“Exotic Sweden”: A Nordic Quest in the Winter of 2010

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Ossian-style notions of a ‘natural’ pre-historic and pre-civilization North were grafted onto contemporary Sweden. Travelers hope to find a situation that would conform to preconceived, Rousseau-esque and Ossianic ideals, as can be seen from the reports of Ernst Moritz Arndt on his Swedish travels (Bohnen 1991). This image of Sweden has been operative ever since; even today, thousands of backpackers still hope to find in Sweden an unspoiled nature, people living in harmony with nature, and a relief from the constraints of civilization.

Lutz Rühling, Imagology (250)

Introduction

I cannot remember my earliest impressions of Scandinavia as a Turk living in Istanbul or how they came into being. But to begin with a confession, I used to have this homogenous notion of the Scandinavian countries that they must share many things in common and thus were more or less the same. If a Swede had referred to the Middle East in a similar way, we would have been even. This may give an idea about how far away and exotic this part of the world was for me then. “Then” refers to a time when I was 18 years old in the early 1990s. I was not only reading the required material of English language and literature courses that I was enrolled in, but I was also devouring a huge sum of European literature since we have a rich variety of translated works in Turkey. Consequently, I must have gathered hundreds of literary representations of national characters, most of which I have been in the process of recycling academically over the years.

The following narration reads in the form of a parody of adventure and epistolary tradition pioneered by Lady Montagu, in which the exotic locale (Sweden in general, and Linköping in particular) serves as “a place
where the laws of normality, realism and mundane plausibility are suspended in favor of [the] ‘strange’, exciting, [and] unpredictable” as defined by Joep Leerssen (325). In addition, I support travelers’ escapist attitudes regarding journeys because I have the itch to travel and become creative and energetic during or after my escapism to foreign lands. Therefore, I do not consider myself the ego/ethnocentric traveler, or the grumpy one. In this sense, my approach towards Sweden or the Swedes becomes inevitably closer to the approach that Lady Montagu (1689-1762) adopted then towards the Ottoman Empire and the Turks. I also very consciously exoticize the “normality” or mundane in foreign countries, since they serve as the very core of the exotic that I cannot help but to construct here. In the process, I integrate myself into the tradition of transnational female travel writing.

It is in the light of Lady Montagu’s letter which narrates her visit to the Turkish bath in 1717 that the concept of the counter-exotic or ubertransparency is also introduced. Innumerable candles and artificial lights which illuminate the darkness in Swedish winters not only generously decorate the windowsills of each living and working space, but also function metaphorically for the purposes of this article. It provides me the material to question the definitions of the exotic and mahrem, an Arabic word whose one meaning (hidden/private) among others will be discussed. The lack of private spheres –at least from the perspective of the visiting researcher from Cyprus– sets a curious contrast to the importance given to the individual space and liberties in Sweden. The final letter addressed to a Turkish friend describes the Swedish sauna experience, parroding Montagu’s letter. It is analyzed with Lisa Lowe’s discussion of various rhetorics of difference and identification. In other words, exoticizing process can also have a “friendly face” (Leerssen 325) and be practiced both by focusing on differences or similarities between the two cultures as the letters will reveal.

Before demonstrating the significance of the cultural codes and how they can be ironically intertwined with or point at the literal codes in my account of the Swedish culture and its everyday life, I would first like to define what I refer to as codes. This then is followed by a discussion of the concept of exoticism and how it should be distinguished from the concept of the Other or the process of othering. In Cultural Codes – Who Holds the Key?, Jenny Hyatt and Helen Simons define codes as “a secret system of words, symbols or behaviours that are used to convey messages that are contextually bound” (24). Most cultural codes are expressed at an
“observable level, through verbal and non-verbal means” but they are the results of interactions with “levels of culture” (24). This means that what is observed often does not make sense to the outsider, that is, me, the non-Swedish academic/researcher in the context of this article. As Hyatt and Simons put it concisely “the codes are known only to their authors and inventors, the insider group,” which then facilitate their shorthand usage by that specific group, allowing swift communication (28). In other words, it is not only masons and intelligence workers that use them; we all use codes for communicational purposes in our everyday life.

Codes can be used both consciously and unconsciously and they are invariably difficult to comprehend in particular for a traveler or an outsider who does not even know the official language, let alone the unwritten or non-verbal ones. Unless the cultural codes are cracked, the traveler is left floundering in a world of assumption and false premise. This means that his/her ability to evaluate and comprehend cultural processes is temporarily curtailed. The traveler/outsider is in danger of acting on miscomprehension which means that his/her efforts to adapt are likely to be failed. Since codes exist in all cultures and sub-cultures, I believe that the most efficient and the least depressing way to deal with them is self-humor, a balanced and intelligent form of it, similar to that which Lady Montagu appropriated in the early 18th century.

When it comes to separating exoticism from othering, Joep Leerssen and Christine Kray’s ideas are helpful. In a book review, Kray argues that “unlike the ‘other,’ who is an actual person(s) with another voice to ‘talk back’ to its representations, the ‘exotic’ is purely the work of the imagination” (510). In other words, the exotic lacks geographic specificity whereas the Other person exists in an “identifiable geographic place” unlike the image of the exotic which often point to a “multitude of peoples and places” (Kray 510). According to Kray, the exotic is “the product of a process of exoticization that removes signs and objects from their original context and fancifully rearranges them” (510).

A similar line of argument is presented by Joep Leerssen in which he claims that “because exoticism will foreground the privilege the different (exotic) aspects” of a society, it actually “pins it down,” and thus, exoticism becomes a “modality of Othering” and “of heightening the Other’s strangeness” (325). Based on this statement, Leerssen defines the exotic locale as “a place where the laws of normality, realism and mundane plausibility are suspended” as briefly mentioned above while locating the agents (me and Lady Montagu) in this article. This process of suspension

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continues “in favor of strange, exciting, unpredictable and sometimes even supernatural or magical events,” (Leerssen 325) all of which can be traced in the letters presented. The other important separation Leerssen identifies in regard to exoticism is within itself, that is, “an exoticism in time (an escapist nostalgia for the past)” and “an exoticism in space (drawing one to distant places)” as he refers to Victor Segalen’s _Essai sur l’exotisme_ (325). Finally, the source of exoticization is the search for an imaginary or idealized space. However, this paradise or utopia, which is constructed through an ideology, fails to materialize when sought. This paradise does not have to be a valorized foreign country; it can also include mobile spaces such as trains, as a passage by Michel de Certeau will demonstrate in the first letter.

My interest in solo-traveling in Europe during my university years has led me more towards reading travel literature by women rather than fiction. I could not find any role models except Buket Uzuner, who studied in Norway and Finland and extensively traveled all over Scandinavia after completing her BA in Ankara, Turkey.¹ She inspired me for further traveling as well as conducting research on traveling and its constituents. However, even after visiting most of the Western Europe and North America (including extended periods of study in Canada and Germany), Scandinavia still remained unexplored by me until 2010².

In the meantime, my connection to the region was limited to novels, media news, and movies by some Scandinavian directors that one can only see in film festivals or upon special requests from libraries’ DVD collections. In addition, I have a Turkish friend who studied Law at Lund University in 2002 for his MA. When he came back to Istanbul, he told me that he had such a great time and was in complete admiration of Swedes’ love for cycling under any weather condition. Thus, one of my early processes of exoticizing Sweden became directly related to bikes and outdoors. In the following year, one of his Swedish friends came to Turkey for a mountain bike trip. To my great surprise, I learned that his friend never owned a car in his life (he was 30) and wore out more than a dozen bicycles. Consequently, I arrived in Sweden preconditioned to see hundreds of Swedes cycling on the icy roads. However, witnessing something is more powerful than hearing about it and that is what happened to me. During my exploratory yet clumsy walks in Linköping and regular commute to my office, I could not help but stare shamelessly at commuter cyclists. None would unravel the secret to me, in particular the ones who cycle with a hockey stick in one hand. I, the traveler, have to

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accept that there are some secrets in any society which must be shared by the locals and kept collectively. Giving up this pursuit of balance has not been an easy one for the traveler who arrived from the island of Cyprus where the perfect conditions of Mother Nature have been unanimously rejected by the population, and cyclists remain elusive and exotic creatures that are rarely spotted.

Taking the focus back to Sweden, the following fragmented narration reads as epistolary forms written to a close girlfriend. One mini-dialogue that took place between “a local and the explorer” is inserted in one of the letters. My last letter, addressed to the same Turkish friend, recalls Lady Mary Montagu, the famous British female traveler whom I admire and of whose style I gently poke fun through imitation within a completely different set of cultural and temporal contexts. The initial “magic” of the automated life of the everyday life in Sweden recounted below is immediately deflated by the narrator and expressed in terms of frustration, yet remains in the borders of the exotic, only relatively defined as a concept. In this context, the exotic is presented as closely related to two types of codes. When used literarily, it reflects irony and parody (i.e. pushing a button, pulling a lever, opening a lid etc.), when used theoretically, it stands for cultural codes, serving as the keys of comprehension and acceptance to a new culture.

Cultural codes are those symbols and systems of meaning that have a specific relevance to members of a particular group or society. This article explores the influence and impact of these codes on the traveler and how they undo the exotic. Unlocking codes by a Turkish researcher in a few months in the context of Sweden may seem a daunting task. However, she considers it a necessary prerequisite to establish genuine relationships with people from other cultures, not so different than Lady Montagu whom she admires. In this sense, as Joep Leerssen separates it in Imagology, one can trace exoticism in space (Sweden) and exoticism in time (Lady Montagu’s era when people used to write detailed letters to their friends rather than sending tweets or short Facebook messages). What follows, then is my account of a Turkish academic in Sweden corresponding with her friend Ayşe in Turkey.

**Letter I- Dear Ayşe,**

I hope you are fine and looking forward to receiving all the bits and pieces of my journey and my first days in Sweden. Let me start by
cheating here a little bit and copying some sections from my diary for you. The astonishment actually begins at the Arlanda airport in Stockholm where I can print my train ticket to Linköping by entering the “code” that Berit Starkman, the administrative coordinator of Tema Genus, sent me online. I haven’t even met her yet. I follow her instructions and “voila!”, the machine prints my ticket and I follow the signs to Track 1. As you know, we don’t have this system in Turkey or in Cyprus, plus I never take trains for traveling across cities. The train arrives just on time and I am now sitting semi-comfortably in my assigned number (window) and begin observing my surroundings. After the train stops briefly at Stockholm Central, I can observe the regular commuters closely. They act more “normal,” that is, not perplexed and out of place, than the Arlanda Airport passengers who arrived in Sweden for the first time. The teenager who sat next to me with a brown MacDonald’s bag opens it up immediately and begins devouring it rather grossly, totally indifferent to the disapproving stares of the old Swedish gentleman who only after one hour of traveling very quietly took out a small and healthy looking sandwich from his bag. He is sitting right across from me and is so careful not to have any eye contact with me. We are also very careful not to touch each other’s legs by mistake although it is not an easy task. The leg room in the train is not meant for long Swedish legs. After gulping down the XL size coke to clean the burger taste in his mouth, the anonymous teenager takes out his laptop from his backpack and extends the train-table to place the computer comfortably in front of him. Another silent “voila!” on my part. He pulls an A4 paper-size white plastic trash bag out of a pile from my side of the train and stuffs the remains of the Mac-menu to it. As he probably behaves like any “normal” Swedish passenger, he keeps unfolding an unending series of “exotic” items for me, the foreigner, in this stuffy compartment without realizing the impression that his show created.

I no longer stare out of the window although I feel like I have to unless I am doing something else (like reading a book or taking a nap, which is still “doing” something in comparison to just staring at people and objects). Based on personal experience as well as the feedback I received from other travelers, I know that in some cultures, staring at other people is very rude. Also, looking out of a window or stare at one spot for a long time without doing anything is considered “wasting or killing time.” As you know, on the island where I live, it is perfectly normal just to sit on a chair and look at people passing by for several hours. On the train, instead of staring into the blinding whiteness, I begin reading a chapter
from *The Practice of Everyday Life* by Michel de Certeau and smile at the irony of the chapter I randomly pick: “Railway Navigation and Incarceration.”

Slowly, reading the chapter becomes annoying since de Certeau strips the romantic notions of railway traveling from me by suggesting that I am indeed nothing but a “pigeonholed, numbered and regulated” being in this “rational utopia” (111), commonly referred to as the railway car. But, wait, am I not the explorer of the exotic North and the narrator of this piece of writing? I can refuse to be incarcerated although simultaneously I realize that most heroes in the genre of adventure travel are captured and imprisoned at some point during their journeys. I keep reading and soon realize that I was unfair to him, so unfair. He lets me out of the prison, ending the chapter with a fairy-tale like tone which I aimed to appropriate for this narration:

... As always one has to get out: there are only lost paradises. Is the terminal the end of an illusion? There is another threshold, composed of momentary bewilderments in the airlock constituted by the train station. History begins again, feverishly, enveloping the motionless framework of the wagon: the blows of his hammer make the inspector aware of the cracks in the wheels... visored caps and uniforms restore the network of an order of work within the mass of people, while the wave of travellers / dreamers flows into the net composed of marvelously expectant or preventively justiciary faces. Angry cries. Calls. Joys. In the mobile world of the train station, the immobile machine suddenly seems monumental and almost incongruous in its mute, idol-like inertia, a sort of god undone... There comes to an end the Robinson Crusoe adventure of the travelling noble soul that could believe itself intact because it was surrounded by glass and iron (de Certeau 114).

How can you not feel that you are part of a saga after reading such a strong closing passage about traveling by train in spite of its repeated insistence on illusion? Dazzled by the power of de Certeau’s words, I begin to reevaluate the details of my three-hour-long train journey. In other words, I am back to staring at people and objects, and thus completely acting out of the normal or the mundane. After a while, I get bored and sleepy. Furthermore, I no longer enjoy my seat since I become concerned with missing the train stop due to the language issue. There is an automated female voice announcing the stops but I do not understand her although she is pronouncing only a few words. Smiling at de Certeau’s philosophical query whether or not the terminal is the end of an illusion or
Cultural Codes as Social and Professional Exchanges

In their discussion of deciphering cultural codes, Hyatt and Simons argue that “the first and most obvious” factor to take into account is “the difference in mother tongue languages and the link language (often English)” which vary in meaning and usage. Precise meaning is sometimes at risk, if not lost, whenever translation is involved whether directly or indirectly (24). Secondly, cultural codes often have deep cultural assumptions which take time and interaction in order to be fully comprehended. Thirdly, the disciplines which have their own professional vernacular, in my case, the academic jargon of gender and feminist studies, again “frequently coded for shorthand exchange.” According to Hyatt and Simons, understanding these codes is crucial for effective communication and successful collaboration.

Hugs,

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Simons, professional vernacular of a discipline presents a “double task for transactions in collaborative ventures” when cultural codes are present (24). In my case, the exotic is the language of the everyday life outside of the Gender Studies Center, not the academic codes of the women and gender studies in English. It is in the latter realm of the language which I feel comfortable with, thus the Center itself is not exotic or alienating even though it is also a part of the Sweden I am out to explore. The fourth and the final factor to consider when understanding cultural codes is the “context of use.” Hyatt and Simons argue that particular messages such as intellectual, political and emotional become encoded and embedded through social and professional interchange in the particular culture (24).

In this article, the emotional messages of confusion, miscommunication and excitement as expressed in the letters should be separated from the intellectual and political ones. Intellectually, the narrator of the letters does not have problems since she seems to be equipped with enough knowledge in regard to her discipline as well as the gender and women specific issues in Sweden in order to be offered the position she has in the Center. Yet, this is also limited and potentially alienating in case she was to be present in a group exclusively of Swedish scholars, especially because of the intellectual, political and emotional messages conveyed and shared within that group. That is the reason why those supposedly smart and mostly well-travelled academics are all provided with survival kits and orientation programs which explain even the most basic elements of the everyday life.

Letter II- Dear Ayşe,

“Here are your keys and your visitor I.D. card, and the password for the entrance door in case you come to study over the weekends or at nights. Our coordinator is going to take you on a short orientation tour to get yourself familiar with the surroundings and all,” says Berit. I finally meet her after following all the online instructions and passwords she provided for me during my brave journey to Sweden from an embargoed (and thus) underdeveloped corner of an island on the Mediterranean. Here I am, genuinely welcomed and cared for, but fed with more numbers and passwords. These codes are the literal ones as opposed to the more challenging cultural codes yet they still help generating the sensation of the exotic images of Sweden. The impressions of high-technology and order can easily provide an idealized paradise for an academic, which will be deflated soon enough. “Everything is automated and running smooth”
sounds more like an observation than a compliment when I chat with the I.T. person in charge who comes and provides me with more passwords about which we finally had to joke. “Sorry,” he says, “Otherwise you cannot get printouts, make photocopies, or scan documents. Even worse, you will have no Internet connection”. Extremely irritated by the possibility of not having an Internet connection, I convince myself that I can remember all the passwords and the location of my office and house keys among many other things such as the Swedish words for milk and sour cream. I enviously remember the comfort of the Swedish teenager on the train, who had enjoyed the Internet connection there while eating his burger (Leerssen 325). I am in the land of passwords, keywords, and numbers which can unlock all the doors. A sci-fi fairy tale has been my Sweden so far. I am the heroine in this adventure story and ready to open the gates hopefully without making much a fool of myself. I even earned a nickname thanks to the IT manager, *Turkishdelightbul*, not-very-creatively coined as it may sound to some who are not into analyzing images and exoticism. “bul” is the last syllable of Istanbul where I grew up, and the rest needs no further explanation. Consenting to this form of exoticism which Joep Leerssen very briefly includes in his discussion of exoticism is called “auto-exoticism” or “internal exoticism.” It presents “the self-image of countries” (add the citizens to the word “countries”) which internalized “the exoticist terms” (such as Turkish delight, used representationally for a woman from Turkey when offered a computer password) “in which they are habitually represented to and by dominant outsiders” (325). Deciphering this code/password, however, opens a whole other pack of entangled issues such as orientalism and sexism, which I willingly drop for now and continue with my own “exoticizing” processes.

My best,

Özlem

**Language(s) and the Exotic**

Among the previously listed four factors when understanding the cultural codes, the first one was the language issue. Referred to as “the link language” by Hyatt and Simons (24), which was English in my time in Sweden, is impressively widely spoken among the Swedes. Still, the structural and vocal differences between my mother tongue (Turkish) and
the link language (English) as well as the local language (Swedish) was so huge that they impeded my process of adaptation while increasing the opportunities of exoticizing that actually enriched my own imagination. Thus, not having the local language served as an exoticizing function, resulting in more exotic images, or as in Kray’s definition of the exotic, in purely works of my imagination. The process of recycling is one example. The dialogue between the Turkish narrator and the Swedish researcher who is equipped with the cultural codes of both the academia and the everyday life of Sweden will show how the link language of English can fail when the cultural codes are missing.

Letter III - Dear Ayşe,

I was relieved to find the photocopies of a “survival kit” on my desk when I finally settled down in my flat. I read it several times and decided to keep it with me for the next few days. Thanks to my brief but quite informative orientation, I think I know how to sort out the mysteries of recycling now. First, you start within the house by sorting out the trash you produce into four: colored glass, clear glass, paper and cardboard, and finally, tin and aluminum cans. After that, you gather your stuff, go out of your apartment building, walk a little bit –say 20 meters or so– and unlock the closest green huts that are built only for recycling purposes. However, there is no recycling sign but only some Swedish writings on them, which I think is not very traveler-friendly. Initially, I thought they were simply storage spaces, which tells you how some items in the local culture are simply assumed to be self-evident, whereas they are not.

These wooden green huts can only be unlocked by the nearby flat residents. Two of them are adjacent and the second one is actually only for the decomposable food leftover stuff. The other solid trash separated into four based on their material remain in the big boxes in the first hut and does not stink as much. The one for the decomposable food leftover has the most mysterious design and is insoluble unless someone tells you how to act in there. In fact, one of the postdoctoral scholars in the Research Center went there by herself for the first time, looked around, felt completely lost and left the empty room, taking her smelly trash back to her flat. Mind you, she received no orientation and assumed that the two big pipes were there most probably to heat the hut or to provide electricity or something. Mind you again that you are basically illiterate so you are not even sure if that room is somewhat supplementary to the closer

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recycling hut with very clear visual signs inside such as open plastic carts, which are full of junk. The further and completely empty hut is only stinky and the smell does not provide much of a hint even if you are brave enough to open the lids of the dark green pipes. I leave it here for you to tell me about the function of the dark green pipes in the stinky empty room. I am sure you have figured it out.

As in any exotic land, I am overwhelmed and yet excited by the possibilities of unlocking as many doors as I can during my stay, including the cultural and invisible ones. However, you also know that I was swamped by the responsibilities and the tasks of the everyday or the mundane for any average adult Swede. I prepared a mental list of things and also tried to remember where I put my office and flat keys, the padlock for the gym and the 10 SEK coin for the locker in the swimming pool, the last two also requiring credit-card-like passes if you want to go through the initial gates. Then came the surprise element in the exotic. It is the moment when you begin to think that you figure out something and something else happens and reverses it, or undoes that very thing that was in the fresh process of construction. I guess that is what happened to my doors of perception when a stranger gently knocked on my door and asked in Swedish: foyolanadinikel?

Me: I'm sorry, I have no idea of what you're saying.
The Stranger: Oh, I just wanted to borrow your office key for a second? I didn’t bring mine.
Me: (thinking in my head only and simultaneously staring at him as if he is crazy) Wow, I guess I have the key to open all the doors of Sweden and a.k.a. Berit Starkman is – who knows what her real name is? – in fact a Swedish-genie and then the next thing I know is that she will grant me three wishes.
Me: (this time to the Stranger) I know this may sound a bit crazy, and I notice that you did switch into English but I still have no idea of what you’re saying.
The Stranger: Oh, didn’t you know that all the keys for this floor can open the doors of the other offices?
Me: (Holy guacamole! There cannot be much exotic going on here, time to pack) Oh, well, here is my key then.
Not having privacy in one’s work space is shocking. The failure of the link language is another blow since it genuinely made me question the vocabulary and the structure of English which both of us were using. These discoveries left me vulnerable in a way that I did not share with anyone except the Turkish doctoral student whom I come across occasionally. Theoretically speaking, the definition of the exotic has the element of the unknown in itself, leading me to the ironical comment “time to pack” which followed after the revelation of the common key for all the offices on the floor. Growing up in a culture which highly regards *mahrem* as a significant issue one needs to protect, the effect of having a common key in the work space is doubled with the windows with no curtains in the living spaces. Literally, *mahrem* means intimacy, domesticity, secrecy, women’s space, what is forbidden to a foreigner’s gaze, or a man’s family. Using the concept of “private sphere” instead of *mahrem* can lead to the suppression of the distinctiveness of the domestic sphere in a Muslim context (Göle 7); however, I see it apt here to at least draw a comparison between Swedish and Turkish cultures. Göle argues that “as distinct from Western societies, private life in Muslim societies is directly associated with the sexuality of women and the forbidden zone itself,” that is, *mahrem* (94). Whether or not this statement is still valid in Turkey and/or accepted by the non-religious people in Turkey like myself, the idea of separation of the private from the public sphere must have been internalized by most Turks as my shock catches me off-guard. How else would you interpret it?

Best greetings and hugs,

Özlem

**Developing a Concept of the Counter-Exotic Due to Darkness: Swedish Saunas versus Turkish Baths?**

The days are dark and getting even darker, there is definitely something uncanny about it, although for the scientist, there is nothing mysterious in the regular positioning and movements of the sun and the earth. Nothing but facts and angles. For the foreigner from Cyprus, it is still uncanny and exotic. However, as also referred by Alp Biricik in his reflections of Sweden in “This is not an (Academic) Paper (on Ethnography),” glowing lights behind the windows of all the buildings stand out for the foreigner as a Swedish element (255). They demystify the

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secrecy of indoors. Innumerous electric candles and mini chandeliers enjoying the best spots on the windowsills are not there to be stared at in Sweden. They stare at you instead while the real people indoors ignore your passing there, and simply continue doing what they are doing in their routine. There is nothing to be stared at unless you are a pervert or foreigner whose country highly regards mahrem as a virtue.

Acknowledging the risk of oversimplification, I would like to summarize a political debate from the early 20th century-Turkey about the concept of mahrem, which polarized the intellectuals in Turkey as the Westernists and the Islamists. As Göle argues “the frontiers between interior and exterior as well as between mahrem (private) and namahrem (public) were drawn upon the female body.” It was through the intersection of these spheres, in which women (not only Turkish but Muslim women in general) were positioned, and their position determined the choice of civilization (Göle 44). In other words, unveiling (of women) served as a prerequisite for a civilized life, which also meant westernized life for many, whereas for the Islamists, keeping women in interior spaces (as men’s mahrem) or veiling them in public meant to preserve the traditions and virtues of women. Since then the civil rights and the gender equality issues regarding women in Turkey changed immensely. However, the internalization of certain elements in one’s culture is always resistant and cannot be altered overnight or over decades. I can feel the history leaking which includes the political debate above in my own behavior as I pull the curtains immediately after I turn on the lights inside my flat. Otherwise, I feel uncomfortable. Maybe it is because unveiling of the interior space in the Swedish way is to me exposing mahrem and it is the curtains and the blinds that preserve my mahrem from the outside world (namahrem). Who can analyze it for sure?

The transparent attitude towards domestic space parallels the comfort with naked bodies in the Swedish saunas and calls for a concept of “counter-exotic.” This concept by no means refers to the “mundane or the familiar,” yet thesaurus entries will tell you that the opposites of exotic are those. Instead, I would refer to it as “ubertransparency” and still include it in my construction of the exotic within the Swedish context even if it may sound contradictory at first. I could have used another term such as “overexposed,” however, the prefix “over” adds a “too-much-ness” to the word it precedes, and thus connotes something negative, which “uber” does not have.
The artificial lights and their reflections are everywhere, challenging the dark, and making the explorer/visiting researcher wonder what life was like without electricity in Sweden, and how this collective resistance to darkness was practiced in the old days. One way, I suppose, was to create warm spaces such as saunas. The sauna is the final exotic element that I dwell on in this paper as a de-eroticized, ubertransparent, and noisy space. Perhaps dim lights and shadows did not bother people as long as they were very warm. They still felt relaxed and happy, crowding the womblike spaces, namely saunas or Turkish baths/bagnios.

Drawing parallelisms to the familiar is a common though ironical tool of the traveler. I say ironic because s/he creates a narrative to arouse curiosity and interest by telling the unknown, the exotic, yet it cannot be too alienating to imagine for the reader, either. Lisa Lowe, in her analysis of Lady Montagu’s Turkish Letters, has an extensive discussion on different forms of rhetorics as a way to approach the letters. Her book Critical Terrains defines Orientalism as a combination of two different rhetorics, the rhetoric of similarity (or identification) and rhetoric of differentiation. This leads to the third one, the rhetoric of comparison. She argues that most travel writers participate in the discourse of Orientalism sometimes by criticizing and other times by adapting it for their purposes. From this menu of rhetoric, the explorer / traveler does not have to select only one. S/he can also combine them in her text while narrating for an audience back home, depending on how she intends to position herself vis-à-vis the culture and people she explores. Thus, the representations or the ideas about the Orient are not actually homogeneous.

I argue that Lisa Lowe’s “rhetoric of difference, similarity (or identification), and comparison” can be applied to the impressions and the representations of the non-Western/Turkish researcher. In other words, these rhetorics might equally as well work from the other direction, that is, when the non-Western subject travels to the West, formulating her versions of exoticism. As mentioned earlier in a quote from Leerssen, exoticism and the process of exoticizing can have their “friendly faces” even when some type of an ethnocentrism is involved (325). In my interpretation of this statement, they do not need to be negative, misleading or prejudicial, in particular when there is no available or accumulated knowledge about the Other (unlike Orientalism), as in the case with the Turkish narrator coming to Sweden.

The letter below parodies and reverses Lady Montagu’s letter describing a Turkish bath (a British traveler exoticizing yet de-eroticizing a
Turkish bath in 1717 versus a Turkish woman exoticizing yet de-eroticizing the Swedish sauna in 2010) and is thus structured in a particular way from the previous letters in this article. As suggested in Srinivas Aravamudan’s article “Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in the hammam,” Lady Montagu reshapes the genre of early travel narrative through her letters as a way that “simultaneously signals ‘romance,’ ‘science,’ and ‘satire’” depending on the position she takes as a writer (73). This reshaping partially explains the contradictory and manifold voices throughout the text. Nevertheless, the dominant voice of Turkish Letters is of a self-conscious and humorous traveler.

Throughout Turkish Letters, Lady Montagu attempts to construct herself as a trustworthy travel writer whose each and every word stands for nothing but the truth. She tries hard to convince the reader of the truthfulness of her accounts. She also complains about the readers’ expectations in a witty way. She invalidates some sexualized images about Turkish women and gender relations in Turkey constructed in previously published travel writers’ accounts. She does not cite their full names but provides initials only. In Aravamudan’s words, she “contests the normative masculine vision of her Western predecessors, noticing different phenomena, and correcting previous misrepresentations from her perspective as a woman” (73). The Turkish narrator’s last letter from Sweden to Ayse should be viewed with these concerns in mind.

For Lady Montagu, a Turkish bath (hammam) serves as a secular public space (with women chatting with each other and crying children etc.) much like the coffee house to which she compares it. In the second part of her letter, she presents passages that portray the beauty of Fatima, a Turkish woman who was one of Lady Montagu’s hosts in the city of Adrianople. This portrayal is followed by a scene from the Turkish bath as complex sites of similarities and differences between the Turkish and the British women. It is in these passages that the boundaries between cultures blur and open up channels for dialogue. When Lady Montagu visits a Turkish bath, a women-only public place where Turkish women go usually once a week to take a long bath, get skin peeling, and socialize, she remains dressed during the visit, which is uncomfortable for a steamy and hot place. During the visit she describes the comfort and the beauty of the women. The scene ends with these following lines: “Adieu, Madam. I am sure I have now entertaind 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.
“Tis no less than Death for a Man to be found in one of these places” (Montagu 315).

There are two main differences between the experiences of the narrator Özlem and Lady Montagu in regard to experiencing these women-only spaces. In Montagu’s case, she is marketing the encounter with Turkish women for vicarious consumption as a female traveler. Srinivas Aravamudan argues that Lady Montagu’s descriptions are “novelties that only a woman can sell,” which her readers enjoy “phantasmagorical desires titillated in the face of death” (88). In the Turkish narrator’s case, there can be no such undertaking or marketing concern since in Sweden, there are indeed mixed saunas depending on individual preference. Consequently, the sauna simultaneously remains to be a “counter-exotic” element in her narrative unlike Lady Montagu’s experience. Secondly, Montagu claims to have observed more than she participated by staying fully dressed in the bagnio, keeping her English femininity apart from that of the Turkish women. In contrast, the Turkish narrator in the sauna crosses over the cultural thresholds, undresses and blurs the boundaries between the “exotic” locals and the traveler further than Lady Montagu did. The following letter is composed still with the assumption that the reader is familiar with the tone and the details of the bath scene in Turkish Letters.⁵

Letter IV- Dear Ayşe,

Thank you for your kind letter and asking for further details of my life in Sweden. As I have mentioned in my earlier letters, life is still very white here in terms of both weather and people, and I have yet to meet someone who doesn’t know English. Before I tell you about my cultural experience among the real locals, I have to begin with a dismissal of a travel book. M.Ö.’s was the only available one in Turkish about Sweden written by a Turkish man who studied in Linköping in the mid-1980s. It has a dry language as if an authority figure is citing facts on life, people, official holidays and traditions of Sweden, yet it is full of misinformation. Fortunately, it is not reprinted so one cannot find it on the book market. Let me tell you that there is currently no mixed sauna on campus unlike he claims. There is a tiny one in the women’s dressing room in the sports complex. One can enjoy it at any time with the least discomfort unlike the other sauna that I have been to a couple of times. It is located in the public swimming complex downtown and it is part of the deal if you have already
paid for your swimming session. There is not much exotic going on for someone who grew up in Turkey and has been to the public bath even once. But I know you and our other friends will not find this line satisfying enough and will insist upon further details. My not having a Facebook account has immensely contributed to the rising curiosity among friends and family about my days here, so I now feel obliged that I have to give a full account of my experience in an authentic Swedish sauna.

I had no problems with going native or smoothly passing as the regular visitor. My previous visits to similar places in other countries and in Istanbul might have helped this transition to be an uneventful one as well. In that sense, you can also imagine that I consider stripping off my clothes completely a non-issue as it is the way that the most locals practice it here. Swedish women’s perception of mahren does not cover any piece clothing but most probably other issues which I am yet to be informed. You must be proud of your friend who doesn’t act like the puritan Lady Montagu in the Turkish bath who remained clothed with her dress stays. I bet she was almost suffocated by the heat and the steam in that heavy and layered dress of hers. Again, unlike Lady Montagu (may her soul rest in peace), when I say that all women were stark naked, I am telling you the truth. Well, she wasn’t, and anyone who has been to an authentic Turkish bath would know that she lied for the sake of fame and popularity. There were, however, a few Swedish teenagers with obvious body-image issues due to their age who are in their bathing suits or fully wrapped towels. The Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi provocatively calls this female body image issue “Size 6: Western women’s harem.” Unfortunately, it is no longer in the West only; I know that you too are desperately working your way to squeeze into a size 6 like the Swedish teens I just mentioned. I wish you were here with me in the sauna to share the comfort of the large and worn-out bodies which are at least 60 or 70 years old. It is only natural, you know. How un-erotically women are spread on their towels, catching up with their friends or family in the dim sauna setting. The solo ones are in “I am meditating” position and their eyes are mostly closed. There is nothing sexualized here as must have become clear for you by now. If only we were fully clothed and had something to drink in front of us, this space could have been a coffee shop or a bar (except that the kids wouldn’t be able to enter). Children are children everywhere so they can be very loud and uncontrollable. In my humble opinion, saunas would be more peaceful and relaxing places if more regulations were strictly in practice: 1. No chatting, just meditating 2. No children under 10 allowed.

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Although I have paid a few visits to the saunas due to my obsession with swimming (it is a complex), I am yet to find the ideal visiting hours for this place. Whenever I go, it is either crowded or very crowded. I find it very mysterious. The only time that was semi-crowded was a weekday at 8 a.m. It was a big challenge for me to be there that early but I had promised some colleagues. I feel very fortunate that the faculty and students in Cyprus are too lazy or too uptight to use the campus swimming pool. Can you imagine Swedes not using our crystal clear outdoor pool? One could have hardly swum a stroke because of the crowd.

My worst experience was on a weekday evening around 7 p.m. I thought it must have been dinner time for many locals so I could enjoy swimming comfortably without the stress of hitting my arms or legs while swimming. When the pool is that crowded, you can hardly get relaxed. You have to watch your surrounding the whole time so that you don’t hit people. Then, if you are determined to swim like I am, you kind of have to manage a rhythm to swim with all kinds of people. I can see your face molding into expressions of disgust, but you know that I am not a hygiene maniac. But that evening was too much even for me. After a few laps, I had to get out. As for the sauna session of the same evening, I would better skip the description. Let me leave the topic aside by saying that no other playground could be noisier.

As for the food, I mostly cook at home and enjoy the inexpensive seafood. What I am going to recall however when I think of Sweden back home are the warming scents of cinnamon rolls and coffee. Swedish desserts are quite delicious and the latest one I discovered is called *semla*. It was not around before the Christmas break, so it must have been a seasonal dessert. As in the case of other exotic elements in a foreign culture, I could not figure out why it is seasonal because there is nothing in the ingredients which is season-specific. I leave you with this gastronomic mystery since it is already time for my *fika*.

Best greetings,

Ö.
Conclusion

According to Peter Mason, the author of *Infelicities: Representations of the Exotic*, the exotic is not something that exists prior to the “discovery,” but it is the very act of discovery that produces it as the exotic. He argues that the time has come to consider whether anything can be said “regarding the elementary structures of the exotic” which is “tantamount to considering how one is to say anything about the exotic as all” (original emphasis) (147). What I have written is a modest contribution to his question. Without losing the histories and periodizations of the exotic, I have reflected on my impressions of Sweden as a guest researcher from Northern Cyprus. I chose Sweden, maybe an unusual preference for locating the exotic at first, to mock the language and process of exotization to underline my conviction that exoticism enjoys an imaginary geography such as Orientalism does. Unlike the dynamics of Orientalism, exotization does not require a cultural and economic hegemony over the other. Therefore, it can work from a reverse direction. In addition, composing a mockery of exoticism is less problematic than locating Sweden in the lines or degrees of Occidentalism or Orientalism in a single article.

I had also hoped to draw attention to the relational element of the exotic. In other words, any location as a phenomenon can be expressed as the exotic in relation to other phenomena in the system(s) of what constituted exotic so far. To my knowledge so far, no similar piece of writing about Sweden in English exists written from the view of a Turkish female visitor with the above concerns in mind. In the attempt, I adopted a humorous tone at times in order to expose the absurdities of narrating how and what the exotic can be. In the process of introducing what exotic is and how it came to being in different geographies, certain continuities and repetitions have emerged. The exotic I described was not only or simply the unknown or the mysterious. In the Swedish context that I experienced, the exotic also demanded its opposite, thus I included a section for the expression of the “ubertransparent” or counter-exotic elements. Yet, I have tried to describe the exotic here as an asexual one, dismantling the image of a sexualized culture. This is the reason for including the sauna episode, which not only demonstrates this but also gently imitates one of the most frequently quoted and studied letters of Lady Montagu without harping on about her style or language.
I have avoided Peter Mason’s too-relativistic approach that the exotic conveys “nothing but the empty echo of itself” (152), and showed that both the formal and personal backgrounds are inevitably in action when one experiences or expresses his/her exotic. Acknowledgment of the failures in and the impossibility of capturing a new culture in a few months, when lacking the language in particular, helped to formulate my Sweden rather basically and modestly. Moments of tragicomedy is another unavoidable element in the experience of the exotic, and unlike the term tragicomedy hints, you may need to opt for one (tragedy) or the other (comedy) no matter how interconnected both are. I opted for the latter.

Notes

1 Scholarly, I am aware of the difference between the terms “Nordic” and “Scandinavian” and of the debates which have been continuing in linguistic, geographical and political realms. The French term “Pays Nordiques” or “Nordic Countries” has become a common term to bring together Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, Denmark), Iceland and Finland under the same umbrella. In this article, however, I take the liberty of using them interchangeably.

2 Importantly, my research trip to Sweden and thus the inspirational process that triggered this article would not have been possible without the postdoctoral fellowship granted by the Center of Gender Excellence in Linköping University and the Swedish Research Council.

3 Justiciary: the chief political and judicial officer under the Norman and early Plantagenet kings; one who administers justice, as a judge.

4 See Nilüfer Göle’s The Forbidden Modern. The original title in Turkish is Modern Mahrem – Medeniyet ve Örtünme. In this article, it is not possible to cover the various meanings of mahrem and how the term has differed in time and cultures.

5 For the full account of the Turkish bath or “bagnio” scene as Lady Montagu refers to, see http://www.archive.org link where various prints of the Letters can be accessed without codes or passwords.

6 In contemporary Turkish travel writing, Buket Uzuner’s Siyah Saçlı Bir Kadının Gezi Notları (Travel Notes of a Brunette) (1989) is still the only travel book published by a Turkish woman who traveled by herself on a low budget in Scandinavia.

References


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