

# Feminizing and Sexualizing the Orient as the Mysterious Other in Nineteenth Century Orientalist Art

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## Biography

**Farazeh Syed** (b. 1971) is an artist based in Lahore. After completing two years of the fundamental program at National College of Arts, Farazeh went on to acquire a diploma in print making at Gandhara Art School, Islamabad. Inspired by the Ustad-Shagird (mentor-apprentice) relationship, she then trained with renowned painter Iqbal Hussain for fifteen years. There, she learnt painting and an acute understanding of the human form, subsequently, refining her own visual and conceptual vocabulary. During this period, Syed also attended Continuing Education courses in painting and drawing at Parsons and Art Students League, New York. As a Research Associate at ‘Sanjan Nagar Institute of Art and Philosophy’, Syed has lectured on South Asian Classical Music and cultural history at National College of Arts, Musicology Department. She has been involved in art teaching/ training through formal classes, lectures and talks and is currently visiting faculty at Beaconhouse National University. She completed her Masters (Hons.) in Visual Arts from National College of Arts in 2015.

Farazeh has been exhibiting her work extensively and has attended national and international residencies. She was awarded merit grant for a one month artists’ residency program at The Vermont Studio Centre, USA, in March 2020. In 2019 Syed attended a one month artists/printmakers’ residency at Inkster Print Studio, Lahore which culminated in a box print and the show *An Etch in Time*, 2020. Her recent shows include a two person show in 2019 titled, *There is No Them*, Sanat Gallery Karachi, and solo shows held in 2018 at O Art Space, Lahore, and 2017 at Sanat Gallery, Karachi. Other solo exhibitions were held at Unicorn Gallery, Karachi and Alhamra Art Gallery, Lahore. Recent group

shows include Aberzanaan, Kabul, Afghanistan; The Artdom Project, Oslo; The Architecture of Being, AAN Gandhara Art Space, Karachi; Bienvenue Art Fair, Paris; Talk to Me, a collaborative project between KL City Gallery Malaysia, Art Voice Seven Gallery Indonesia and O Art Space, Lahore; Self Portraits in the Age of the Selfie, COMO Museum, Lahore; Unmaking History, Curated by Laila Rehman, Sahar Sohail and Natasha Malik, Lahore; The Imago Mundi Project for Pakistan, Imago Mundi Pavilion, Venice Biennale; New Art from Pakistan: An Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures by Pakistani Artists, High Commission for Pakistan, London, Unicorn Gallery. United- in the Age of Dialogue, National Art Gallery, Islamabad.

## **Abstract**

**This essay studies the creation of identities, through means such as art and literature, of colonizers and especially the colonized, in context of the ‘Occident’ and the ‘Orient’. ‘Orientalism’, a Western systematic, organized creation and dissemination of knowledge, ideas and discussion about the Orient, informed, governed, and authorized the various modes of representation of the Orient as the ‘Other’. Orientalism was driven by a Western sense of cultural superiority and corporate, political and military interests in the East with the aim to control, restructure and dominate it. Hence, the creation of a certain image of the Orient to justify the European presence as the white man’s burden to civilize and tame the uncivilized, the inferior. The focus of this paper is specifically on 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist art, wherein the Orient was perceived and represented not only as backward, mysterious, and exotic but also as feminine, sexual, erotic, and sinister. The emphasis will particularly be on the famous odalisque and harem paintings that betrayed underlying Western ideological assumptions of power in relation to ‘woman’ as the ‘Other’, the object, the weaker in the heterosexual equation. and, white man’s racial, cultural and**

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**moral sense of superiority and power over inferior, darker races of the Orient. Thus, I will be analysing contextual history, representation of the female body in Western art and European social attitude towards women, to understand why the Orient was feminized/sexualized in art and how Orientalist art served as an aesthetic branch of political documentation, and, means of social propaganda and cultural imperialism.**

### **Keywords**

**Orientalism, orient, orientalist art, colonial art, feminizing, sexualizing, female body in art, deindividualizing, dehumanizing, objectification, white supremacy, eurocentrism.**

### **Introduction**

This research paper was written in 2016 as a requirement for the degree of ‘Master (Hons.) Visual Arts’ (National College of Arts). The original version has been shortened and edited in order to be published here. The reader might feel that it falls short on referring to current scholarship that has built on the works of authors like Berger (1972), Said (1972, 2001), Nochlin (1989), Kabbani (1986), and Pollock (1999), among others, who are mostly referred to in this paper. I am fully aware of this shortcoming. However, at the time of this inquiry, not only were the seminal works of the aforementioned authors eye opening for me but also relevant to my fundamental conceptual understanding and thought process regarding Orientalism and Orientalist art.<sup>1</sup> Having said that, I sincerely hope to expand on this research in future based on more current literary scholarship.

As a student of history and belonging to a once British colony, colonial perceptions and attitudes towards the colonized, and, the colonial legacy—still very much operative and evident

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in our psyches and social fabric—of viewing ourselves from a colonial perspective, had always intrigued me. As a painter, my practice focussed on ‘woman’ and the female body as subject. It was interesting to note that art historically, ‘woman’ had been observed and represented primarily through the eyes of the Western ‘man’, and thus, from a position of power and dominance as the weaker, opposite sex, the ‘Other’. Consequently, women and their bodies were objectified, stereotyped, sexualized and de-individualized in disempowering ways. Hence, the female body, its limitless impressions and the politics around it lent to my creative expression and gave meaning to my work.

In the above context, the countless female nudes found in visual representation of the Orient by European artists raised the question, why the Orient was always depicted using the female body as metaphor—as odalisques i.e. concubines or sex slaves of the Muslim Sovereign—where it came across as a passive, inert, sexual object. Therein, I found an interesting connection between European social perception and artistic depiction of the female body and its perception and portrayal of the Orient. Moreover, the purportedly Eastern, Muslim women representing the Orient were very much European, hence, confirming that representations by European artists were not based on the real Orient, but were, in fact, constructed upon Western ideas and fantasies about the Orient.<sup>2</sup>

The study was, thus, an investigation into how and why the Orient was feminized and sexualized in art as part of 19th century Imperialist political and cultural propaganda against the East. The objective was to expose the misrepresentation of the Orient as removed from temporal and historical processes of evolution and progress, culturally and morally backward, unable to speak for itself, and hence, white man’s burden to civilize, tame and speak for.

### **Historical and Contextual Background of Orientalist Art—‘Orientalism’**

The Orient was more a cultural than geographical designation by Europe of anything and everything beyond European borders, culture, and society. The Orient was the created ‘Other’ and the Occident was everything that the Orient was not and vice versa. On the basis of this fundamental distinction—us and them—and negation—we are not they—the Occident defined, actualized and strengthened its own identity and reality, and inadvertently submitted its existence to be only in relation to the East: “The Orient [was] ...Europe’s...cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other...[it]...helped to define Europe...as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.” (Said, 1972, p. 1). The intellectual lethargy of the Orientalists, however, was to bring the inherently diverse civilizations of Persia, Arabia, India and China<sup>3</sup> under one banner of the ‘Orient’.

Colonization involved prolific production of Colonial art: “...the East was a major preoccupation of nineteenth-century painting, an East which was, in turn, ‘Imagined, Experienced, Remembered’.” (MacKenzie, 1995, p. 44). Colonial art was very much Orientalist in its approach, themes and subject matter—it depicted the Orient both as romantic, mysterious and exotic, and as, culturally, morally and politically servile, regressive and debauched. The inspiration was not only fascination but also visual documentation of the ‘Other’ for political reasons. This led to ethnographic studies, studies of the natural world (flora and fauna), landscapes (both picturesque and sublime), interiors and architecture.

Significant artists of this period of Orientalist art were the French such as, Eugene Delacroix, Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, Jean-Leon Gerome, Manet and British artists like Tilly Kettle, William Hodges and Johan Zoffany. The dominant style at the time was French Realism (Academic or Salon style) that preferred genre painting i.e. depicting everyday life, to historical, religious or mythological painting. The recurrent subject of Orientalist art was Oriental women, harems, life, cultures, societies, customs and peoples.

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In order to fully grasp the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist art, it is imperative to grasp the nature of involvement of the West with the East. Visual theorist, Griselda Pollock (1999) wrote:

In European painting the combination of an African woman as slave...and an Oriental harem or domestic interior with reclining women...represents a historical conjunction of two, distinct aspects of Europe's relations with the world it dominated through colonization and exploited through slavery. The relations with Islamic culture...and with African peoples collapse in Orientalist paintings into a trope for a masculine heterosexuality...held in place by the displayed sexual body of a...pale-skinned...woman...[T]his rhetorical combination of sex and servitude is 'logical' only in an economy that has slavery as its political unconscious, and sedimented in its social rituals and erotic fantasies. This legacy – materially and ideologically – is, was part of Western modernity.

Thus, colonization at its core meant a relation of power, sex and servitude with the colonized—the colonizers were in a position of racial, moral and cultural superiority, political and military dominance and control. In this culture of Imperial domination and sense of superiority—us and them—the East was inferior, backward, and an 'object' of desire, with endless political, economic and sexual possibilities. This predominant feature of Orientalism governed almost all aspects of the relationship of the West with the East.

Moreover, European understanding of the Orient was superficial and external—they were foreigners interacting with alien cultures and societies sans any cultural, social, or historical referents. Consequently, they misrepresented the Orient:

Those who look[ed] upon the East as mysterious and romantic ha[d] only themselves to thank for the creation of a novel unreality. What [was]...romantic and mysterious to a foreigner [was]...classic and self-evident to a native; and no one

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[could]...be said to understand the art of the East...so long as it remain[ed] to him a curiosity-only when he [saw]...that it must have been as it [was]...[would] he begin to understand. He [would]...see then that it d[id] not represent a fine accomplishment or something undertaken for fun, but expresse[d] an entire mentality and racial inheritance.

Furthermore, stemming from a position of dogma and power, Orientalist conception of the East was unsympathetic and shallow. Europe, being in the dominant stance, defined and constructed views about the Orient as it wished to represent the Orient to suit its imperial, economic, and political interests. Thus, the Orient was ‘Oriental’ because that is how the West portrayed it under the assumption and pretext, of course, that it could not speak for itself. A pertinent example of Orientalist ideological assumptions was Flaubert’s account of an Egyptian courtesan, to which Said (1972) responded with:

...[his] encounter...produced a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her...[and the] historical facts of domination ...allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell...in what way she was “typically Oriental.”

Thus, it was the relationship of power and the culture of Western superiority that together produced the ‘Orientalist’ hubris in art, literature, travelogues, scholarly texts and various philosophical, socio-political, anthropological and historical theories.

The above exteriority in European understanding of the Orient applied equally to Orientalist visual representation by artists such as Gerome, Delacroix, and Ingres among others—the European artist was an outsider representing and depicting the ‘Other’. He employed pictorial tools such as documentary and scientific realism, objectivity, picturesque information, accuracy, lack

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of identification with the subjects and detached empiricism to reinforce ‘otherness’ and create the effect of reality. The aim was to lend credibility to and convince the Western audience that the representation was essential, authentic Oriental reality, without any adulteration or personal interpretation of the artist. And that served the purpose of ‘Orientalizing’ the Orient for Western audience much as *Kuchuk Hanem* was ‘Orientalized’ by Flaubert.

Thus, Orientalist visual imagery was the reality of the white man and not that of the Orient or how the ‘Orientals’ looked at or perceived themselves. In other words, the artists were not reflecting a given reality but in fact “producing meanings” (Nochlin, 1989) through their works: “...the white man [was]...always implicitly present...with his controlling gaze, the gaze which br[ought] the Oriental world into being, the gaze for which it [was]...ultimately intended.” (Nochlin, 1989, p.37). Hence, these were at best mere ‘representations’ reflecting Orientalist vision, fantasies and ideology about the East.

Discussing Jean-Leon Gerome’s picturesque *Snake Charmer*, Linda Nochlin (1989) remarked that “...the defining mood of the painting [was] mystery” and the “sexually charged mystery...signifie[d] a more general one: the mystery of the East itself, a standard topos of Orientalist ideology.” (p. 35). The painting depicted a scene of “huddled” Orientals watching a performance, and both, the audience and the “performance”, appeared distant and far removed from the viewer. The “realist mystification” and alienation of subjects was meaningful as it signified a detachment, a non-identification of the Western viewer with what was depicted. In other words, the visual and conceptual message for the white man was that the East was a distant, remote reality that he was morally, existentially and emotionally removed from and could respond to only with detached wonderment, curiosity, erotic pleasure or even disgust.

The “absence of a sense of history, of temporal change” (p. 38) in Gerome’s painting was another significant observation by Nochlin (1989): the painstakingly painted Turkish tiles in the background, showing later repair work, were meant to reflect the neglect and laziness of the



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Orientalism served a moralizing function by “...commenting on the...the barbaric insouciance of Moslem people, who...literally charm[ed] snakes while Constantinople f[ell] into ruins.” (pp. 38, 39). The Orient was, thus, represented as stagnant, deteriorating, lacking progress and unaffected by the advances of modernity and civilization influencing the West. Consequently, one would find a narrative coded in paintings: monarchs carrying out brutal and barbaric acts, such as Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827-8) (Fig. 1.2); white man saving brown women; white women protecting themselves against heathen brown savages; the power play between the colonists and the colonized, for example, Johan Zoffany’s *Colonel Mordaunt’s Cock Match* (1784-6); political authority of the colonists, or, in the words of Akbar Naqvi “...triumphant passage of British arms, and heroes of conquest and occupation...immortalized in the language of power”, (Naqvi, 2010, p. 6), for example Robert Home’s *The Reception of the Mysorean Hostage Princes* (1793-94); a white woman (Britannia) slaying a tiger (a visual code for India) in Edward Armitage’s *Retribution* (1858); and so on.

Thus, Orientalist art originated in the context of Orientalist ideology (discussed earlier), a specific power configuration of Imperial sovereignty and a moral, cultural and racial high ground. Therein, it had its socio-political uses and functions: the objectification, exoticization and misrepresentation of Eastern lands and peoples as backward, inferior and servile, with the aim to colonize them under the pretext that it was upon the West to cultivate, educate, civilize and modernize them in keeping with Western civilization.

### **Feminizing the Orient: Critical, Visual and Contextual Analysis of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Orientalist Paintings**

Fascinated by Eastern feminine sexuality the West indulged in creating many romanticized tales about it using the imagined metaphor of the Oriental woman. Portraying the East as feminine created gendered otherness and the Orient was, thereby, a sexual haven in the phallogocentric,

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heterosexual equation of European society:

Europe was charmed by an Orient that shimmered with possibilities that promised a sexual space, a voyage away from the self, an escape from the dictates of the bourgeois morality of the metropolis. (Kabbani, 1986, p. 67)

Thus, the topos of eastern sexuality, sexual availability and passion was a dominant characteristic of Orientalist art and discourse. Representations of the East were replete with, and, as noted by Professor Meyda Yegenoglu, “interwoven by sexual imageries, unconscious fantasies, desires, fears, and dreams.” (Cited in Clayton and Zon, 2007, p.180). The purpose was to feed Western imagination, fantasies and conceptions about the Orient. The condemnation, however, was the Orient for being decadent and debauched. One finds the imagery betraying blatant voyeurism. Hence, a correlation with European tradition of nude painting, where voyeurism, the idea of the spectator, the male gaze was the predominant theme. The nude woman looked either directly at the spectator suggesting awareness of being watched, or then, at herself in a mirror, implying surveying herself:

The mirror was often used as a symbol of the vanity of woman. The moralizing, however, was mostly hypocritical. You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure. (Berger, 1972, p. 51)

Moreover, by projecting their erotic fantasies, secret desires and passions onto the Orient—‘Orientalizing’, as it were, their own fantasies and desires by portraying them in an Oriental setting or situation—European artists were able to maintain a cold objectivity and safe moral, social and cultural distance. The otherness and distancing—a distant land inhabited by non-European, inferior races—created a narrative that the Western viewer did not identify with

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morally, culturally or emotionally, but only sexually.

Another telling aspect of Orientalist depiction of the East as female was the 19th century European male attitude towards ‘woman’—the ‘Other’, the weak, passive, mysterious and object of male sexual pleasure. Nochlin described Eugene Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus*, as a signifier of:

...contemporary Frenchmen’s power over women, a power controlled and mediated by the ideology of the erotic.....[T]he vivid turbulence of Delacroix’s narrative...[wa]s subtended by the more mundane assumption, shared by men of [his] class and time, that they were naturally “entitled” to the bodies of...women...[Therefore] Delacroix’s private fantasy did not exist in a vacuum, but in a particular social context... (1989, p. 42)

It would be useful here to elaborate on the European tradition of ‘nude’ painting—going back to mythological and religious paintings of the Renaissance—to understand the intent behind depicting the Orient in feminine nudity. The way the female body was represented implied Western male beliefs about women and their bodies and the social conventions tied to them. The paintings served the voyeuristic, fetishist and erotic fantasies and desires of the spectator or owner of the painting, who was always, most certainly, the European male—the patrons of art (agents, gallery owners, buyers, and even artists) were, by default, men due to their social and economic power. Thus, the nudes flattered and glorified the sexual and social identity of the powerful male. Consequently, the subject was always depicted passive and supine as if an object on display, surrendering her sexuality to the demands of the male viewer, and, hauntingly unaware of her own person, individuality or passion.

The ‘act of looking’, therefore—both in society and art—and the enjoyment attained therein, was always the prerogative of and an indulgence reserved for ‘man’. According to the psychoanalytic theory, looking at art was dictated by unconscious, instinctual, psychic processes related

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to sexuality:

The very phrase, ‘pleasure in looking’ has...[a] name, ‘scopophilia’,...one of the ‘component instincts’ from which adult sexual instinct develops. Looking...can be associated with...exclusively masculine response where [sexual] gratification is derived...through fetishism...or voyeurism... [Thus]...looking and the pleasures derived from it are profoundly linked to questions of sexuality...There is no such thing as simple ‘pleasure in looking’. Nor is it ever politically innocent; power is always at stake. (Garb, 1993, p. 221-222)

Thus, Western nude painting existed and operated in a very real historical, social and cultural context and in relation to ‘lived sexuality’. As noted by Naqvi—in context of the Bengal School enthused by Hindu revivalism, and Chughtai, the flag bearer for Muslim India: “Art, despite its dreamy demeanour and other-worldly romance, responded nonetheless to what was happening in society.” (Naqvi, 2010, p. 5). The Western nudes, therefore, mirrored conventions of society that designated the female body as an ‘object’ for man’s sexual fulfilment, and it was, thereby, de-humanized and de-individualized reassuring the powerful male of his masculinity:

The images reproduce[d] on the ideological level of art the relations of power between men and women. Woman [wa]s present as an image but with the specific connotations of body and nature, that [wa]s passive, available, possessable, powerless. Man [wa]s absent from the image but it [wa]s his speech, his view, his position of dominance which the images signif[ied]. (Parker and Gollop, 1993, p. 223)

It would be interesting to note, that in other non-European art, ‘woman’ was depicted as having individuality, dignity, agency and authority of her sexuality: “...in Indian..., Persian..., Pre-Columbian art—nakedness [wa]s never supine in this way. And if...the theme of a work [wa]s sexual attraction, it [wa]s likely to show active sexual love...[and] the woman as active as the

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man...” (Berger, 1972, p. 53). This indicated that femininity was venerated and even worshipped in these cultures. Thus, reinforcing the theory that ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ were not determined by respective biology and fixed, predetermined ‘natures’, but, given meaning and value by society and culture, which, in turn established social and cultural norms. So, art as reflection of society not only reflected, but in fact, reinforced social values and beliefs:

Arts [were] particularly implicated in the formation and cementing of the unequal power relations between men and women. Art d[id] not only reflect these but constitute[d] one of the sites of their formation. The way that traditional patterns of ‘looking’ and ‘being looked at’ [we]re related to gender identity and accepted notions of sexual pleasure [we]re crucial in this respect. (Parker and Gollop, 1993, p. 223)

A relevant case in point would be Edouard Manet’s *Olympia*, (1863), an exception to the norm in 19<sup>th</sup> century European nude painting. It aroused violent criticism as it broke the convention of the idealized, mythologized female nude, and replaced it with a real life prostitute. Manet depicted her in a defiant, self-confident posture, expressing her individuality and gave her a human face and body as opposed to statuesque idealized beauty:

...the expanse of Olympia’s body was edged...in a chalky grey outline...compared with the softer gradation of tones in the conventional use of chiaroscuro...This lack of modelling signalled a lack of *compliance*...with a tradition of painting the nude, in which the nude female body was offered for contemplation in idealized form...[T]he hand...was evidence also of the masculine, aggressive posturing of Olympia, a sign of male desire...Because this representation did not fit with prevailing representations of compliant femininity, Olympia was seen as ‘not a woman’, that is, as masculine...[F]or these commentators...proper, secure categories were

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somehow not in place in Manet's work." (Fer, 1993, p. 26)

In keeping with the above Western tradition of 'nudes' the Orient too was depicted in sensuous, languid, seductive feminine nudity, inviting European male gaze, indulgence and control. The women in the countless odalisque and harem paintings by various Orientalist artists had a stereo typical appearance, as if there was a universal odalisque: they "appear to be cloned from one model, as if depictions of one woman in an endless variety of poses." (Kabbani, 1986, p. 84). Thus, the idea of the perennial, essential, universal, natural, and pre-existing feminine was projected onto the Orient, creating an artistic myth. An Orient that was sexual, unchanging and removed from historical processes of progress meeting 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century West.

Underlying the narrative of the feminine, backward and savage Orient was also the imperial intent to justify colonization to their Western counterparts back home. It served another politically driven, psychologically potent function: to make the colonized perceive, and thus, treat themselves as uncivilized, subordinate and unable to speak for themselves (recall Berger's analysis of the use of the mirror in European nude paintings):

...the Indian had to be cut down to the size of a servitor even in a grand painting of an Indian royal. When Thomas Hickey painted Charles Brooke playing with the grandson of the Nawab of Murshidabad in 1790...he stood the English child up with a man-size gun in his hand. The taller and older grandson of the Nawab was shown seated at his feet. The symbolism is unmistakable. The English child is cherubic and dominant; the Muslim aristocrat is subordinate. (Naqvi, 2010, p. 10)

To sum up, it is quite evident that European artists depicted the Orient not through real life encounters or experiences, or, as the Orient actually was, but on the basis of 'Orientalist' ideology and assumptions of power (discussed at the outset) and Western conceptions of the East and Eastern sensuality. Orientalist art was political, in that, it was motivated by Western

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political, economic and militaristic interests, and, reflected the relationship of dominance, sex and slavery between the Occident and the Orient. It was, in other words, the aesthetic offshoot of European political, economic, militaristic and cultural propaganda against the East.

For further elaboration, following will be a critical visual and contextual analysis of Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*, an iconic painting in Orientalist pictorial imagery, and, epitome of female beauty and femininity in 19<sup>th</sup> century European visual culture.

### **Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*: A Visual and Contextual Analysis**

Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* is an oil painting, measuring 91 cm in height and 162 cm in length. It was commissioned by Napoleon's sister, Caroline Murat, married to the king of Naples. Ingres completed the work in 1814, and it is currently displayed in the Louvre, Paris.

In order to understand *La Grande Odalisque* in its complexities, it is imperative to situate it in its historical, social and cultural context. At the time, French Imperialism reigned in Northern Africa with an expanding political and economic interest in the Ottoman Empire. French imperialist cultural and political propaganda and moralistic arrogance was endemic. The prejudices created, hence, were deeply inculcated in Western consciousness, and the many, seemingly objective narratives about the East by contemporary European travellers, artists, writers, merchants and tourists, were informed by these biases. Referring to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's (an English traveller) accounts and letters, Jessica Zeigenfuss stated that:

Montagu's account became exceedingly well-known...as an authentic and objective description of North African women...[A]s a European...and member of a prude Victorian aristocracy...it can be put under scrutiny...[if]...Montagu's supposed objective spectatorship could have truly superseded the biases that French imperialist propaganda and moralistic hubris had thoroughly infused into the European psyche...The bias hidden under the guise of objectivity in [such] accounts...helped to

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fuel the ‘orientalization’ of Northern Africa in the European ethos. (Zeigenfuss, 2008, p. 6)

It was against this backdrop of French imperialism, propaganda, moral and racial prejudice towards an ‘inferior’ Orient, that Ingres created his *La Grande Odalisque*.

The painting depicted a languid nude—the *Sultan’s* concubine—sprawled on a divan with ruffled silk sheets underneath her. Her left arm, shorter than the right one, rested on a sumptuous blue velvet cushion. She sat in a rather impossible posture with her legs placed in quite an unnatural position. However, her body meandering and curving in a serpentine line—a pictorial tool used by Ingres—added grace and sensuality to the body. The nude had her back towards the viewer, hiding her body and sexuality save a slight glimpse of her right breast. She looked over her right shoulder as if to glance at someone who had just entered her chamber—a lavish room laden with luxurious silk, satin fabrics and Oriental fineries and opulence. She wore nothing but a turban on her head (which art historians/critics claim to have been a reference to Raphael’s *Fornarina and Madonna delle Sedia*), a jewelled ruby and pearls brooch in her hair, a gold bracelet on her right arm, and held an ornate peacock feather fan—another sign of luxury—in her right hand. Her right arm stretched out lead the eye all the way along her delicate, velvety body to the luxuriant rich blue silk drapes on the right hand side of the composition. The blue drape ornamented with red flowers complimented her flesh tones, and came right down to and beneath her right foot, and onto the divan. There was a *hookah* (an Oriental pipe used to smoke tobacco) and an incense burner placed at her right foot.

In order to depict Oriental affluence and extravagance Ingres used rich colour and immense realistic and skilled detail in executing the curtain, fabrics, jewels, fan and turban. The reclining figure was drawn in long, sinuous lines with the skin painted in soft, diffused flesh tones and an even light, thus, lacking chiaroscuro. The dark, cool background lacked illusionary depth, a device used to accentuate and emphasize the figure.<sup>4</sup>



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In contrast to the acutely realistic rendering of the objects and drapes, Ingres' depiction of the female body was abstract and fantastical. It was, in my opinion, to represent the ideal, eternal, mysterious 'feminine' and to create an otherworldly, mythical and chimerical aura around the Orient—a simultaneous gesture of romanticizing, eroticizing and mystifying 'woman' and the Orient. The odalisque appeared to be ethereal with no sense of a corporeal body due to the absence of body hair or visible genitalia—a visual trope used in European nudes to make the woman appear passive with no passion, desire or sexuality of her own. Moreover, the female body was not just idealized in the Classical sense, but also distorted, by elongating the spine and pelvic area, suggesting enhanced sensuousness, sexual pleasure and fantasy. The accuracy of the human body was, quite obviously, secondary to Ingres here as compared to heightened feminine sexuality.

Her body turned away from the viewer added to the mystery and suspense. The nude reclined in a languorous, inviting and suggestive pose (reminding one of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* with smooth ivory skin, a seductive gaze, and a receptiveness and mysteriousness offering indulgence and discovery. Her expression and posture did not express what she desired but what the male viewer desired to 'do' to her. Her demure gaze towards the viewer implied her awareness of, and, complacency and subordination to voyeurism (the male gaze), and hence, enhanced the eroticism.<sup>5</sup> Contrasting Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* and Francisco Goya's *La maja desnuda* William Vaughan made an important distinction between the 'nude' and the 'naked':

...this painting [*La maja desnuda*]...stands out for the directness with which the maja looks at the spectator and displays her body...Goya was exploiting the primitive as much as Ingres did, but the primitivism here is active rather than passive. Goya's woman makes it clear that she knows how to make love and is not ashamed of it. (Vaughan, 1999, p. 111)

It is well-established in art historical research that Ingres never visited the Orient and *La*

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*Grande Odalisque* was a figment of imagination based on accounts of European travellers and painters:

Historical records...prove Ingres was influenced by the writings of ...Montagu...Leeks describes, “There are literary sources for the painting, in particular three written accounts transcribed by Ingres into one of his notebooks... There is abundant evidence that Ingres made extensive use of prints” and that artists [had]...“established prototypes for poses and accessories of many of the subsidiary figures of the bather [odalisque] pictures”. The prints and letters...served as references upon which Ingres could base his romantic Orientalist vision...[and] may have given Ingres the idea for the pose of his odalisque and the *mise en scene* of the final work of art. (Zeigenfuss, 2008, p. 7)

In the same context, Zeigenfuss observed that such writings provided the “...artists, and other cultural manufacturers, the proper mental *mise en scene* in which to create Orientalist work of art without the aid of primary sources, i.e., ...without ever leaving...their European studios.” (Zeigenfuss, 2008, pp. 6, 7).

Thus, the entire subject of *La Grande Odalisque* was fictional, a fantasy, a Western construction of what a luxurious and distant sexual experience would be like. Moreover, Ingres used a European model to represent the Oriental woman and the ‘Orient’ itself, which signified historical inaccuracy. It was a creation of the ‘Other’, the East. The exotic Oriental accessories, the textures and voluptuous folds, conjured up a mysterious, sumptuous, and indolent Orient, a place of lascivious, sinister and novel sexual experiences for 19<sup>th</sup> century French male audience.

Like Delacroix ‘Orientalized’ his forbidden, secret fantasies (recall *Death of Sardanapalus*), so did Ingres situate the Classical mythological nude in an Oriental setting, a geographically and racially remote, distant land. He, thereby, made it safe, comfortable and acceptable for French society to derive sexual pleasure by looking at a nude female body, with a sense of moral and

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racial distance and superiority. In fact, Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque* was often compared to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and it was remarked: whereas, Titian masked his eroticism in the classical myth of Venus, Ingres cloaked his sexually evocative nude in the guise of a distant and detached exoticism. *La Grande Odalisque*, hence, symbolized Orientalist desires and fears about the Orient—desires for the erotic utopia it symbolized in European psyche, and fear of the unknown, the Other, and, due to the long history of aggression and violence between Christian West and Islamic East.

In light of the above, it becomes quite evident that the Orientalist fantasy about the Orient embodied 'femininity'. And the 'female nude' became a visual trope for the Orient to feminize and sexualize it in disempowering ways—just like the tiger became a visual trope for India (discussed earlier), often depicted being slain or tamed by the white man or woman.

Hence, *La Grande Odalisque*, and many similar images, certainly implied French Orientalist propaganda, exoticization and fantasy about the supposed otherness of the Orient. It reiterated and established a visual correlative to racial, moral and cultural superiority, hierarchical power and sexual desire, in which Europe was the dominant, powerful male, and the East, the subordinate, submissive female. The theme was, no doubt, difference, morality, erotica and mystery, which perpetuated the myth of the primitive Orient, providing moral justification for white man's right to control, moralise and civilize the uncivilised, immoral and vulgar East. The 'female nude', thus, represented, or was rather, a personification of the Orient with all its implications.

### Conclusion

The topic of this research *Feminizing and Sexualizing the Orient as the Mysterious Other in Nineteenth Century Orientalist Art* was of particular interest to me, as it related to my art practice revolving around portrayal of women and the female body in art. It supplemented my

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conceptual understanding of representation and objectification of the female body in art history and contemporary art, colonial ‘creation’ of identities, and, the relations of power, sex and servitude. It further contributed to, and will continue to inform, my art practice in relation to de-objectifying and demystifying the female body and creating autonomous female interpretation and spectatorship of art representing women. My practice evolved to an even more independent, subjective interpretation of femininity, moving beyond the boundaries and confines of gender. The study facilitated my understanding of the significance of weaving the contemporary in, appropriating from what is and what has been, and situating it in the present.

It also enabled me to realize the connection between the present and the past in relation to perpetuation of the Orientalist vision—the West continues to demonize and dehumanize the East, the Islamic and Arab countries as the ‘Other’, the primitive and barbaric. Western media, advertising, literature and popular culture are constantly bombarding its audience with negative portrayal of the East and the Arab world in terms of religious fundamentalism, social and cultural oppression of women (recount the popular imagery in western media of *burkha* clad (veiled) Afghan women), Talibanization, terrorism and so on. The current Islamophobia and intolerance of diversity in the Western world being the logical concomitant and testament to Western political propaganda against the East and the Muslim world. Thus, echoing 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist ideology and practices, the West continues to create, instil and play upon the fear and anxiety of the ‘Other’ in its people.

It would be relevant to mention here some modern, post-colonial responses to Orientalist art—contemporary artists of both Arab, Muslim, as well as, non-Arab, non-Muslim origin, have used their work to challenge Orientalist ideology and Eurocentric misconceptions and misrepresentations of the ‘Other’. They have re-envisioned, re-claimed and re-imagined stereotypical ‘Oriental’ subjects and content on their own terms, independent of Western conceptions and influences. Some noteworthy names are, Barbara Kruger, Lalla Essaydi, Houria Niati, Fahrelnissa

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A contemporary re-articulation of *La Grande Odalisque* was by the famous Guerrilla Girls in 1989, in New York City, for a political work titled, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?*. The work was a comment on over representation of female nudes by male artists, and, under representation of women artists in the Metropolitan Museum. In other words, it questioned why more women were depicted nude by male artists and displayed in galleries, than given a platform to display as artists with an autonomous and independent interpretation of femininity.

I hope this research will be a valuable addition to Pakistani art historical literature, as this issue needs more attention and scholarship. I also hope that it will help us, the people of the subcontinent, understand, interpret and re-position our false perceptions of ourselves, our culture, and our history handed down to us by the colonial West, and in doing so, it will break the colonial legacy of looking at ourselves as the colonists saw us.

**Author/Artist's Work**



Figure 1. *I am my own Genie*.  
Acrylics & Chalk on Canvas. 60 x 36 inches–2017.

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Figure 2. *Re Imagining the Imagined*.  
Acrylics & Chalk on Canvas. 60 x 36 inches–2017.



Figure 3. Her Heart was a Secret Garden and the Walls very High.  
Acrylics on Canvas. 38 x 51 inches–2019.





Figure 4. *Two to Tango*.  
Note. Acrylics on Canvas 42 x 54 inches–2019.



Figure 5. *Like Echoes Hanging in the Air II*.  
Note. Acrylics on Canvas 36 x 48 inches–2020.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Current post-colonial debate on Orientalism and Orientalist art involves three generic approaches. A seminal discourse was begun by literary critic, Edward Said, who expounded that 'Orientalism' was a form of cultural imperialism and Orientalist discourse had "...supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles." (Said, 2001, p. 2) backed by colonial political, economic and corporate motives for dominance and expansion.

The second is the feminist approach focussing on gender issues and the Orientalist male gaze by which and for which Orientalist art was produced. The feminists question issues of sexuality, female representation, passivity, objectification and sexualizing and feminizing of the Orient by European male artists. Notable post-colonial feminist writers are, fine art theorist Wendy Leeks, who applied feminist psychoanalysis to deconstruct and interpret Ingres' odalisques (*Ingres Other-Wise*, 1986), Meyda Yegenoglu (*Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, 1998), cultural analyst and scholar of postcolonial feminist studies in the visual arts, Griselda Pollock (*Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, 1999), historian, anthropologist and sociologist Joanna de Groot (*Oriental Feminotopias? Montagu's and Montesquieu's 'Seraglios' Revisited*, 2006), and art critic Linda Nochlin who wrote her famous *The Imaginary Orient*, 1989, influenced by Said's *Orientalism*. Nochlin reminded her readers to view Orientalist art in terms of "the particular power structure in which these works came into being" (Nochlin, 1989, p. 34). Moreover, she described erotic visual depiction of the Orient as passive female nudes, as a signifier of French "...fantasy of absolute possession of women's naked bodies..." and an "...overt pictorial expression of men's total domination of women..." (p. 43).

There are other cultural and art critics and historians, sociologists, and anthropologists who do not necessarily subscribe to feminism, but do question the erotic and exotic stereotyping of the Orient and deliberate 'creation' of the identity of the Orient as the 'Other'. There is art critic and cultural historian Rana Kabbani, (*Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule*, 1986), and Amrit Wilson (*Reappraising Orientalism: a personal statement*), who interpreted Orientalist art as a product of xenophobia, and race and cultural hatred.

The third approach to Orientalism and Orientalist art comprises of exponents of the anti Said and anti Nochlin models, with authors and historians like John M. MacKenzie (*Orientalism: History, theory and the Arts*, 1995), Bernard Lewis ("The Question of Orientalism", *Islam and the West*, 1993), Robert Graham Irwin (*For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and their Enemies*, 2006), Nikki Keddie (*An Islamic Response to Imperialism*, 1968), and Albert Hourani (*A History of the Arab Peoples*, 1991). These Orientalist academics propounded that Orientalism, as defined by Said, was anti-Western, it trivialized the rigours and ordeals of Orientalist scholarship, and Orientalism and Orientalist art should not be politicised in terms of imperialism, xenophobia or feminism.

<sup>2</sup>The problem with Orientalist works of art like Gerome's *The Slave Market*, *The Large Pool of Bursa*, Delacroix's *Algerian Women in their Apartments*, *Odalisque Reclining on a Divan*, and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *The Grand Odalisque*, was not only the objectification, sexualizing and deriding of the Orient, but also lack of authentic representation of Oriental culture, society and women. For instance, women were misrepresented as European in features and complexion with no resemblance to the physical appearance of Oriental women, and so was the culture and society grossly misrepresented: it was inconceivable for European artists to have access to enclosed women's quarters or royal harems that were forbidden to all men except the Sultan.

<sup>3</sup>To aggregate the diversity among the peoples generally clubbed as Persian, Chinese, Indian and Arabic is a gross over simplification.

<sup>4</sup>One could contrast Ingres' precise Neoclassical linearity, cool "licked" surface, and invisible brushwork to Delacroix's Romantic, highly emotionally charged, and painterly style. However, in art historical appreciation, *La Grande Odalisque* was considered to be a fusion between Neoclassical style and Romantic subject matter, because of its distortion and anatomical inaccuracy of the female body that did not conform to the Classical/Neoclassical notions and ideals, and, its depiction of the mysterious, the exotic and the sensuous.

<sup>5</sup>Some art critics and historians also suggested that Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*, created for a Parisian audience, was an instance of nostalgia about 'female passivity' at a time when French women were fighting for equal rights in 19<sup>th</sup> century France.