V. TEL: Some Conclusions

In the previous four chapters, four different aspects of Lady Mary have been discussed: her persona as a struggling soul, her literary achievements, her Oriental material and its influence, and her travelogue. This discussion leads to the following conclusions:

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), the daughter of the 5th Earl of Kingston, a Whig and a London celebrity lived a richly personal life...As an aristocrat she could determine what she wanted but found herself pitted against customary class rigidities yet she dared to move ahead and confront the impasse without any apology or regret. This cost her social distrust, notoreity and perhaps ennui while attempting to please others. Yet she trusted her intellect and instincts and therefore, repulsed bores and fools which often led her to flight and quarrel. It was this aspect of her life on which Lord Chesterfield reflects that she was ‘eminent for her parts and her vices’, equally sharing Lady Irwin’s view: “her principles are as corrupt as her wit is entertaining”.¹

A result of the class rigidities resulted in her being deprived of formal education. Undaunted, she struggled to overcome the debacle through self-study and learnt not only French and Latin but also Turkish when she got such a chance. She was deemed one of the most thoroughly read persons in England. Anna Secor has quoted F. Nusbam as claiming that the 'Female Pedant', an anonymous 1750 tract, describes her as one who:

…only by her much reading spoil'd a good Pudding-maker, and neglected those useful, tho' humble culinary Arts, more properly
adapted to a female Genius, to make herself that prodigious uncouth kind of a Hermaphrodite, a deeply-read Lady.\textsuperscript{2}

In her adult life, Lady Mary found herself discriminated against males. She came to conclude that education alone is an effective remedy and fought for this right of women throughout her life. Early in life, her letter to Bishop Bruno confessed, “I do not doubt God and Nature has thrown us into an Inferior Rank”, but later, her views shifted towards scientific reasoning, “Nature has not plac’d us in an Inferior Rank to men, no more than the Females of other Animals, where we see to distinction of capacity”, though inflexibilities of gender-based social ranks of her time stopped her short of Mary Wollstonecraft. Lady Mary’s educational philosophy proclaimed, “Learning is necessary to the Happiness of Women, and ignorance the common foundation of their Errors both in Morals and conduct”.\textsuperscript{3} Yet she emphasized maintaining womanly modesty to the extent that she came to believe that “the reputation of learning a misfortune to a woman.”\textsuperscript{4} She enjoins that a woman should “conceal whatever Learning she attains, with as much solicititude as she would hide crookedness or lameness.”\textsuperscript{5}

Although Lady Mary urged diverse education for her grandchildren, and wrote “Every branch of knowledge is entertaining”, but when Lady Bute mentioned one of her daughter’s proficiency in arithmetic, Lady Mary advised “an emphasis on languages, history, geography and philosophy rather than a course that was unlikely to be a portion of her life. In the final stage of this controversy, she avoided any further debate saying, “Every one has the right to educate their children after their own way, and I shall speak no more on that subject.”\textsuperscript{5a}
This freedom of choice she maintained also in matters of love and marriage. She married Edward Wortley Montagu, defying parental dictates and social barriers, even at the cost of public rumours and ill-repute. Her husband, Wortley was merely a compromise, a ‘Limbo’ for her yet she proved to be a devoted wife. She also successfully campaigned for Wortley’s parliamentary seat and official career besides pamphleteering on various issues including corruption. In the gravest crisis of Wortley’s professional life, she stood by him in England as well as in Turkey. All this was in accordance with her philosophy of ‘passive obedience’. One of the best outcomes of this dormant life was her literary career, an achievement about which her most hostile biographer, Kronenberger writes:

Lady Mary Montagu was the most interesting Englishwoman of her century. Very much of a personage and something of an eccentric, she revelled in both roles... an independent mind. ...She hated bores, and she fled from them...the best platonic female company that eighteenth-century England can provide.

Almost all the aristocrats with brains spent their life misusing them [and Lady Mary] only arose because she had more sense than the people around her and was bored by them.⁶

Ehrenpreisn and Halsband classify Lady Mary’s works thus:

Those that remained unpublished in her lifetime; those printed without her authority; and finally, those whose publication she arranged
“Still among her unpublished manuscripts are her juvenilia: poems, translations, a pastoral in prose and verse, a brief epistolary romance---

“A more puzzling form of non-publication is her critique of Joseph Addison’s tragedy, Cato---She wrote at the desire of Mr. Wortley; suppressed at the desire of Addison---

“Although a great admirer of La Rochefoucauld---she wrote a long essay in French to refute one of his maxims---that marriages can be delightful as well as convenient.7

The list should also include her works mangled by others. Similarly, *Turkish Embassy Letters*, published posthumously, must be counted in a separate category because these letters not only formed the basis of her lasting fame in the world of literature as a woman of letters, perhaps the only target she longed for throughout her life, but also proved a source of inspiration for later generations, especially European women travelers to the Orient who frequently cited her. Thus, the *Letters* themselves became a claim to authority of women’s writing, and in her preface to *TEL*, Miss Astell proudly prognosticated, “Male-authors with an envious eye [would] praise coldly, that they may the more decry.”

The title of the first edition of *TEL* refers to "Sources that Have Been Inaccessible to Other Travellers", and the letters themselves frequently reiterate that they present a different and more accurate description than that of previous travelers. Her position as wife of an ambassador gave her easy access to palaces and courts, harems and baths, an advantage over ordinary travel writers. This was possible because in her capacity as a female traveler she had easy access to her material. Whereas male travelers
usually indulged in wine or pretty women or Turkish baths as a site for unbridled sexual practices, she experienced a different Orient whose culture, morality and manners were ‘as it is with you’ and ‘not so diverse’. These letters are remarkable for because they display Lady Mary’s wit, empathy and sense of adventure. It is rightly said that the success of TEL lies in Lady Mary’s ability ‘to break away from the rigid confinements---mental and intellectual as much as physical---of her own society’. As an enlightened and emancipated woman, Lady Mary not only crossed the barriers of England but assimilated the entire Europe and the heartland of Islam in her letters. Such were the charms of TEL that Dr. Johnson read through it to the end in his later life. Truly, that is “the only way of knowing a woman who, lacking glamour and magnetism and charm, is yet the best platonic female company that eighteenth-century England can provide.” It is reported that her descriptions of nude Oriental beauties inspired even male artists like Ingres.

It is often claimed that Lady Mary is one of the most important, most provocative and most entertaining women writers between Aphra Behn and Jane Austen. Concluding their assessment of Lady Mary, Ehrenpreis and Halsband write:

Her career, with its span over mid-century, bridges the gap between, on the one side, women writers as tawdry Sapphos or stately ladies, and, on the other side, women writers as professional and respectable members of the republic of letters.

TEL comprises Lady Mary’s Orientalism, her travelogue and her stature as a traveler. In a deeper analysis, her Orientalism turns out to be of a different variety. Peter Cochran identifies three varieties of Orientalism:
1. The Orient---is an object, an Other, which you, the subject, wish to “possess” and “penetrate”. This crude sexual formula may be applied to any narrative in which an occidental male possesses and penetrates an oriental female,----as a metaphor for western imperialist expansion into and forcible domination of eastern countries.

2. The Orient as a place in which one can redefine one’s self in new ways, not so much by penetrating and possessing it, as by “encountering” it, and in doing so, newly discovering oneself--- a pitting of self against self. This may lead to a recognition that cultural variety is only skin-deep, so that the boundaries between “occidental self and oriental other” often blur, and the line between hitherto Eurocentric Self and Oriental Other becomes hard to see. The myth of Euro-supremacy loses its power in this version. The Orient is, or becomes, you. The “Eurocentric binary of self and other” becomes indistinct and disappears. East is West, and vice versa. There may be comic potential in this discovery that Orient and Occident are identical.

3. The Orient can also be a place of violence, of oppression, or contrariwise of romance, of lost innocence recovered, or of paradisal strangeness.---In the Orient, everything is revealed as having the capacity to transmute into its complementary opposite--- but the specifically Oriental version of such a voyage of spiritual discovery should really involve adventures in eastern countries. The psychological adventures which Orientalism offers in theory are much more adventurous.\textsuperscript{10}
Clearly, Lady Mary’s Orientalism mostly involved ‘pitting of self against self’ (no. 2), or sometimes expressed ‘capacity to transmute’ (no. 3). In this way, she was able to shatter the myth of Euro-supremacy and, therefore, her ‘Orient’ became ‘you’ and binary distinction of the self and the other became blurred by virtue of which she succeeded in deciphering it. East is indistinct from West, and vice-versa. This understanding helped her adopt not any particular but a variety of rhetorics in describing the Orient:

- Rhetoric of Otherness
- Rhetoric of Identification
- Rhetoric of Difference
- Rhetoric of Tolerance
- Rhetoric of Semiotics
- Rhetoric of Reason
- Rhetoric of Savagery
- Rhetoric of Compassion
- Rhetoric of Erotica
- Rhetoric on Islam

Another specific advantage of dropping the male-dominated Orientalism was the ease in the assimilation of the feminist voice in Oriental discourse; what Lady Mary wrote was unique and ‘authentic’ because she was not towing any other person’s line but inking down her own experience. Although it remained mired in class discourse but she succeeded in resolving feminist issues within the realm of Orientalism. This also helped her in contesting predominant myths about the Orient and its peoples, especially its women.
By disrupting the monolithic narrative of Orientalism, Montagu could highlight the good breeding of the Turks, high culture of the Ottoman court, parity of the Turkish elite class with those back home, and freedom and financial self-reliance of Turkish women. She honestly states her identification with Turkish women and raises no objection against ‘four wives’ or gender relations. As a matter of fact, she praises the Turkish women’s veil, their Harem and demolishes myths of promiscuity. She also highlights Turkish women’s superior beauty, though some critics term it as ‘fetishization of white skin’. Some readers may feel some lapses in her description of Islam and its emblems but one should realise that her responsibilities did not require her to interpret or represent Islam. In fact, what she set out to achieve was to present a faithful portrayal of Turkish Muslims. If they erred in their practice of Islam, this was not her fault as a foreigner.

Nevertheless, she addresses and dismisses Islam-bashing and builds a strong argument for bridging the gap between feminism and Islam. She condemns the polemic against Islam----depiction of the Prophet of Islam as an impostor, or ‘the Anti-Christ’, charges of iconoclasm, Islamic lore as the locus of a wanton sensuality and inherent violence besides shunning the polemics of the ‘Middle Ages’. She frankly appreciates the Turkish elites’ steadfastness and their good behaviour towards their slaves.

As a child of the Age of Reason and a member of the enlightened society characterized by knowledge, self-control and open-mindedness, Lady Mary vastly demystified the Orient as a dark, obscure, unintelligible, and unpredictable territory and presented it on a pleasing aesthetic level. She delved into the heterogeneity of Turkish society and came to conclude that as stolid as earlier male travelers have
painted them, their grasp of reality is not staled by ‘previous Oriental knowledge’ rather, the West needs to further open up within its polemical spaces.

While Lady Mary’s Orientalism maintains positive ideals, her travelogue, the second aspect of TEL supports progressive and inclusive philosophy downplaying cultural, racial, and economic differences besides producing a kind of geography that does not sustain the conquering voice of a European representative but promotes the emotional response of a gendered discourse that is both authentic and socially secure. Here she does not seem interested in ‘seizing’ or ‘owning’ the Turkish woman as seen in the colonialist narratives, but in cooperating with them and assisting them. She has tried in her travelogue, to sensitize her readers to visualize and think in terms of co-existence instead of vilification. In her travelogue, she appears to be distinctly inaugurating a new discourse which is both cross-cultural and empathetic. Indeed, she is not a run-on-the-mill type of ordinary travel-writer.

It is this travelogue that tells us what a traveler of ‘a very diligent curiosity’ Lady Mary was! Firstly, it is difficult today to imagine the obstacles of travel in the eighteenth century’s framework of gender relations, geo-politics and class constraints, besides historically specific social, political and economic relations. Even in the protection of liveried entourage servants and military retinue, she had to fear for Tartars and wild animals, hazardous banks and unkind weather. The geographical, historical and political context of her journey differs even from that of Mary Kingsley or Fanny Park. Braving the legions of snow, passing over the frozen Danube and journeying through Hungary, Bohemia and Germany with ‘a fresh scene of an opera everyday’ for about half-an-year, deserts of Serbia, overgrown with thick wood, staying among foreign people and returning through the Mediterranean Sea, the
‘Elysian fields’ of Tunis, ruins of Carthage, and the ‘dreadful Alps’ is incomparable to today’s jet-plane tourism. Moreover, she was a woman traveler, bearing the responsibilities of tending to a baby and maintaining proper decorum as the wife of an ambassador.

However, it was this travel that was the source of TEL, first in her daily journal and informal letters and then in its compiled and polished form, and this poses a ticklish question: What motivated Lady Mary to pen down TEL? Sarah Fielding opines, “Perhaps the best Excuse that can be made for a Woman’s venturing to write at all, is that which really produced this Book; Distress in her Circumstances: which she could not so well remove by any other means in her Power.” But Virginia Woolf says, “Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for.” The question which remains unanswered is, what inspired Lady Mary: muse or distressed circumstances?

Lady Mary seems to side with her muse. Her aristocratic standard of literature says: Those who write, “merely to get money”; they are corrupted, she says, because they are forced to “fall into the notions that are most acceptable to the present Taste.” and that “The Greatest Virtue, Justice, and the most distinguishing prerogative of Mankind, writing, when duly executed do Honor to Human nature, but when degenerated into Trades are the most contemptible ways of getting Bread.” But there was another reason behind her hesitation to print her travelogue, as she told her daughter, “When I print, I submit to be answer’d and criticised”.

Lady Mary’s critics have been somewhat irrational in ridiculing her, thereby underscoring her other qualities as a writer, an opinion-maker and a human being of forbearance, tenacity and persistence. She was censured at the Court for writing a
pamphlet not suiting their decorum. When she tended to neglect Wortley, he called her ‘friend of an immoral lady,’ and when her beauty was ruined by smallpox, Wortley bore it, but her literary opponents, Pope and Hervey used the disaster to call her ‘pox’d Sappho’ and ‘Moll Worthless’. Even today, she is vilified. With reference to Lady Mary’s description of Turkish baths, Briony Llewellyn and Charles Newton write, “We do not know if Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s famous account of the vocabulary of this romantic practice among the Turks still held good for Cairo in the 1840s, but the Lady is supposed to be the consort of a Turkish Bey.” One thing her adversaries cannot negate is her being an accomplished woman writer, and a lady of extraordinary talents.

It seems appropriate here to conclude with what Joseph Spence wrote to his mother in a communication, “Lady Mary is one of the most extraordinary shining characters in the world, but she shines like a comet; she is all irregular and always wandering. She is the most wise, most imprudent; loveliest disagreeablest; best natured, cruelest woman in the world.”
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People

The following are some people associated with "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu"

- Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (British author)

Places

The following are some places associated with "Lady Mary Wortley Montagu"

- London (England, United Kingdom)