



The Western Woman from the Perspective of Ottoman and Iranian Travelers and Ambassadors in the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries

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Extended Abstract

The recognition of modernity and the advancement of European nations in recent centuries have been a defining factor in shaping political and cultural interactions between the East and Islam—particularly the Ottoman Empire and Iran—and the West. Travelers and political envoys, serving as both cultural and diplomatic intermediaries, played a crucial role in facilitating these exchanges. This study aims to comparatively analyze the perspectives of Ottoman and Iranian travelers and envoys regarding Western women in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, examining the implications of these views for cultural and political relations between the East and the West.

The emergence of these encounters in the Ottoman Empire followed its devastating defeat in the Battle of Passarowitz in 1718 against Austria (Ras, 1994: 385), which ultimately compelled Ottoman statesmen to recognize their stagnation and military shortcomings relative to European powers. In response, the Ottoman administration initiated the dispatch of official envoys to Europe with the objective of studying Western culture and civilization, leading to the systematic compilation of detailed reports on these diplomatic missions.

In Iran, initial interactions with Europe and Western women predominantly occurred through informal journeys undertaken by individuals such as Mirza Abutaleb Esfahani and official diplomatic missions led by statesmen such as Mirza Abulhasan Khan Ilchi. Rather than yielding responsibility-driven reports presented to government authorities for strategic planning and implementation, these experiences were primarily documented as travelogues, reflecting personal observations and interests.

This study addresses the central question of why, despite their cultural and geographical proximity, the Ottoman Empire and Iran responded differently to social transformations in the West, particularly concerning women. By exploring the similarities and differences in these perspectives, this analysis facilitates a deeper understanding of East-West interactions during this period. Employing a comparative methodology and source analysis, this research examines travel memoirs, diplomatic correspondences, and other primary records from Ottoman and Iranian travelers and



envoys. Through a content analysis of these sources, the attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of these individuals toward Western women are extracted and compared. Moreover, the study contextualizes these viewpoints within the historical, social, and political frameworks that shaped Iran and the Ottoman Empire during this era, identifying the underlying factors that influenced these attitudes.

Prior scholarship indicates a lack of independent research specifically addressing this topic. Within Ottoman studies, Fatma Müge Göçek's *East Encounters West: France and the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth Century* (1987) investigates the infiltration of Western culture into the Ottoman Empire but does not provide comparative insights into similar developments in other Eastern regions, such as Iran. Meanwhile, in Iranian historiography, references to encounters between Iranian travelers and envoys and modern Western women appear implicitly in sections of *Native Modernity and Historical Reconsideration* by Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi. However, a comprehensive comparative analysis between Iran and its western neighbor, the Ottoman Empire, remains absent.

Drawing upon primary sources from both Ottoman and Iranian contexts, this study demonstrates that, despite profound social transformations occurring in Western societies, Ottoman and Iranian travelers and envoys exhibited markedly different reactions and interpretations. In the Ottoman Empire, these engagements often involved strategic planning and active participation in various arenas. In contrast, responses in Iran tended to be more passive, shaped largely by travelers' and envoys' subjective perceptions of Western women. These perceptions were influenced by multiple factors, including cultural and social values, political and military dynamics, and the extent of intercultural interactions.

The perceptions and interpretations of travelers and envoys regarding Western women were shaped by these various influences. Such notions not only affected political and cultural relations between East and West but also played a fundamental role in shaping and advancing women's social and political movements in both Iran and the Ottoman Empire.

What stands out in these constructed images is their direct impact on domestic and foreign policy-making, social reforms, and even the emergence of protest movements within Eastern societies. These perceptions were not merely reflections of travelers' and envoys' observations but rather the result of complex processes of cultural, political, and social exchange that ultimately reshaped views on women's roles in Islamic societies.

A careful analysis of these perspectives reveals how the image of the other—in this case, Western women—served as a catalyst for rethinking women's roles in Eastern societies. The influence of these perceptions extended beyond diplomatic and cultural exchanges, actively shaping the trajectory of social reforms and women's movements. A thorough examination of these transformations not only provides a deeper understanding of East–West relations but also illustrates how perceptions of the other can drive political and social change.

Keywords: Travelers, envoys, Iran, Ottoman Empire, West, women, comparative perspectives, cultural relations, modernity.

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