

## **A Self Beheld the Eyes of the Other: Reflections on Montesquieu's Persian Letters**

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**Abstract :** As a multi-layered prose piece of artistry and craftsmanship Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu's Persian Letters (1721) is a satirical work which records the experiences of two Persian noblemen, Usbek and Rica, traveling through France in the early eighteenth century. Montesquieu creates Persian Letters as a critique of the French society, a critical explanation of what was considered to be 'the Orient' in the period, and an invaluable historical document which illustrates the ways Europe and the East understood each other in the first half of the eighteenth century. However, Persian Letters is considered today, in part, an Orientalist text because of it presenting the culture of the East using stereotypical images. Although, when Montesquieu published Persian Letters, the term Orientalist was a harmless word for people who studied or took an interest in it, the ways in which this Western intellectual author exerts his critique of French social and political life through the eyes of Persian protagonists by placing the example of the Orient (the Other) at the service of an ongoing Eighteenth century discourse does raise some Eastern eyebrows. The fact that Persian side of the novel is considered by some critics as a fanciful decor, and the letters sent home are seen as literary props, yet these Eastern men intelligently question the rationality of religious, state, military and cultural practices and uncover much of the absurdity, irrationality or frivolity of European life. By drawing on the insight that Montesquieu's text problematizes the assumption that orientalism monolithically constructs the Orient as the Other, the present paper aims to examine how the innocent gaze of two Eastern travelers mirrors the ways Europe's identity defines its-Self.

**Keywords :** montesquieu, persian letters, 'the orint', identity politics, self, the other

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