

The Relationship between Orientalist Painters and Muslim Women: Between Imagination and Reality

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Abstract

The current study aims to highlight the significance of the clichés attached to Muslim women spread by Orientalist painters in general. However, this study will mainly explore this subject through the painting “Women in Algiers” by Delacroix. This paper will analyse the work of Delacroix’s “Women in Algiers” through previous research to understand the relationship between Orientalist painters and Muslim women, a product of both imagination and reality.

Keywords

Orientalism, Orientalist Painters, Muslim Women, Delacroix

1. Introduction

Frequently covered by its veils of stereotype and history, Orientalism remains a cultural legacy that inspired not only undoubted technical excellence but also an intricate understanding of the interactions among the western and Arab worlds. Orientalism’s common subject—was prohibited at that time to non-Muslims, which raises added questions of accuracy in the minds of modern viewers. For instance, some Orientalists painted believers wearing shoes in mosques—something that are unanimously prohibited; showing that the artist was painting through imagination. The Harem was an essential theme of European Orientalism, one of the most culturally sensitive at that time. Though its simple meaning was “family quarters”, the word harem—derived from the Arabic word haram, meaning “forbidden”—was a kind of allegorical screen onto which European male artists invented the lives of the women they could not perceive; they attempted to portray work regarding polygamy and the veil. This study will ana-

lyse the work of Delacroix *Women in Algiers* through previous research to understand the relationship between Orientalist painters and Muslim women, a product of both imagination and reality.

We all understand that the entry of art into the Arab world was facilitated by colonial powers. It all started at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when Orientalists created the East in all its natural beauty, social lives, religious rites, customs, and traditions. For most artists traveling to the East from France and Britain, the political reasons were not distinct from the cultural and artistic ones; rather, both perspectives backed the other. Due to the diversity and richness of cultural references, these factors changed the cultural and social characteristics of Arab-Islamic heritage and culture and resulting from the multiplicity and difference of cultural references; colleges, art institutions, and scholarships all influenced the characteristics of the start. Foreign artists opened their own studios so that Arab painting enthusiasts could learn from them in areas where artistic structures and institutions were established to meet the needs of the colonial administration and provide a suitable atmosphere for foreign nationals so they would not feel alienated. These events eventually evolved into art education hubs, like the Leonardo da Vinci School in Cairo, the Villa Abdel Latif in Algeria (founded in 1906 to draw exceptional French artists to study the real Arab world), and the Tunisian Salon Foundation (founded in 1894) that showcased the artwork of foreign artists residing in Tunisia (Bahnasi, 1997).

Many references to Said (1993), Said (1979), Bahnasi (1997) and Lelia (1992) indicated the artists' primary motivations for participating in Orientalist campaigns were military ones. As a result, many artists were not welcomed or admired when they were sent abroad. Conversely, they experienced distress and unease, and several subjects—such as poverty, backwardness, peasants, and Bedouins—were absent. It caused him to misrepresent the East in the minds of the West. However, some individuals were drawn to taking pictures of the Eastern Nights because they offered a distinct perspective from what was really seen. Even if some of them had only been to the East for a few months, their images served as a justification for their strong want to capture the thoughts in their cameras.

For instance, not everyone had access to the harem, which is an area devoted to ladies. Despite the difficulty of painting Muslim women in Algeria at the time because they were always wearing the abaya, critics questioned Eugène Delacroix's 1834 painting "Women of Algeria", which sparked controversy for showing the harem in inappropriate situations. Along with having sexual overtones, the painting featured "the hookah", which was then often used to inhale opium and hashish and, according to critics, conveyed the conventional view of Arabs and Muslims that Western orientalists had of them.

2. The Significance of the Study

The topic of this study is the clichés attached to Muslim women and how Orien-

talist painters propagated them is a substantial topic. It will mainly be explored through the painting *Women in Algiers* by Delacroix.

3. The Aim and Method of the Study

The current study aims to highlight the significance of the clichés attached to Muslim women spread by Orientalist painters in general and through the painting *Women in Algiers* by Delacroix, highlighting the following points:

- 1) Viewed from an imperialist vantage point, the Middle East is portrayed as a region of strange and exotic pleasures between imagination and reality.
- 2) Muslim Women were objectified through Delacroix's interpretation and his of sexualised Middle Eastern women who were depicted as highly erotic subjects who smoked opium within a harem.
- 3) The dichotomous relationship of Muslim women between the veil and polygamy in Art as interpreted through the fantasies of Orientalist painters.

4. Viewed from an Imperialist Vantage Point, the Middle East Is Portrayed as a Region of Strange and Exotic Pleasures

The French conquest of Algeria had begun in 1830; toward the end of 1831, the young diplomat Charles de Mornay was sent to the Sultan of Morocco. At that period, it was usual to take artists along, to visually manuscript such a journey. From January to July 1832, Delacroix toured in Algeria, Spain, and Morocco. During this trip, he did not stop sketching because he was captivated by Algiers'



Figure 1. Delacroix, Eugène. “The Women of Algiers (in Their Apartment)”. 1834. Oil on canvas.

exoticism. *Women of Algiers (Figure 1)* is his first oeuvre resulting from his time in Morocco and is based on Delacroix's visit to a Muslim Harem. A harem is a place in a house reserved precisely for women; this place exists mostly in the countries, which have Islamic culture. Indeed, Muslim harems were heavily guarded, and so it was challenging to enter one. Because Islam forbade all naturalistic images and women were veiled in public, it was problematic for Delacroix to find female models to draw from; as so men predominated his sketchbooks. As soon as he would try to sketch from afar the women who would hang their washing out on roof terraces, they would instantly warn their husbands. Delacroix was privileged enough to meet a man who possessed a private harem, and so he was permitted to enter and stay for some time and was given consent to painted numerous watercolour sketches.

In his study *Djebar (2000)*, elucidates that the individual who granted permission for Delacroix to enter his residence was a chaouch, an Algerian individual employed by the French colonial administration. Djebar further emphasizes that a mere two years prior to France's colonial conquest, the painter would not have been granted the privilege to observe this view, and moreover, would have faced grave danger in attempting to do so. Hence, Delacroix's observation of the Orient is closely intertwined with the colonial expansion. His "adventure" can be seen as an intrusion, and his perspective as that of a voyeur and a thief.

Many writers and authors such as *Faulkner (1996)*, *Lelia (1992)* and *Minces (1978)* referee that the harem becomes accessible to him. The protagonist observes ladies and children who are eagerly anticipating his arrival, amidst an opulent display of silk and gold, creating an astonishing spectacle characterized by its remarkable visual abundance. According to an eyewitness, the artist is characterized as being "enraptured by the spectacle that unfolded before him. The painting is a composition of sketches Delacroix made of a Moorish merchant's female family members who expected the painter in a receiving room dressed in their luxury clothes. As we perceive from the painting, the women were in expensive and sumptuous clothes, have soft features, own a black slave and smoke from a hookah pipe. The women are portrayed waiting eagerly as a black servant in the far right of the image draws back a curtain as if unveiling the painting and the women's private apartment to the spectator. In the background, there is a red door half-open. Near the door, we can see a mirror and over the door, there is a shelf with vases. Delacroix uses light and colour to colossal effect, drawing the viewer into the picture "by its powerful harmony of colour values, its completely baroque and asymmetrical yet balanced rhythm of bodies and space" *Walter (1980)*. We can also grasp exotic curtains. On the wall, we can appreciate the exotic drawings over the tiles. The high window in the upper left-hand corner lets a ray of light into the room, casting the seated women in a natural highlight. This painting was distinguished because it was usually problematic to represent Muslim women, who were covered. Replacing the distinct odalisque with a group stresses the harem's function as a primary representation

for a man's aptitude to retain a multitude of women. The black slave's picture of the curtain fits into the account of the dramatic unveiling of the harem, reserved for the Muslim male, but now subject to the colonialist's scrutiny.

Cezanne commented that the colour of red slippers belonging to the three women in the harem in Delacroix's painting "goes into one's eyes like a glass of wine down one's throat" Blake (1984). In Parallel, Renoir said that "he could smell incense in it-which is all the more disturbing when combined with the lassitude of the women as they lounge in their confined chamber" Vaughan (1978). Compared to most harem scenes, the painting, in Tom Prideaux' (1966) words, is "a triumph of sensual delicacy".

European painters of the 19th century turned to backgrounds of harems and baths to raise an atmosphere of non-European hedonism and tantalising intrigue. Ingres's 1814 *Grande Odalisque*, for instance, portrays a concubine languorously lounging about, calmly dusting herself with feathers as she looks over her shoulder at the viewer with vague eyes. Suggestions strengthen the ideas of hedonistic and indulgent sex to opium-induced indulgence accessible by the pipe in the bottom right corner. Images like this encouraged viewers to imagine the Middle East as a distant region of sex, and new exotic practices. In his painting *Women of Alger*, the women's embellished bodies, enveloped in dense blankets and multiple layers of vibrant apparel insinuate a sluggishness that contributes to the "lazy native" stereotype.

Although many artists did visit the locations they painted, their images are often a mix of both fact and fantasy, illustrating on scenes and moments witnessed abroad as well as their predetermined notions of what a sensual, exotic, and barbaric non-Western world should appear. Memorably, the Palestinian-American intellectual Edward Said (1978) examined over Orientalism in 1979 with the publication of his book *Orientalism*. In it, he discussed that the West's imaginary artistic and literary notions of a static, passive and even morally degenerate East abetted Western colonialism, no matter how benign the apparent intentions of the paintings or the literature. He alleged that the "Grand Tour memorabilia" aspect of Orientalist painting was politically unpardonable, if not actively racist. Still today, no debate of Orientalism is comprehensive without reflection of Said's analysis.

5. Muslim Women Were Objectified through Delacroix's Interpretation and His of Sexualised Middle Eastern Women Who Were Depicted as Highly Erotic Subjects Who Smoked Opium within a Harem

Like Ingres' *Odalisque*, Delacroix's *Women of Algiers* is an exemplar of the 'harem interior' genre. The apartment is flooded with Oriental objects, such as vases, the hookah, and the familiar patterns related to the Oriental style implanted in the furniture and rugs. As Grigsby (2001) wrote: "The power of the picture resides in its successful integration of discrepant descriptive and generalising registers. On the one hand, the tableau flaunts Delacroix's newfound knowledge

in its plethora of sumptuous details that describe how things look: patterns of tiles, pillows, rugs, jewellery and fabrics. On the other hand, those details are everywhere subordinated to the self-evidently painterly handling of the composition's overall atmospheric lighting: the dusky late afternoon interplay between golden light and ceiling, cushioning shadows."

Delacroix, with his unique perspective, initially gravitates towards crafting an imaginative and exotic narrative rather than a strictly accurate and factual portrayal of historical events. He is engaged in what Djébar refers to as a "journey to the Orient". In Djébar's portrayal of Delacroix's initial encounter with the harem, it becomes evident that an Orientalist perspective is employed. Delacroix's immediate response is characterized by a sense of awe, fascination, and a tendency towards fantastical imaginings. The portrayal of the harem evokes an air of intrigue, ethereal beauty, and captivating charm (Djébar, 2000).

That perspective made Delacroix displays warm colours to show the viewers that he was painting an oriental and exotic painting. Eugene Fromentin (in Philippe Jullian (1977); offered a colorful description of Delacroix' masterwork: "Imagine a collection of all kinds of precious materials, yellow damask, with black satin stripes and with gold arabesques on a black ground, and silver flowers on the lemon background; a whole array of scarlet silk with two strips of olive; orange beside violet, pinks crossed with blues, delicate blues with cold greens, half-emerald cushions, crimson, purple and garnet-red, all this put together with the imaginativeness that comes naturally to Orientals, the only true colorists in the world."

In the painting "Women of Algiers in their Apartment", Djébar portrays the notion of intimate areas exclusively inhabited by women as sanctuaries that offer a brief escape from the constraints imposed by patriarchal traditions. In the sanctuary of these environments, women are strongly embraced by their peers, fostering an atmosphere where they may establish meaningful connections on an equal footing. Consequently, individuals are given the opportunity to relinquish their defenses, engage in conversations about their complaints, and seek mutual assistance within this context. These sanctuaries play a crucial role in facilitating the development of female communities, establishing an environment characterized by acceptance and inclusivity, which counteracts the sense of isolation that women typically encounter Ann (2016).

On the other side, the painting was not only known at the time for its erotic connotations, but also for the depiction of opium, which at the time was only included of paintings of prostitutes. The hookah, though in fact less common in Algiers at the time than in Beirut or Damascus, flatters this nature of work better than the long-stemmed pipe. First, the hookah can more merely be placed in a prominent place in the painter's composition, unlike the pipe that can stand on its own. Also, the hookah is used to smoke and be passed around from individual to individual. This admits the presence of several smokers. The orgiastic characteristic of the fantasy is reinforced by the fact that the women smoke at the same time—their facial expression and posture show that all three have previously

been intoxicated. The ruler of the house is still nowhere to be seen, but the group depiction continues, of course, to place the European male observer in his position.

The painting, which literally and metaphorically glances behind the “veil” of Muslim women’s privacy, persuaded generations of painters to travel overseas for exotic artistic stimulation.

6. The Dichotomous Relationship of Muslim Women between the Veil and Polygamy in Art as Interpreted through the Fantasies of Orientalist Painters

The concept of Orientalism provides developed a certain viewpoint that constructs, amplifies, and distorts the understanding of Eastern, or “Oriental”, civilizations, transforming them into fabricated realms characterized by enigmatic allure, sensuality, exotic appeal, and peril. Orientalism originated in Europe as a way to distinguish between the East and the West. It is the deliberate marginalization of those they perceive to be less morally upright, more depraved, and from lower social classes than themselves. Not only does art present this false and harmful representation, but literature, human geography, and cultural studies do as well.

Orientalism, as [Edward Said \(1993\)](#) used the word, can be stated as an ideology, which supports the ‘West-and-Islam’ dualism and the idea that ‘Others are less human’. Because the Islamic world was viewed as an enemy since the Crusades, colonialism calls for misrepresentation. Here are two matters in Islam that appear to be of specific interest to the West. The first is polygamy and the second is the veil. Islam did not conceive polygamy. Judaism approved men to have an unrestricted number of wives according to their income. Both David and Solomon had hundreds of wives and concubines despite the circumstance that they were both prophets. The Old and New Testaments did not forbid polygamy, which was in custom until the 16th century. In 1650 the Frankish Council in Nuremberg tolerated men to take two wives. The Mormon accepted polygamy until the 1970s when they were banned from doing so by civil law. When Islam came in, it regulated polygamy by limiting it to four wives, who each have identical family and inheritance rights. Nevertheless, polygamy in Islam can only be applied under certain circumstances such as infertility or illness of the first wife or the decline of the male population due to conflict. Certain situations were inflicted on men, among them complete equality in the management of their wives, although if he could not take by this stipulation, then he was allowed only one spouse. Despite the several interpretations concerning the veil and seclusion of Muslim women, there is no clear text in the Qur’an that demands either on women. The Qur’an itself does not dictate that women should be fully veiled or separated from men but expresses of their involvement in the life of the community, and mutual religious duty with men to devote to God, live virtuous lives, and to cover themselves or dress humbly [Edward Said \(1993\)](#).

Throughout pilgrimage to Mecca, both men and women accomplish their ri-

tual without being separated and a woman's hands and face must be uncovered both at pilgrimage and while executing the five daily prayers; both rites are among the five pillars of Islam. After the emergence of Islam, for the first time, women were given equal rights as men. In a family, a woman was not only given the right of approval to marriage, but her consent became an order for the validity of the marital contract. Her conjugal rights and responsibilities were clear. As a wife, her respect was essential for the husband who was indebted to provide her with the three necessities: food, clothing and shelter according to her social position. If he failed to deliver her with one, she had the right to separation. As a mother, her broods were obliged to obey and respect her. As a daughter, she was protected from infanticide, as was the practice in pre-Islamic society. Females were given the right to inherit and to possess and was the only keeper of her property with no interference from her family including her husband. Her civil and religious rights and duties were identical to men. The Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet advised both men and women to pursue education on equal standings. The Prophet's daughters and wives were not only educated in matters of their religion but were also referred to as authorities to decode religious customs and inculcate Muslims in matters of their conviction. Islam provided women with the right to political contribution, holding public office and official debate, associating and practising all the vocations that were accessible to men. Since the early days of Islam, women participated in conflict and trade (Khadija, the Prophet's first wife, was a merchant in whose occupation was the Prophet himself before the revelation came to him), and instructed the people privately and in mosques. Muslim women practiced medicine and nursing.

Unlike her European peer, the nude Muslim woman appeared in Orientalist paintings independent of mythology and was assigned within a certain milieu which in the mind of the artists gave her a real charisma that fascinated the Western middle-class community. Consequently, the most common cliché's portrayed Oriental women, through literature and art, as the malicious, immoral and decadent sex object whose sole aim in life was to seduce and gratify the forbidden desires of the Oriental and European male travelers. Indeed, Luis Riccardo Falero, John Fredrick Lewis, Jean-Léon Gerôme, Jean Lecomte du Nouÿ, and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, among others, presented limitless scenes of naked Muslim women. 'The White Slave' by Jean-Jules-Antoine Lecomte de Nouÿ, insinuates the theme of erotic possession inspired the artist's vision; a theme that frequently dealt tently in harem scenes by artists and writers of the time (Said, 1979).

7. Conclusion

The artist's works within the context of Orientalist paintings offer a better understanding of the identity of Muslim women depicted in Orientalist painting. The circumstance that Delac travelled to North Africa in 1832 as part of a French diplomatic mission two years after the invasion of Algiers appeared to

imply that the painting was a method of propaganda for France's imperialist motivations. However, upon closer analysis, *Women of Algiers* deviates from the interpretation of the exotic "other" characteristic of Orientalist works of the era. Indeed, Delacroix gave added nuanced message than Said's Orientalism might advocate: explicitly, that civilisation of Algeria, though less progressive than France's, was closer to nature and owned value ancient times that had eroded in the West. The painting's numerous contradictions—its immediate invitation and frustration of the voyeur's look, its slumbering like a serene shadow that glows and illuminates at night, its peace and intensity—express to its enigmatic nature as a product of both reality and imagination. Cournault, who accompanied Delacroix, wrote that upon seeing the women, he exclaimed that it was as if in the time of Homer. What he observed in the apartment that he painted was woman's devotion to the household and tenderness for her children and husband. He explained that he sees women and understands them, not thrown into the life of the world but withdrawn at its heart, at its most secret and hidden place. The women's self-reflection and reserve in *Women of Algiers* resonate with their faithfulness to their family and each other, far away from the image of an unaware and repressed woman whose ethnicity, based on religion, strained her into servitude behind the veil. The viewer, despite stepping into the women's space, stays an outsider. Despite its representative Orientalist subject, *Women of Algiers* portrayal of the harem contrasts unusually in that the viewer cannot achieve total infiltration. The secrecy of the woman and the harem is thus, preserved and respected. Besides, the limbo state of the image speaks to Delacroix's desire to hold onto the treasurable memory of this North African heaven. In an 1858 editorial, Theophile Silvestre celebrated Delacroix' mastery, no matter what was the subject referring to Walter (1980):" [He] has a sun in his whole scale of human passion; grandiose, terrible, or calm, the brush went from saints to warriors, from warriors to lovers, from lovers to tigers, and from tigers to flowers". In this painting, Delacroix caught theft of vibrant fabrics, the striking women and the blessedness of the culture. He beautifully denoted the beauty he had perceived within the walls of the harem.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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