Women Travellers in the East

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The woman is absent from the stories and research about the East in modern times. If she does appear, she is almost always referred to in the plural, and if she is judged, she is judged negatively. Even so, within the panorama of European writers and travellers who told of their experiences in the East, three women stand out, all of them white and from the aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie: Lady Montagu, Vita Sackville-West and Gertrude Bell. Their impressions are very valuable due to the importance of their accounts, despite the fact that none of them could completely free themselves from the masculine perspective and bias. However, Bell was the first who, when naming the East, made it into a woman, probably because it has always represented the feminine, the expectant space available to be penetrated, possessed and dominated.

The woman has not been the main object of research on the East, or even a secondary one; she has not fallen within its interest and, lacking visibility, she has been almost deprived of existence. As Jean Richard recalls, poetics determined how to describe travel in modern times; however, the woman was not included. If she appears in the travel accounts of the time, she is at the end of an enumeration. Moreover, in her exceptionality, she is referred to in the plural, as a group and collective, and she is described devoid of specific qualities. Even if analysed from an evaluative point of view, the preferred judgments are negative. She represents a *dual otherness*. On the one hand, she is Oriental, with the worst of its connotations and, on the other, she is a woman, with the inferiority that this represents. Although it is true that the discourses are never univocal, they are usually androcentric and masculinised. Thus, they contain stereotyped images where colonialism, Orientalist ideology and negative and religious attributes are mixed. As Lisa Lowe writes, Orientalism is a discourse enunciated by a unified colonialist subject, intentionally and hopelessly masculine.

There are several notable studies on travel and women: in Spain, the research by Rosa Cerarols and Yasmina Romero Morales, and, internationally, the now classic studies by Meyda Yenegoglu and Billie Melman. Here I will limit myself to talking about three travellers. White, European and from the aristocracy and upper bourgeoisie.

Male discourses talk about their gender, while the few women we know to date who have written about the East differ from them. One of the most important differences is space. Women have access to places that are forbidden to men, although they need their help to get there. This is the case of the English traveller and writer Mary Pierrepoint – Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, after her marriage to Edward Wortley Montagu –, who published

The Turkish Embassy Letters[1] in 1763. She visited these places because her husband was a diplomat and in contact with the highest classes in Istanbul, the only ones who have two of the most symbolic and intimate spaces in the East, which gave rise to literary and visual sources: the harem and the Turkish bath or hammam. The woman knows that experience lends a certain truth to the story, which the man does not have since he cannot access these places, although he sometimes tries using his gender and, therefore, privilege. The stories show that she knows her journey is different from the man's. This is acknowledged by Lady Montagu in her letters, where she argues that previous travellers had lied: "I am sure I have now entertained you with an account of such a sight as you never saw in your life, and what no book of travels could inform you of, as 'tis no less than death for a man to be found in one of these places" [Letter XXVI]. "'Tis a particular pleasure to me here, to read the voyages to the Levant, which are generally so far removed from truth, and so full of absurdities, I am very well diverted with them. They never fail giving you an account of the women, whom, 'tis certain, they never saw" [Let XXXVIII].

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The man says nothing or very little about the condition in which the woman lives in the home. He not only takes for granted that he is a role model, but also that he is exemplary and beatific, which Lady Montagu denounces: "All [the Sultan's...] ladies, [...] were ready to die with envy and jealousy [...] But this seemed to me neither better nor worse than the circles in most courts, where the glance of the monarch is watched, and every smile is waited for with impatience, and envied by those who cannot obtain it" [Let. XXXIX].

The woman becomes, at last, an important object of the description. The tales of women travellers need to reach us so that something as obvious as the woman noticing the woman is apparent. She discovers other ways of being thanks to the journey, and experiences her self and her gender awareness in a process of construction thanks to the encounter with the East and other women. As Lady Montagu explains: "Turkish ladies don't commit one sin the less for not being Christians. [...]. 'Tis very easy to see, they have in reality more liberty than we have. No woman, of what rank soever, is permitted to go into the streets without two murlins, 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. Their shapes are also wholely [sic] concealed, by a thing they call a serigee [...].You may guess then, how effectually this disguises them, so that there is no distinguishing the great lady from her slave. [...] and no man dare touch or follow a woman in the street" [Let. XXIX].

Vita Sackville-West, an English writer and gardener – as she liked to define herself –, was invited to the coronation of Reza Sha Pahlavi in Teheran in April 1926, because of her privileged status as the wife of the English diplomat Harold Nicholson, business adviser in the city. Her account in *Passenger to Teheran,*[2] published in 1926 – which also covers her travels through Egypt, Russia, Iraq, India and Poland –, is important, as there are

1. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *The Turkish Embassy Letters*, London, Virago, 1994.
2. Vita Sackville-West, *Passenger to Teheran*, London, Collins & Brown, 1990.

Winston Churchill, Gertrude Bell (3rd from left), T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) at Giza during the 1921 Cairo Conference.

hardly any descriptions of the coronation of Reza Sha Pahlavi but others in which she, a woman, pays extraordinary attention to the Iranian woman. As in previous travellers' discourses, the woman appears as a ghost, a mystery to be unravelled and an enigma to be revealed. The secret attracts, fascinates, and the need arises to reveal it to discover the mystery, one of the great Orientalist desires. Once again, she describes women as a group or collective. The discourse is also hegemonic, just like that of men, but it expands and becomes more complex, since the objects (or rather the "subjects") are women. Vita concentrates more on detail and produces more honest writing. The text interacts with the "vast majority" of the social body of women and moves away from patriarchal norms. The discourse eschews the centralist and masculine line: "A Persian crowd is divided sharply into sexes; the stillness of the silent males, and then, from the black veiled figures, a sudden, charming twittering, as from a lot of birds or children. They sat cross-legged on the pavement, rising into standing tiers, peeping from under their veils; young women with bright eyes, old women like traditional mothers-in-law, tyrants of the household, and little girls… One never got more than a glimpse, but that glimpse revealed the whole character in a way that the uncovered face rarely does, whether it was a glimpse of the lively naughty eyes, or

of the sagging, pouchy ill-tempered jowl of the old Megaera. One had brushed past them every day on the pavement, in little clusters of two and three, and caught such glimpses, but never until now seen them collected in such quantities, as though every little secret household in Teheran had poured its women out on to the pavement, jabbering, excited."

The historian and diplomat Gertrude Bell tries to describe in detail and with an archaeological perspective the years she lived in the East. Member of the British intelligence service and belonging to the country's upper bourgeoisie, she published *Safar Nameh, Persian Pictures: A Book Of Travel* in 1894,[3] a book that covers her first journey through twenty images (pictures or impressions) and that begins with this statement: "The thronging Oriental life is in itself an endless source of delight." The East as an accumulation of objects (always disorganised) and a reason for joy and satisfaction. The attempt to show the bustle of public space and the types and customs of the inhabitants is admirable. Also the desire to transfer the movement of travel to writing, which she fully succeeds in doing. Colours, human groups, actions and forms give a vivid tempo to the story: "A kaleidoscopic world of unfamiliar figures passes to and fro beneath the white mulberry-trees which spring out between the cobble stones of the pavement: grave elders holding their cloaks discreetly round them, dervishes with a loincloth about their waists, and a brilliant scarf bound over their ragged locks, women enveloped from head to foot in loose black garments [...], negro slaves and white-robed Arabs, beggars and loiterers, and troops of children..."

The woman appears again as part of an enumeration and turned into a ghost – this time black –, and Bell mentions her by reducing her to the clothes she wears. Likewise, she relates her to fatality, a demon that appears and disappears among the "exoticized" streets, a passive beggar waiting for a handout, wherever and whoever it comes from. The East has a mocking beauty; that is, it is hard to grasp, which makes conquest difficult and increases desire: "Yet in this desolation [of the gardens] lurks the mocking beauty of the East." And she continues: "As it listeth, it comes and goes; it flashes upon you through the open doorway of some blank, windowless house you pass in the street, from under the lifted veil of the beggar woman who lays her hand on your bridle, from the dark, contemptuous eyes of a child; then the East sweeps aside her curtains, flashes a facet of her jewels into your dazzled eyes, and disappears again with a mocking little laugh at your bewilderment; then for a moment it seems to you that you are looking her in the face, but while you are wondering whether she be angel or devil, she is gone."

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The Orientalist commonplaces of desire and fascination populate the stories and descriptions of the countries through which she travels and where she lives: Iraq, Palestine or Saudi Arabia. The joy, the bliss, the fascination, the exoticism are so great that, for the first and possibly only time, Bell changes the gender of the East: she makes it female. So we read: "For it is in her gardens that she is most herself – they share her charm, they are as unexpected as she."

Until then it had been masculine, and now she names it and makes it a woman. However,

3. Gertrude Bell, *Safar Nameh, Persian Pictures: A Book of Travel*, Bristol, Read & Co. Books, 2020.

although feminised, it is still the place where the most Orientalist desires are fulfilled, probably because the East has always represented the feminine even if it was not given that gender, until Bell arrived and expressly recognised it. The East represents the expectant space available to be *penetrated*, *possessed* and *dominated*.