fact that Omar spoke out at all, because he always acted in a state of reverence when in the presence of Western Europeans, especially her.<sup>131</sup> Although she did have some experience within the lower levels of society, Lucie was not living among them as an equal. Her observations of the slums of Cairo were fairly observational. Although she had those experiences, such experiences were not extended enough to initiate full incorporation as a working contributor to society, as Lughod experienced within her research as mentioned earlier. For the time in which she was living, the experiences of Lucie Duff Gordon were extremely important, but also had their limits within the context of ethnography.

Although these letters have limits in terms of ethnography, especially in terms of data collection, the openness with which they wrote is important when looking at other formal letter writing of the time. The letters of James Morier were letters from the Ambassador back to London, and the tone seemed restrained and lacking any real personal insight when relaying the details of life in Tehran. Lady Montagu, however, was notorious for her lack of restraint when it came to her correspondence. For example, Lady Montagu was a staunch supporter of inoculation to prevent small pox, which she encountered on her journey throughout Istanbul.<sup>132</sup> In one of her letters for example, she proclaimed that,

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>132</sup> "Montagu, Mary Wortley: Introduction," *Feminism in Literature: A Gale Critical Companion*. Ed. Jessica Bomarito and Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 1: Antiquity-18th Century, Topics & Authors. Detroit: Gale, 2005, 393-394.

I am patriot enough to take pains to bring this useful invention into fashion in England; and I should not fail to write to some of our doctors very particularly about it, If I knew any one of them that I thought had virtue enough to destroy such a considerable branch of their revenue for the good of mankind.<sup>133</sup>

From this quote, she expressed her personal feelings about the procedure, while also expressing her desire to do something about it, despite the obstacles that she may face in doing so. Lady Montagu reveals her nature in this instance, by showing her stubbornness and insistence on getting something done, despite any restrictions she may have as a woman within high society.

Similar personality traits were expressed by Lady Duff Gordon in her correspondence, and she frequently challenged social norms within her writing. She was quick to express that many in Egypt act in a more civilized manner than those in Europe. On one such occasion, she comments on the atmosphere within the coffee shop and how its political and social environment was very tame, stating that, “Only one man speaks at a time, the rest listen, and never interrupt; twenty men don’t make the noise of three Europeans.”<sup>134</sup> She openly praised the civility of the Egyptians in this instance, while also slightly chastising the Europeans for being aggressive in their actions. In a similar instance, Lady Duff Gordon also comments on the fact that Egyptian property and labor practices are not safe from government control and oppression stating that it is, “done under the pretext of improving and civilizing” within the European mindset. However, she disagrees with this assessment and makes it clear that she would rather that, “the person and property safe.”<sup>135</sup> She shows no desire to soften her opinion in this case, although she knows it is contrary to what many Europeans believe at the time. This honesty is enabled by the fact that her letters are not meant to be formal, and help to portray a more accurate account of what Egypt was like as Lucie saw it.

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<sup>133</sup> Montagu, *The Letters and Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 309.

<sup>134</sup> Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*, 63-64.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



When looking at these two women and their letters, it is hard to discount the candor and openness with which they wrote about the cultures they were experiencing in the Middle East during their respective places in history. Both were unafraid in criticizing the culture of English society in their letters for example, and it is well known that Lady Montagu's family wished to have her letters censored because of the salacious details within them and her inability to hide her true feelings. The level of which they expressed themselves can be seen as fairly open, and are not formal in the respect that they are written to a formal ambassador or minister. It can be argued however, that Lady Duff Gordon was ultimately more successful in creating an accurate picture of Egypt during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century than Lady Montagu was in creating a picture of Istanbul in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Lucie benefitted from her relative autonomy and lack of a structured schedule. She was on her own, and did not have to cater her schedule to that of her husband or her family. This allowed her to develop a more intimate relationship with Omar and her other companions that allowed her to gain a more in depth insight to what Egypt was like at that time. Lady Montagu was limited in the fact that she was a member of high society, and was forced to be associated with all of the formal practices that go along with being an ambassador's wife. While her commentary is certainly valid, she was much more limited in her situation in that she was exposed to less of the majority of society than Lady Duff Gordon.

Despite the merits and issues that come with the study of each of these sets of letters, their value in creating an accurate description of Istanbul and Egypt is not to be understated. Each set of letters displayed a microcosm of what those particular societies were like at the time. More specifically, Lady Montagu and Lady Duff Gordon had unprecedented access to the culture of women within these societies, as well as the culture of Islam and its practice. The purpose of understanding their letter writing and ethnographic tendencies is to create a lens with which to view their commentary on these two subjects, and to show that these women contributed much

more to the understanding of Muslim women and Islam in general during the times within which they lived.

## Chapter 4

### The Ethnography of Mary Wortley Montagu

The characteristics of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters help to distinguish her writing as early ethnography. Along with Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, the letters help to show their perspectives on the interaction of Islam and gender, a topic that were rarely discussed from the Middle East. The perspectives provided on gender and Islam also helped in understanding the social and religious backgrounds within which these two women came from, and how these perspectives shape their view of the Middle East. The influence their backgrounds provided were very apparent in some of their experiences. While Lady Montagu was in Istanbul, she had many experiences that also reflected the attitudes of gender and religion within Turkish society.

Although she was not necessarily as immersed in the culture as Lucie Duff Gordon was because of her upper class status, she was still able to observe some of the cultural aspects of Turkish life to create a basic ethnographic perspective. In fact, her experiences within the upper class society of Istanbul contributed to the ethnography in the sense that Lady Mary was very much incorporated into the world of the upper class. The amount of cultural information and observations that she was able to obtain living within this society were important in creating an accurate picture of how gender and Islam interacted in Istanbul in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Because of her writings, Lady Montagu creates a picture of an Istanbul that was respectable to women, and women were not necessarily deprived of independence. She was also able to create a picture of Islam that was not the heathen religion that many believed it to be, but rather one that was just as civilized as the Christian religions practiced in Western Europe. Regardless of the class differences that Lady Montagu highlights, she makes these points through her correspondence.

Lady Montagu was a very open and honest woman by her nature, and her letters only further highlight this trait, especially when looking at her views of religion while traveling in

Istanbul. It is important to look at these views, as they are very telling of what she believes, but also how she provides an open-minded account of the Islam that she experienced through her travels. In one specific letter, in which she is writing to the Abbe Conti, she relates her experiences with Islam,

Mahometism is divided into as many sects as Christianity; and the first institution as much neglected and obscured by interpretations. I cannot here forbear reflecting on the natural inclination of mankind to make mysteries and novelties.- The Zeidi, Kudi, Jabari, etc., put me in mind of the Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist, etc., are equally zealous against one another. But the most prevailing opinion, if you search into the secret of the effendis, is plain deism. But this is kept from the people, who are amused with a thousand different notions, according to the different interests of their preachers. There are very few amongst them (Achmet- Beng denied there were any) so absurd, as to set up for wit by declaring they believe no God at all. Sir Paul Rycout is mistaken (as he commonly is) in calling the sect *muterin* (i.e. the secret with us) atheists, they being deists, and their impiety consists in making a jest of their prophet. Achmet- Beg did not own to me that he was of this opinion; but made no scruple of deviating from some part of Mahomet's law, by drinking wine with the same freedom we did. When I asked him how he came to allow himself that liberty? He made answer, all the creatures of God were good, and designed for the use of man; however, that the prohibition of wine was a very wise maxim, and meant for the common people, being the source of all disorders among them; but that the prophet never designed to confined those that knew how to use it in moderation. However, scandal ought to be avoided, and that he never drank it in public. This is the general way of thinking among them, and very few forbear drinking wine that are able to afford it.<sup>136</sup>

As mentioned previously, Lady Montagu attempts to make a comparison between Islam and Christianity in order to create a better understanding for her audience. What she also does in this instance, is give some insight into not only what she thinks personally about religion, but also

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<sup>136</sup> Wortley Montagu, *The Letters And Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* Edited by Lord Wharncliffe, London: Swan Sonnenschein & co., 1893, 289-290.

the stigmas surrounding religion in British society. She offers an acknowledgement of many different kinds of religion, whereas many in her position would not. She also hints at a lack of respect for Deism as a belief system within her own society, but also as a way of showing a lack of respect for Islam as a religion as well. Historically, Deism was the most popular in England, however many considered it blasphemous and was met with criticism and controversy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>137</sup> In attempting to explain Islam to those that are unfamiliar with it she made comparisons to things familiar, especially the persecution that many Deists met at this time. The way she attempts to explain Islam says a lot about the society in which she was born, as she aims to make it more familiar by making comparisons that also serve to battle common misconceptions.

Also in battling with stereotypes and inaccuracies, Lady Montagu explained to her upper class audience how Islam is interpreted in many different ways and how this may or may not detract from the basics of the religion. For example, she writes about the drinking of wine, which according to European understandings of Islamic law is prohibited. However, she explained, that as Christianity can be interpreted in many ways, Islam also falls under this concept of interpretation. Her emphasis on interpretation shows her reluctance to give in to stereotypes, and her desire to examine Islam as a complex religion and culture, rather than something that is one-dimensional. She portrayed it as something that is not rigid, but rather just as adaptable as some of the other religions of the time. This is congruent with ideas within British society, as the Enlightenment was beginning to gain ground in Europe at this time.<sup>138</sup> Attitudes about religion were changing, and Mary wanted that to be reflected in her portrayal of Islam. She portrayed

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<sup>137</sup>Allen W. Wood, "Deism," *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Vol. 4. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005, 2251-2252.

<sup>138</sup>Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, "An Early Ethnographer of Middle Eastern Women: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762)," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (Oct., 1981), 331.

Islam, like many other religions, as something that can be dictated by political leaders and is malleable depending on the time and place in society.

Political influence on Islam as a religion played an important role in what was taught as well, according to her account. In this specific example, she is corresponding in 1717 with a clergy member named the Abbe Conti, who may not have had a basic understanding of Islam. By recounting this experience, she tries to show the Abbe that Islam is something that can be misconstrued. In this specific case, she is actually involved in the event, rather than acting as a third party observer. This can be construed as an example of good ethnographic writing, as she experienced the actual event as an active member in this cultural exchange, rather than just observing it as an outside party.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the experience may have been altered because of Montagu's presence. As explained through Abu Lughod's ethnography in Chapter 3, cultural exchanges are often times dependent on being able to identify with the community being studied. This is evidenced through her shared traits of Islam and Arab heritage with the Bedouin society. Even though it may seem as if Lady Montagu was incorporated into the experience, there still may have been cultural barriers that impeded her from truly experiencing the culture of Istanbul. Regardless of this, Montagu was able to deconstruct and empathize with a complex aspect of Islam as a religion by making it more relatable to her social circle.

With the religious aspects in mind, it is also important to look at Lady Montagu's perspective on gender and social relations when looking at her letters. For example, Lady Montagu's perspective on marriage and courtship is very indicative of what she believed to be a proper and meaningful relationship. It is well known that she defied her father's wishes in her courting of Lord Montagu, as she was betrothed to another man. She ignored the typical societal roles in this instance, and pursued whom she believed to be her true love at the time. Mary was one of the few who set the example for a shift away from arranged marriages to marriages

founded on love and mutual attraction in England at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>139</sup>

Arranged marriages were still very popular, but many began to break the trend in the early part of the century. Mary was one of these exceptions, and this is a key aspect of her character. This kind of difference in thinking is important to take into account when looking at her perspectives on gender relationships between men and women in Turkey during her visit.

Another important factor to understand that is particularly applicable to Lady Montagu's perspective on women in Istanbul is the social construct of sex that existed within England at the time. As was common in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, regulation and command over the human body was a priority of Christian governments, not only to regulate the behavior of women, but also that of men.<sup>140</sup> Lady Montagu was living in the time period marked by this severe regulation of the body, thus making it very difficult to express sexuality in a way at all divergent from the norm. The censorship of her letters, mentioned earlier in Chapter 1, is a reminder that although Lady Montagu was not afraid to be candid about her personal life, her writing was considered obscene to the point where her family was ashamed to have the letters published. There was the threat of shame along with these letters, and such shame could indeed undermine the family's status within upper class society.

Understanding the gender roles that were in place regarding sexuality and Lady Montagu's unwillingness to fully conform to these ideas are key when interpreting her accounts of the Middle East. Especially in her interactions with the local women, her personal feelings and beliefs were clear within her writing. When describing women in Istanbul, she states,

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. Now I am a little acquainted with their ways, I cannot forbear admiring either the exemplary discretion or extreme

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<sup>139</sup> Wendy Moore, "Love and Marriage in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain," *Historically Speaking*. no. 3 (2009): 8-10.

<sup>140</sup> Laura Gowing Signs, "Women's Bodies and the Making of Sex in Seventeenth-Century England," Vol. 37, No. 4, *Sex: A Thematic Issue*, University of Chicago Press (Summer 2012), 813-822.

stupidity of all the writers that have given accounts of them. 'Tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have. No woman, of what rank soever, being permitted to go into the streets without two muslins; one that covers her face all but her eyes, and another that hides the whole dress of her head, and hangs half way down her back, and their shapes are wholly concealed by a thing they call a ferigee, which no woman of any sort appears without; this has strait sleeves, that reach to their finger-ends, and it laps all around them, not unlike a riding-hood. In winter 'tis of cloth, and in summer plain stuff or silk. You may guess how effectively this disguises them, so that there is no distinguishing the great lady from her slave. '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.<sup>141</sup>

There are many things to take away from this particular excerpt. She hints that there have been inaccurate descriptions of women in Turkish culture when she comments on the stupidity of writers. She also justifies their good qualities by declaring that they commit the same amount of sins that any Christian does. Initially, she feels the need to describe them and justify their dress within the context of religion, comparing these women to Christians in a positive light. Mary makes a compelling favorable comparison, especially regarding the serious topic of sin, and argues in her own way that Muslims are not the sinful people that they have been depicted to be. Again, this shows her willingness to accept the religion of Islam on a certain level, although her level of acceptance is difficult to ascertain. Even in the most basic way, however, Mary still chooses to see the good in a culture that is seen as strange and backward to some.

When looking at Lady Montagu's interaction with women, it is important to note the class of women that she dealt with most often. As Lady Montagu was part of British high society and was considered upper class, she also dealt with the Turkish upper class the most often when

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<sup>141</sup> Wortley Montagu, *The Letters And Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 298-299.



living in Istanbul. On one occasion, she dealt with a wife of the Sultan, named Fatima, explaining,

The Sultana Hafiten is, what one would naturally expect to find a Turkish lady, willing to oblige, but not knowing how to go about it; and it is easy to see in her manner, that she has lived secluded from the world. But Fatima has all the politeness and good breeding of a court; with an air that inspires, at once, respect and tenderness; and now 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 of her own, so common to little minds. A Greek that I carried with me, who had never seen her before, (nor could have been admitted now, if she had not been in my train,) shewed that surprise at her beauty and manner which is unavoidable at the first sight, and said to me in Italian, “This is no Turkish lady, she is certainly some Christian.” Fatima guessed she spoke of her, and asked what she said. I would not have told, thinking she would have been no better pleased with the compliment than one of our court beauties to be told she had the air of a Turk; but the Greek lady told it her; and she smiled, saying, “It is not the first time I have heard so: and my mother was a Poloneze, taken at the siege of Caminiee; and my father used to rally me, saying, He believed his Christian wife had found some Christian gallant; for I had not the air of a Turkish girl.” I assured her, that, if all the Turkish ladies were like her, it was absolutely necessary to confine them from public view, for the repose of mankind; and proceeded to tell her what a noise such a face as hers would make in London or Paris.<sup>142</sup>

Lady Montagu describes Fatima as a woman of poise to the Countess of Mar in this instance. However, Montagu notes that Fatima acts in a manner as someone who is willing to serve and please, something Montagu believes to be stereotypical of women in a Turkish court. Mary entertained the stereotype in this case, but does describe Fatima as someone with dignity and grace despite this. Her audience, the Countess of Mar, is also from her social circle, and understands the kind of respect it takes to command a room in an upper class society. Despite her

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 348-349.

audience, Mary shows reluctance in comparing Fatima to “Christian” women, as if she feels it would be an insult to Fatima and her status as an upper class Turkish woman. Mary shows a desire to respect Fatima for who she is and the culture she comes from, rather than comparing her to other women of the European courts. This was typical for her as “she was among the first to suggest that Muslim women were not benighted “others” bound by a cruel code of restriction and oppression, but might have values that were worthy, if not of emulation, at least study and respect.”<sup>143</sup> Fatima being a Turkish woman was not a negative trait, but rather something to be looked at in a positive light, and Mary was not hesitant in expressing this belief in her letters.

Although this may detract from her audience’s understanding of what life within high society in Istanbul was like, Mary shows her propensity to respect the beliefs and mannerisms of other cultures because of her restraint. She sees Fatima as a unique woman, rather than someone who has copied or resembled something that she is familiar with. She does not feel the need to compare Fatima to other people that she may know, but rather accepts her for the unique person that she is within the culture and society of Istanbul. Her lack of comparison in this sense makes her more of ethnographer than many of her other comments, as she realizes that there is a cultural difference that she does not believe to be negative, and explains in a way that represents this thought. This is very essential in understanding Mary’s experiences, as she shows her desire at times to not compare everything back to Europe, keeping the cultural identity of the Turkish people separate and unique.

Within this experience, Mary describes her time within the Turkish court as one would expect someone with first hand experience of the matter. Lady Montagu was of the upper class and is able to describe this aspect of her journey with some accuracy, as it is the life that she has known being an ambassador’s wife. In a way, this is one of the ways in which she is closest to becoming an ethnographer. She has an inside view of high society of Istanbul, and rather than

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<sup>143</sup> Fernea, “An Early Ethnographer of Middle Eastern Women,” 330.

being a third party observer, she lives among the other women of the court, and acts as one of them. Mary is a member of the community and culture of high-class, Turkish society in this instance. It is very well known that she did not live among the common people of Istanbul, but rather lived among other Europeans staying in Istanbul at the time.<sup>144</sup> Most of her comparisons are made to benefit those in her audience that also belong to the high-class society of London, and they are purposely explained in a way that her friends and peers are made to understand. There is a limited scope of experience that she has when living in Istanbul, and it is restricted to the upper class. She lives and works among them in the occupation of someone who belongs to that part of society. Mary interacts with other women of this class as she is supposed to, which is her occupation in a sense. It is her job to dress formally and interact in a way that signifies her class. This creates a more specific view of her experience, which causes issues when looking at the broader sense of Turkish society at this time.

In addition to the specific social implications of this passage, Mary's comments on veiling and how this relates to the freedom of women within Muslim culture add unique dialogue to a controversial discussion. Mary insists that the veils women wear in their daily lives were actually helping them to be more liberated, allowing them the freedom to do as they wished without having the fear of being scrutinized for their activities. Mary explains that these women are able to blend in, implying that social class does not matter because of the concealing nature of women's dress. Women in this sense, are not bound by societal roles created for them, despite their gender and religion. Rather, they are allowed to do as they wish, and Mary concedes that these women possess more "liberty" rather than less, as many assume that Islam would allow less liberty in this instance.

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<sup>144</sup> Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* Oxford University Press New York 1999, 147.

Although this is an interesting argument, it is purely based off of her observations, rather than an actual experience with Muslim women. Although she interacted with Muslim women often within the courts of Istanbul, this description does not include a personal experience. Rather, Mary made assumptions and conclusions based on her own personal opinion. These descriptions are also not completely devoid of Western notions of beauty and Mary could not completely escape the prejudices of beauty in European society.<sup>145</sup> Regardless, this description does offer a unique insight into how religion and gender were integrated in Istanbul during this time. As scholar Teresa Heffernan maintains in her article on Montagu, even though her argument about veiling may have been flawed and heavily influenced by the Western notions of beauty, her ideas still helped to dispel the stereotypical discourse that surrounding veiling.<sup>146</sup> Despite her predisposition to created stereotypes of the Middle East, she still contributed to the dialogue in a way that cast doubt about previous thought.

Although Mary seems to be more accepting of other religions and cultures than many of her contemporaries, she still reflects many of the colonialist stereotypes, including her opinions on slavery. For example, in this passage she explains,

I know you'll expect I should say something particular of that of slaves; and you will imagine me half a Turk when I don't speak of it with the same horror other Christians have done before me. But 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. 'Tis true they have no wages; but they give them yearly clothes to a higher value than our salaries to any ordinary servant. But you'll object, men buy women with an eye to evil. In my opinion, they are bought and sold as publicly and more infamously in all our Christian great cities.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Teresa Heffernan, "Feminism Against the East/West Divide: Lady Mary's Turkish Embassy Letters," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33.2 (2000), 202.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

<sup>147</sup> Wortley Montagu, *The Letters And Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 357.

Initially, she attempts to dispel myths surrounding the slavery of the Turkish people, as she implies a belief that Turkish slavery is more evil and inhumane than European slavery. When comparing the two versions of slavery, she uses the word “Christian” to provide a positive connotation to European slavery. She never tried to discredit the idea of slavery, rather she merely tried to qualify it by comparing it to Christian slavery. Contrary to Fernea’s idea that Lady Montagu’s writings are “remarkably free of ethnocentrism” there is no attempt to affirm that slavery is wrong in this case.<sup>148</sup> This shows some level of conformity to European values, as many still believed in the institution of slavery at the time.

Although there were times in which her European tendencies came through in her writing, Mary was quick to defend Islam and dispel many of the rumors that surrounded it. In one instance, she explains the role of women in Islam, stating that,

As to your next enquiry, 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 less agreeable. It remains to tell you, that the virtues which Mahomet requires of the women, to merit the enjoyment of future happiness, are not to live in such a manner as to become useless to the world, but to employ themselves, as much as possible, in making little Musssulmans. The virgins who die virgins, and the widows who marry not again, dying in mortal sin, are excluded out of paradise; for women, says he, not being capable to manage the affairs of state, nor to support the fatigues of war, God has not ordered them 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, fulfill not the duty of

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<sup>148</sup> Fernea, “An Early Ethnographer of Middle Eastern Women,” 330.

their vocation, and rebel against the commands of God. Here are maxims you prodigiously contrary to those of your convents.<sup>149</sup>

There are several suggestive and revealing instances in this passage; it is one of the most overt references that Lady Montagu makes regarding women in Islam. She immediately tries to dispel the idea that women have no place within the religion, even after they have passed on. However, Mary cites the Prophet Muhammad as the one who says that women in fact have a place within Muslim society. She immediately recognizes and acknowledges that European society perpetuates false ideas about Muslim women. That fact that she is able to understand that is very important, as many of her peers would not have been so introspective in understanding the flaws of their own culture. As Weitzman states, “Lady Mary consciously developed an aesthetic strategy of subversion of mental attitudes that exacerbated differences between the two nations.”<sup>150</sup> Lady Montagu discerns inaccuracies that have been perpetuated about the Middle East and tries to correct them, often by attempting to reconcile the differences between the East and the West. Within this passage and defense of Islam, she attempts to use this technique to dispel myths about Islam and the role of women, by proclaiming their usefulness in society, and using the teachings of Muhammad to do so.

Lady Montagu’s travels throughout Turkey are a distinctive look into a society where little was known and much was questioned in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Mary’s experiences with religion and gender allow for the audience to understand how these two things interacted and how they affected culture within Turkish society. As much as she comments on her experiences and opinions of Istanbul, she also divulges information about the society she was from, and how that impacted her perspective on the people of Turkey and how their society functioned.

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<sup>149</sup> Wortley Montagu, *The Letters And Works of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*, 371-372.

<sup>150</sup> Arthur J. Weitzman, "Voyeurism and Aesthetics in the Turkish Bath: Lady Mary's School of Female Beauty," *Comparative Literature Studies* 39, no. 4 (2002), 355.

Where Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters show the strongest trends toward ethnography are within her experiences in Turkish high society. This is where she became an actual part of the community, and where she interacted and worked to be a part of them the most. Many of her observations about gender and religion outside of the court are as a third party observer and she mainly recounts what she sees and develops her own opinions without much information. Within the court, however, she is trained in the ways and means of high society, and is able to comment on gender and religion within this realm as someone who has a level of integration. As an ethnographer of Turkish high society, Lady Montagu is the most effective in reaching her audience, allowing her experiences blended with her own personal attitudes affect those to whom she is writing.

## Chapter 5

### The Ethnography of Lucie Duff Gordon

She was now as tied to the country by her love of the Arab ways as by the health which Egypt's climate restored to her, and she came as close as anyone to lifting the veil between the English and Egyptians.<sup>151</sup>

This statement by Anthony Sattin summarizes the mindset with which Lucie Duff Gordon approached her stay in Egypt, which would ultimately lead to an amazing perspective of the Middle East. Looking at the field of ethnography in the present day and seeing the many forms it has taken over the years, it is hard to discount the writings of Mary Montagu and Lucie Duff Gordon as early examples of ethnographic literature. Furthermore, their letters provide key insight into what roles gender and religion played within Egyptian and Turkish society, while also showing how the English society they were familiar with was reflected within their work. Specifically examining religion and gender within the context of these two women's letters best demonstrates the ethnographic quality of their writing, and solidifies their place as early ethnographers in the history of the Middle East. In the previous chapter, I focused on Lady Montagu, but in this chapter Lady Duff Gordon's independence and extensive travels throughout Egypt take center stage.

Lucie Duff Gordon's letters provide a perspective into Egyptian society that is more consistent with an ethnographer in the modern sense, in that she was more fully integrated into the culture being studied. Through her travel activities, she experiences gender interactions within the Egyptian culture, as well as the interaction between society and Islam. Her experiences with gender and Islam in Egypt allow a perspective on a society that was often misunderstood during

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<sup>151</sup>Anthony Sattin, *Lifting the Veil: British Society in Egypt 1768-1956*. London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1988, 90.



this time. She worked to fully incorporate herself into the society within which she was living, more so than Lady Montagu, and Lady Duff Gordon showed more resistance to the European stereotypes of the East.

At this time, most European tourists saw little interest in learning about the Egyptian people, but rather sought to see the ruins of the past. One scholar of the time, for instance, insisted that, “baksheesh and the big stick are the essence of the Arab: you hear nothing else spoken of and see nothing else.”<sup>152</sup> There was little interest in understanding the culture, rather it the focus was on a superficial exploration of main tourist attractions. Despite the common notions surrounding travel in Egypt, Lucie Duff Gordon went beyond the surface understanding of Egypt and provided key insight into a culture that was often missing from travel writing. Through her correspondence, she allows her audience a glimpse of what gender and Islam consisted of in Egyptian society through the lens of a British woman. British society was very different, but not necessarily better in many respects. A more complete examination of her writings, in addition to the information and insight regarding ethnography that I have already addressed in Chapter 3, will provide a more specific look into the mindset of Lady Duff Gordon and her writings in Egypt, and how this perspective was remarkably free of European prejudice. While Lucie’s nature as an educated and independent individual has been discussed previously within this analysis, further examination of her letters show a unique perspective on religion and gender within Egypt and Britain during this time.

Understanding the conditions of women within the time frame that they lived provides very important insight into their perspectives on women and gender in the Middle East. In Lucie Duff Gordon’s situation, there were few forums available for independent women to express their views. Living within the Victorian era, there were prevailing ideas of what women were capable

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<sup>152</sup> Helen Wheatley, "From Traveler to Notable: Lady Duff Gordon in Upper Egypt, 1862-1869," *Journal of World History*. no. 1 (1992), 83.

of doing and how they were expected to behave within society. Mainly, “men’s idea was of decoratively idle, sexually passive woman, pure of heart, religious and self- sacrificing” and there were not many forums to address this form of subjugation within society.<sup>153</sup> Literature became the most prominent way of combating the subjugation of women by portraying them in independent roles and attempting to change the perception of women and their roles in Victorian England. The works of the Bronte sisters, as well as Jane Austen, helped to perpetuate the idea of the capable and independent woman, although male writers portraying women in this manner were significantly less frequent.<sup>154</sup> Women writers were becoming more prominent during this time, and Lucie contributed to this prominence, especially in her use of letters, which were a forum for personal and honest expression.

It seems that during this time, women were the main combatants in the battle against systematic patriarchy. As a fairly independent woman, Lady Duff Gordon served as an example of someone who combated these stereotypes of women through the lifestyle she chose. In social settings, many were impressed by her intellectual prowess and conversational acuity, and often times her husband, Sir Alexander, receded into the background and was content in doing so.<sup>155</sup> Her commanding presence was noted mostly for its irregularity, but rarely was it seen as something distasteful, and Lucie took full advantage to express her opinions, regardless of pre-existing social stigma. Combined with her personality and popularity among her social circle, the format of letter writing itself is also significant in the Victorian Era, as it was a main activity for many women as a hobby and form of communication between them and others within their world, especially among the middle class. Although many of these women’s husbands read their letters before sending them, they were the main source of communication while also serving as an

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<sup>153</sup> Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* Washington Square: New York University Press, 1993, 86.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-87.

<sup>155</sup> Kathleen Frank, *A Passage to Egypt: The Life of Lucie Duff Gordon* Houghton Mifflin New York 1994, 115.

outlet for many women to express concerns and issues within their own lives.<sup>156</sup> The independent nature of Lady Duff Gordon, combined with the popularity of letter writing, led to her utilization of them as a means of portraying her experiences with her family and friends. The fact that she traveled through Egypt without her husband cannot be ignored when looking at her independence relative to her peers, and shows that she was more self sufficient than most, regardless of her travel companions. These letters benefitted from her personal style and status as an independent woman, both of which enhanced their ethnographic nature when among the people of Egypt.

Within the time in which Lady Duff Gordon lived and travelled throughout Egypt the changing landscape of the country is important to note when looking at her experiences with gender and religion. With the stability provided by the rule of Muhammad Ali in Egypt, it quickly became a place for travel, especially on the Nile River, and became a place of fascination for many Europeans looking to study Egypt's history.<sup>157</sup> Along with Egypt's growing ties to Europe and Britain in particular, the interest in Egypt's past led to new tourist attractions. The main attraction were the ruins along the Nile River, and many used these ruins as a way to see "living proof" that substantiated the Bible, and it was believed that, "With each new discovery in Egypt, it was believed that another part of the Bible was being authenticated."<sup>158</sup> There was an inherently religious component to Egypt at the time that had nothing to do with understanding Islam. Rather, many Europeans sought new ways to substantiate things within the Bible and Christianity, as a way of further promoting the beliefs that many Europeans held and thought everyone else should hold as well. The role of Islam within Egypt was not important, but rather being able to further understand Christianity within their limited view of the world was the main reason for study of Egypt. Understanding the importance of religion within British culture and its role in encouraging travel to Egypt is important when looking at the letters of Lady Duff Gordon. She did not attempt

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<sup>156</sup> Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 102.

<sup>157</sup> Sattin, *Lifting the Veil*, 30 .

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

to reinforce Biblical views, but rather wanted to explore the religious nature of Egypt in terms of Islam.

Lady Duff Gordon often times defied stereotypical religious thought when it came to traveling in Egypt. One example of Lady Duff Gordon being more open to new religious interaction shows many different traits about her character. She chose to expose herself to Islamic religious practices that were very different from her own, and did not display apprehension. In this instance, she describes a religious ceremony where she states,

I was taken into the hareem, welcomed and regaled, and invited to the festival of Seyd Abd er-Racheem, the great saint of Keneh. I hesitated, and said there were great crowds, and some might be offended at my presence; but the Kadee declared 'by Him who separated us' that if any such ignorant persons were present it was high time they learnt better, and said that it was by no means unlawful for virtuous Christians, and such as neither hated no scorned the Muslimeen, to profit by, or share in their prayers, and that I should sit before the Sheykh's tomb with him and the Mufti; and that du reste, they wished to give thanks for my safe arrival. Such a demonstration of tolerance was not to be resisted.<sup>159</sup>

Although initially she hesitated to participate in this celebration of the Saint Seyd Abd er-Racheem, she quickly was overcome by the locals' insistence, and did not protest after her initial reaction. She also proceeds to describe a religious experience that is very different from something that she is familiar with, importantly, as a participant, not just as a third party observer. She explained the different components and participants of the ceremony to the audience in order to increase their understanding, but also, in a sense, to enhance her own understanding. Lucie actually experienced this ceremony, making her description that much more effective in relaying the cultural nuances.

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<sup>159</sup>Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, 1821-1869, *Letters From Egypt, 1863-65 / by Lady Duff Gordon*. 3d ed. London: Macmillan, 1866, 254-255.

The fact that she recognizes that she was being tolerated as a Christian is also very important, as this shows her recognition of Muslim religious tolerance. Her willingness to experience this celebration is also an indicator that she was not content with the idea of being a stereotypical European tourist of the time. She wanted to experience Islam for herself, rather than choose to not participate and merely reaffirm her beliefs in Christianity. As Charisse Gendron states, she is not, “disappointed by the truthfulness of the Bible, but that she is disillusioned with the use made of the Bible to teach dogma and, worse, intolerance of other faiths, particularly Islam.”<sup>160</sup> She did not want to abandon her own faith, but also did not believe in using her faith as fuel for hatred and belittlement. Lucie did not merely observe and ridicule the customs of Islam in this ceremony, which was common for other types of formal correspondence from the Middle East. There is a keen self-awareness that Gordon displays within this experience that is a part of the effectiveness of these letters as ethnography.

As this previous experience shows an attempt at integration into Egyptian society and culture, later experiences and personal anecdotes show an attempt to study Islam, rather than just having a cursory understanding of the religion. She makes it a point to comment on the laws within the religion of Islam and provides some perspective into her views of Islam through this experience. As mentioned in Chapter 2, she compared the Qur’an to the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus in the Bible, but adds much more about her perspectives on religion.

It is impossible to say how exactly like the early parts of the Bible every act of life is here, and how totally new it seems when one reads it here. Old Jacob’s speech to Pharaoh really made me laugh (don’t be shocked), because it is so exactly what a fellah says to a Pasha: ‘Few and evil have been the days,’ etc. (Jacob being a most prosperous man); but it is manners to say all that, and I feel quite kindly to Jacob, whom I used to think ungrateful and discontented... All the vulgarized associations with Puritanism and abominable little ‘scripture tales and pictures’ peel off here, and

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<sup>160</sup>Charisse Gendron, "Lucie Duff Gordon's "Letters from Egypt," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, Volume 17 Number 2 (1 April 1986), 56.

the inimitably truthful representation of life and character-not a flattering one certainly- comes out, and it feels like Homer. Joseph's tears and his love for the brother born of the same mother is so perfect. Only one sees what a bad inferior race the Beni Israel were compared to the Beni Ishmael or to the Egyptians. Leviticus and Deuteronomy are so very heathenish compared to the law of the Koran, or to the early days of Abraham.<sup>161</sup>

It is clear that she believes that the Bible has been overly sensationalized in order to make it more exciting and relatable. She shows her ability to re-analyze what she originally believed to be true. She showed flexibility in her beliefs, and a willingness to change them after seeing new perspectives. With this in mind, she also believes that there are some inherent flaws in the Bible that are not present in the Qur'an, which she discovered upon this new introspection. The Qur'an is not some strange and vile book to her, but rather a credible guide for reconsidering and re-evaluating the Christian Bible. She also shows a fascination with Egypt as a place of rediscovery for Biblical events that was consistent with how many people viewed Egypt at the time. However, Lady Duff Gordon did not see Egypt as a place simply used to rediscover the Bible and reaffirm her old beliefs, but rather she saw the flaws within it, and made an attempt to understand Islam. She did not focus on substantiating her Christian beliefs, but was able to see new perspectives on Islam throughout her experience and portray the religion in a positive light to her audience.

Lucie Duff Gordon also observed the gender relations in operation in Egyptian society. She was in a unique position to comment on this topic, as many male travelers would not have had the same access to men and women that Lucie was able to obtain. Lucie was able to live within both of the circles of men and women. As Helen Wheatley states, "Women travelers tended to step between both spheres of men and women. They were often treated for practical purposes as honorary men...but they were also clearly recognized as women."<sup>162</sup> Lucie's position

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<sup>161</sup> Lady Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt*. London: R.Brimley Johnson, 1902, 122-123.

<sup>162</sup>Helen Wheatley, "From Traveler to Notable: Lady Duff Gordon in Upper Egypt, 1862-1869," *Journal of World History*. no. 1 (1992), 93.

as a visitor in Egyptian society allowed her to experience it in a way that many were not able to, and this allowed for a fuller version of what gender relations were like within Egypt at the time.

With this in mind, looking at specific instances of gender interaction highlight Lucie's distinctive position while also providing honest commentary on Egyptian society. In one particular letter to her mother, Lucie shows an unusual perspective on the women with Egyptian society that she has been told about through her travel companions.

The old father of my donkey-boy, Hassan, gave me a fine illustration of Arab feeling towards women to-day. I asked if Abd el-Kader was coming here, as I had heard; he did not know, and asked me if he were not Achul-en benat, a brother of girls. I prosaically said I did not know if he had sisters. 'The Arabs, O lady, call that man a "brother of girls" to whom God has given a clean heart to love all women as his sisters, and strength and courage to fight for their protection.' Omar suggested a 'thorough gentleman' as the equivalent of Abou Hassan's title. Our Europeans galimatias about the 'smiles of the fair,' etc., look very mean beside 'Achul en Benat' methinks. Moreover, they carry it into common life. Omar was telling me of some little family tribulations, showing that he is not a little henpecked. His wife wanted all his money. I asked how much she had of her own, as I knew she had property. 'Oh ma'am! I can't speak of that, shame for me if I ask what money she got.'<sup>163</sup>

This simple interaction with Omar and the men of the community gives profound insight to the audience about the attitudes of men towards women within Egypt at this time. In this encounter, Lucie describes a scene in which there is an enormous amount of respect shown to women, and Abou Hassan is described as a gentleman in this case. Lucie even opines that these Arab men show respect and manners that escape most European men. Lucie lays the groundwork for mutual respect amongst genders within this experience and elaborates on this idea further throughout her letters.

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<sup>163</sup> Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt* (1902), 79.

It is clear that she believes that this is significant enough to express to her mother, and that she aspired to make a more far-reaching comment on the social attitudes towards women, and their differences in European culture versus the Egyptian culture she experienced. No British man would have thought twice about talking about his wife's property, for example, because women really were not afforded functional property rights until 1870 in England.<sup>164</sup> It is clear that in this particular instance, Lady Duff Gordon is taken aback by the amount of respect displayed by Egyptian men towards Egyptian women, and that is respect that is not consistent with gender relations in European society. She shows her desire to be truthful and does not hesitate to criticize European men in this instance. This passage also shows her willingness to recognize and express the flaws within British society. This is an example of an experience that expresses her views of Egyptian society, but also her views on British society, making a comparison that places Egypt in a positive light for her audience.

Lucie's European background is intriguing to note when it comes to examining these letters in the way that she wrote them and the way in which certain experiences were expressed. There is one experience in pertaining to gender within Egyptian society that Lucie describes that may be the most telling of her opinions of both the Egyptian and British societies when it comes to male and female interaction.

I asked Omar if he would tell his brother if he saw his wife do anything wrong. (N.B. – He can't endure her.) 'Certainly not, I must cover her with my cloak.' I am told also, that among the Arabs of the desert (the real Arabs), when a traveler, tired and way worn, seeks their tents, it is the duty of his host, generally the Sheykh, to send him into the hareem, and leave him there three days, with full permission to do as he will after the women have bathed, and rubbed, and refreshed him. But then he must never speak of that Hareem; they are to him as his own, to be revered. If he spoke, the husband would kill him; but the Arab would never do it for a European, 'because all

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<sup>164</sup> Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 88-89.



Europeans are so hard upon women,' and do not fear God and conceal their offences. If a dancing-girl repents, the most respectable man may and does marry her, and no one blames or laughs at him. I believe all this leads to a good deal of irregularity, but certainly the feeling is amiable. It is impossible to conceive how startling it is to a Christian to hear the rules of morality applied with perfect impartiality to both sexes, and to hear Arabs who know our manners talk of the English being 'jealous' and 'hard upon their women'. Any unchastity is wrong and haram (unlawful), but equally so in men and women.<sup>165</sup>

This passage is one of the most revealing within her letters, not only because it shows a genuine aspect of Egyptian culture that is often overlooked, but also because it is very clearly from the perspective of a woman who is not treated as an equal among her fellow Europeans simply for being a woman. Although this is the case, this particular letter is written to her husband, showing the mutual support and relative equality that the couple shared as mentioned before. It is important to note that she was comfortable in expressing her opinion to her husband, even though such views clearly crossed the line of respectability and appropriate decorum commensurate with her status in British society. The surprised tone she uses to express the idea that men and women are treated equally in certain respects is very telling of the type of society Lucie was from in Victorian England. Her surprise shows that it was something unexpected, in the sense that she was not expecting the Arab culture to behave this way, but also surprised that English society did not act in the same way.

Religiously, this passage is also particularly important. Within reference to Christianity, it was believed by many that "Divine providence held that women should be subordinate and resignation to her lot, with true Christian humility, was the only proper response of a good woman."<sup>166</sup> Lucie was unused to the type of equality that was displayed within this story as she suggests. Common misperceptions of the Middle East and Arab culture also could have

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<sup>165</sup> Duff Gordon, *Letters from Egypt* (1902), 135-136.

<sup>166</sup> Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 1.

contributed to her surprise, as she may not have expected this type of reaction from those who practiced Islam. Within a context of gender and Islam, this passage combines the two within underlying themes and seems to make the point that women and men within Islam in this context are not what they have been portrayed to be. This account is one of the most useful in understanding how Lady Duff Gordon interpreted the events unfolding around her in relation to gender and Islam and these interpretations led to a better understanding of Egypt at the time.

Throughout her travels, her relationship with her travel companion Omar proved to display some of the most beneficial experiences with gender and religion for the audience as ethnography. In one such experience that she recounts to her mother, Lucie dines in Omar's house and has plenty to say about the experience she had.

“I dined one day with Omar, or rather I ate at his house, for he would not eat with me. His sister-in-law cooked a most admirable dinner, and every one was delighted. It was an interesting family circle. There was a very respectable elder brother, a confectioner, whose elder wife was a black woman, a really remarkable person. She speaks Italian perfectly, and gave me a great deal of information, and asked very intelligent questions. She ruled the house, but as she had no children, he had married a fair gentle-looking Arab woman, who had five children, and all lived in perfect harmony. Omar's wife is a fine handsome girl of his own age, with very good manners, but close on her lying-in, and looking fatigued. She had been outside the door of the close little court which constituted the house once since her marriage. I now begin to understand the condition of the women, and the Muslim sentiments and maxims regarding them. There is a good deal of chivalry in some respects, and in the respectable lower and middle classes, the result is not so bad. I suspect that among the rich, few are very happy, but I don't know them, or anything of the Turkish ways.”<sup>167</sup>

Within a small, seemingly ordinary experience of eating dinner, Lady Duff Gordon expounds most thoughtfully about male-female relationships of this time. In this instance, she

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<sup>167</sup> Lady Lucie Duff Gordon, *Letters From Egypt, 1863-65* (1866), 90-91.

mentions the concept of having multiple wives, something not uncommon within Islam, as many followed the example set by Muhammad.<sup>168</sup> However, she does not mention it with a hint of disgust or repulsion. Rather, she mentions it as a common occurrence, and justifies the second wife by mentioning the first wife did not have any children. In Lucie's mind, it was as if the lack of children was an acceptable reason to adopt a second wife. Coming from a Victorian background, Lucie was raised in a time that expected women to have children and effectively raise them and manage a household, especially if it meant carrying on the family name through a son.<sup>169</sup> Although she provided a European perspective on the matter, Lady Duff Gordon provided a unique and somewhat unbiased view of a household with multiple marriages.

Another important aspect of this interaction is the respect that she gives these women, while also noting the respect that these women are given by the men in their lives. The women of this household were not mistreated in the way that she had believed because of prior misconceptions. She benefits from being around a lot of Muslim men in this respect, because she is able to see their interactions with women in a way where she can intimately observe them. She sees the interaction between husband and wife as one of mutual respect, even though the wife does have many things to do inside the home that prevent her from leaving. There is still a sense that there is an obligation for these Muslim women to take good care of their homes and families. However, there is a tone of understanding in her writing, as she begins to understand what life is really like for a couple in this part of the Muslim world. This also implies that she had a different kind of understanding before she had this experience and that it was contrary to what she actually saw. From the audience's perspective, this change in understanding is a positive one. She is not merely an observer, but was interacting with the family and was integrated into this complex gender and religious social interaction.

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<sup>168</sup> Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices 4<sup>th</sup> Edition* Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group New York 2012, 51.

<sup>169</sup> Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 86-87.

Within the letters of Lucie Duff Gordon, there is often an intersection of gender and religion that provides uncommon perspectives of life in the Middle East and Egypt during this time. This is to be expected, as Islam is a very common thread throughout this society in which she is living. Through her writings and travels, however, she sees many of her experiences in a different way than many of her contemporaries in England. Through her legitimate social interaction with the culture of Egypt, she is able to see past many of the misconceptions about Egyptian and Arab society, especially when it comes to understanding Islam and gender relations. As mentioned earlier, it was the perception in Europe that Islam was a brutal and cruel religion, but Lucie attempts to thwart these kinds of misconceptions. She shows that many beliefs about Islam are misconstrued, especially when it comes to men interacting with women and vice versa. Within the context of ethnography, her ability and willingness to live amongst the people of Egypt helps to give a more accurate depiction of every day life, despite her own background and biases. While she stops short of truly becoming a part of the community, her experiences should be understood as a very early example of the type of literary ethnography that has become popular within the field.

## Conclusion

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Lady Lucie Duff Gordon traveled in the Middle East during a time when European society had a very rudimentary understanding of this foreign culture. Both women used their personal experiences to make comparisons for their perspective audiences to understand, and therefore humanize, the cultures they were living in. The letters these women wrote would prove to be the center of intense discussion and debate, often times involving censorship and intense public ridicule. Lady Montagu faced the scorn of her peers from the British aristocracy and this was only punctuated by her family's reluctance to release the letters in their entirety. However, Lady Montagu was compelled to publish as a way of defying the norms of the upper class, while also showing one last act of her trademark independence. Lady Duff Gordon, although not as controversial among her peers, still faced issues of censorship from her daughter after her death. However, this did not prevent the bulk of the letters being published. Many editions of their letters have been printed and they continue to be the object of fascination.

Elizabeth Fernea asserts that Lady Montagu was one of the earliest examples of an ethnographer of Middle Eastern women. I assert, however, that Lady Duff Gordon is the more effective ethnographer of gender and religion of the two for a variety of reasons. First, Lady Montagu was financially more secure and more ensconced within the British aristocracy, whereas Lady Duff Gordon belonged to the intellectual middle class. Therefore, Lady Montagu had a more luxurious lifestyle while abroad, whereas Lady Duff Gordon did not have the financial means to live in such splendor. These factors, while not necessarily within the control of either woman, played a significant role in the experiences of each. Second, Lucie Duff Gordon's place within society allowed her to live in a more frugal manner among the common people of Egypt,

giving her a richer variety of experiences. Her distinct experience allowed for a more effective understanding of gender relations and religious practice within Egypt at this time and created a more accurate historical representation of Egyptian culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Third, Lady Duff Gordon was more progressive because of her different place in history. The Enlightenment principles that were increasingly popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century of Lady Montagu were only expanded upon by the mid- 19<sup>th</sup> century, as shown through Lady Duff Gordon's vast exposure to philosophers of her time. These thinkers were very influential and served to expand upon the new ideas that were sweeping over Europe heading towards the modern era. These factors help to place Lady Duff Gordon as the more effective ethnographer of gender and religion in the Middle East.

The experience of Lady Montagu is not to be overlooked within this argument, however. The country of Turkey proved to be a more complex place than many Europeans believed. Lady Montagu's contribution to the dialogue about the Middle East expresses the changing times within Istanbul at the time, and the interaction between gender and religion was much different than it was depicted to be. The women within upper class Turkish society were typically subservient and willing to please, but they were also commanding and exuded confidence in a way that signified their status. Lady Montagu believed that the veil was actually a way for women to exercise their freedom, rather than constrain them into a life away from mainstream society. Even though this may have been a misguided description, Montagu still addressed the issue of the veil in a way contrary to what was commonly believed by claiming that it was not restrictive to the freedoms of women in Istanbul. Montagu's opinion of Islam in a general sense also serves to dispel many of the myths developed within Europe surrounding the religion. She claimed that it was not as barbaric as it had been construed, and claimed that there was flexibility and civility within the religion that many people did not see.

Lady Duff Gordon also wrote about similar ideas from her travels in Egypt, and was able to see Egypt as a place that had been misrepresented by those in the West. Gordon determined that gender relations were not as restrictive to women as many believed. In her experience living among the people of Egypt, she discovered that men generally respected women and even exuded chivalric tendencies towards the women within the culture. At a time when the European tendency was to claim that women's subjugation was a way of life in the Middle East, Lady Duff Gordon was discovering that the opposite was true on many occasions. Gordon showed an even greater fascination in the religion of Islam while abroad in Egypt and attempted to gain further understanding through her travels. Islam became a religion of interpretation and complexity to Lady Duff Gordon, rather than one of rigid religious practice solely focused on harboring barbaric worshippers. She understood that Islam took many forms and was more spiritual than it was depicted to be in Europe. Over time, these discoveries, coupled with her desire to live closer to the real people of Egypt, led to an increase of bold claims and Lady Duff Gordon began to care less about what the social circles she belonged to would think about what she was writing. She showed little desire to reconcile with the society that she originally called home, and she died in Egypt as a woman who desired to be a part of the community.

These women have much to offer the modern reader with a historical perspective. Part of what makes these women so fascinating is the fact that they are women writing about topics considered taboo or abnormal in a time when women were not writing much at all. There is a general desire to learn more about history from a woman's perspective, as men and their perspective dominate much of history. Women and their voices have been underrepresented throughout history. When an invaluable resource is found, like the letters of Lucie Duff Gordon and Mary Montagu, the desire to learn from them is strong. The stories that they tell not only provide insight into the culture they are depicting, but also provide insight into what life was like for women of their caliber during that time.

In addition to this study of women's history, there is a fascination with the religion of Islam and the impact it has made on the culture of the Middle East. Culture and religion in this region are so heavily intertwined, that the interaction between these two areas is often difficult to untangle. The skewed nature with which many see the Middle East today originated from these earlier depictions of the Middle East. The origins of this deformed vision of Islam are something that both women address in detail, often saying things contrary to the popular discourse. The fact that women within this early modern era recognized that Islam was a complex religion worth valuing is telling of them as individuals, but also begs the question, has the modern world still not recognized the complexities of Islam? The impact of these letters is still felt, as many are still attempting to understand Islam and the misconceptions that surround it.



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