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

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Dedicated to the memory of my grand-mother, Malka Pukhraj, for her love and unflinching faith in me that has kept me going on. Also to my daughter, Nisa Sanjana, who encouraged and supported me with her silent understanding and patience during this time.
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Abstract:

This paper 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 European presence there as the white man’s burden to civilize and tame the uncivilized, the inferior. The focus of this paper is specifically on 19th 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 weak in the heterosexual equation, and, white man’s racial, cultural and 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.
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Introduction:

The topic of my research is *Feminizing and Sexualizing the Orient as the Mysterious Other in Nineteenth Century Orientalist Art*. As a student of history and belonging to a once British colony—the consequences and legacies of which are still very much operative and evident in our psyches and our social fabric—I have always been interested in colonial perceptions and attitudes towards the colonized, and, our colonial legacy of viewing ourselves as the colonists did.

As a painter, my visual vocabulary was always dominated by women and the female body. In retrospect, the choice to use the female figure as subject for my work was but natural: there was a predominant role of a strong, self actualized woman in my life in my parent, and, because I knew what it was to have a female body—it was something very personal, something I was most familiar with and experienced most directly. The female form lent itself to my creative expression and its limitless impressions gave meaning, shape and style to my work.

A significant part of my learning in art was under the tutelage of renowned artist, Iqbal Hussain, who painted women from his immediate environment of the Red Light district in Lahore. During my learning and inquiry I discovered that women and the female body, both in Western as well as South Asian art, had mostly been painted by male artists: women had hardly ever been perceived and depicted from the eyes of female artists.

The significance lay in that ‘woman’ had been observed and represented predominantly through the eyes of ‘man’, and thus, from a position of power and dominance. Consequently, woman had been objectified, stereotyped, idealized and sensualised using either, stylization or realism, and passive visual vocabulary as tools—woman had been sexualized and de-individualized in disempowering ways. In the case of South Asian art, I believe, it was our post modern colonial legacy whereby we continued to exoticize and sensualise the Indian woman as the European artists did. The only exception I found to be was Amrita Shergill, a female artist portraying women, and Iqbal Hussain who portrayed his women not as pretty pictures of demure, seductive, erotic females. He painted them in their reality and environment as individuals and as humans
with all their complexities, strengths and weaknesses, without, either stereotyping or depicting them as mere objects.

This lead me to the conclusion that women or femininity had been misrepresented in art and had an acquired identity as they were spoken for by man, who viewed and represented them as the opposite sex, the ‘Other’, the sensuous and mysterious. Hence, my inclination and involvement in representation of women and female body in art.

During my investigation, I came across an essay in John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* on 19th century depiction of the nude in European art. I was particularly interested in the distinction Berger made between ‘naked’ and ‘nude’ depictions of the female body in European art: the ‘naked’ embodied individuality, a person, whereas the ‘nude’ was devoid of any such dignity, character or self possession, reflecting only eternal female passiveness, submissiveness and mysteriousness before the male gaze and power. I considered it fruitful to also investigate feminist art and artists such as, Guerrilla Girls, Cyndi Sherman, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro (founders of the Feminist Art Collective at Cal Arts), Jenny Saville and so on.

In the course of time, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* urged me to look into visual representation of the Orient. Therein, I came across hundreds of female nudes painted by European artists to depict the Orient. What concerned and intrigued me was that they always depicted the Orient as ‘female’—as odalisques i.e. concubines or sex slaves of the Sultan—and hence, an object, a sensuous, sexual, inviting, mysterious (therefore dangerous), and complacent object. Another disturbing fact was that the representations of the purportedly Eastern, Muslim women were neither genuine nor convincing: the women representing the Orient and Oriental women were not Oriental but very much European. Hence, confirming the fact that representation of the East by European artists was not guided by the real Orient, but a misrepresentation, constructed on the basis of Western ideas and fantasies about the Orient. Moreover, these pictorial depictions of the Orient revealed a definite connection and similarities between European social perception and artistic depiction of women, and, its perception and portrayal of the Orient.

There onwards, I began to look for writings, interviews, videos, images, documentaries and movies on Oriental art and Orientalism and found a ready amount of material available.
Research Question:

This study is an investigation into how and why the Orient was objectified, feminized, sexualized and misrepresented in art as part of 19th century Imperialist political and cultural propaganda against the East. It will also reflect on how this portrayal of the Orient coincided with the Western male conception of women: as the ‘Other’, an object, subordinate, sensuous and weak. The aim is to expose the deliberate intention of mystifying, objectifying and portraying the Orient as removed from temporal and historical processes of evolution and progress, culturally and morally stagnant and backward, unable to speak for itself, and hence, the white man’s burden to civilize, and tame.
Methodology:


Along with theoretical research, I also studied visual references of Orientalist art, collecting relevant images, especially of odalisque and harem scenes in order to elucidate and validate my research question. During this process of theoretical and visual research I notated my reflections and ideas on the topic.

The paper begins with a discussion on the historical and contextual background of Orientalist art i.e. Orientalism. It then proceeds to discussing how the Orient was feminized and sexualized in art relating it to European social attitude towards women and depiction of the female body in Western art. Finally, in order to elaborate and establish the above standpoint, comes a visual analysis of an iconic 19th century Orientalist painting by French artist, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, titled, La Grande Odalisque (Fig. 1.13). In conclusion, the paper relates the study’s significance to my own past and future practice.
Literature Review:

Current post colonial debate on Orientalism and Orientalist art involves three generic approaches. A seminal discourse was begun by Palestinian-American literary critic, Edward Said, in his milestone 1972 book, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Said expounded that ‘Orientalism’ was a form of cultural imperialism. In his opinion, Orientalist discourse had “…supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.” (Said, 2001, p. 2). This enabled the Occident to create an image of the ‘Other’, backed by colonial political, economic and corporate motives for dominance and expansion. Said contended that Orientalist literary discussion and imagery was a product of imperial fantasies, desires and fears about the Orient, wherein, it portrayed the ‘Other’ as morally, racially and culturally backward and inferior.

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 sexualising 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 ‘Seraglio’s 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:

...imperialism...should [not] be regarded in an imprecise and undifferentiated way, somehow free of the chronological dynamic that is the stuff of historical study... [and one should not] pick and mix artists from different points in the nineteenth century and portray them as locked into a set of racial and imperialist assumptions.1

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Historical and Contextual Background of Orientalist Art—‘Orientalism’:

The Orient was almost a European invention, and...since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.\(^2\)

Edward Said certainly did not mean to imply that the Orient was an imaginary idea, a fantasy of the Europeans. What he meant was that the Orient was the created ‘Other’ by virtue of which the Occident defined and actualized its own identity, existence and image: the Occident was everything that the Orient was not and vice versa. Thus on the basis of this fundamental distinction—us and them—and negation—we are not they—the Occident realized, visualized and strengthened its own reality and existence: “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). A paradoxical situation, one could say: in creating the identity of the ‘Other’ and asserting differences with it, the West actually, inadvertently, submitted its existence to be only in relation to or through recognition of the East. One could say then, that West’s identity was a negative identity—it was asserted by negating what it was ‘not’.

The dominant colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries were The United Kingdom and France. The Orient or the East were countries adjacent to or beyond Eastern Europe like Turkey, Iran, India, China, Chinese inspired civilizations of South East Asia including Japan and countries in Northern Africa like Morocco, Egypt, Algeria and Libya. The Orient was, however, more a cultural than geographical designation by Europe of anything and everything beyond the European borders, culture, and society. The intellectual lethargy of the Orientalists was that they brought the four inherently diverse civilizations of Persia, Arabia, India and China\(^3\) under one banner of the ‘Orient’.


\(^3\) To aggregate the diversity among the peoples generally clubbed as Persian, Chinese, Indian and Arabic is a gross over simplification.
For the white man, the Orient was rich, quaint, mysterious and exotic, but it was also archaic, backward, racially inferior and a land of tyrannical despots and savages with occult beliefs and practices. The West was, no doubt, fascinated by the Oriental romance, mystery, exotica and pleasures, but it also considered it decadent, regressive, and sinister. Hence, the Orient had to be saved, its riches exploited and its pleasures delved into. Of course, the pretext for colonization was that it was the white man’s burden to tame and civilize the primitive and savage East by introducing Western culture, arts, ideals and knowledge. The prerequisite to control and exercise of power over the Orient was to acquire understanding and in depth knowledge about the land and its peoples—knowledge about their psyches, cultures, languages, customs, religions, social structures, ancient beliefs, arts, economies, geography, topography, politics, flora, fauna and so on. The information gathered was then documented in the form of elaborate and detailed treatises and texts.

Thus, the Orient was ‘Oriental’ because the West defined it as that—being in a position of dominance it had the power and the right to describe and construct ideas, views and imagery about the Orient. Thereby, ‘Orientalism’ came to be a structured and disciplined “...system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness...” (Said, 1972, p. 6). It represented and established a way of thinking about the Orient:

Orientalism [was]...the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient...by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it:...[It was]...a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.4

Thus, Orientalism—the idea, understanding and portrayal of the Orient—was a sign of Imperial dominance in terms of its knowledge about the Orient, and, its political, militaristic and ideological ascendancy. The roots of Orientalism lay in a “…positional superiority” or “…the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non–European peoples and cultures...[and hence] European superiority over Oriental backwardness...” (Said, 1972, p. 7). The identity of the Orient, therefore, was established on the basis of certain fundamental factors—a basic distinction between the Occident and the Orient, Western desire to control the East, a culture of superiority in Western consciousness, and hence, racism, and a relationship of imperial

power, and hence, Western economic and political interests. In short, the West was looking at the East from a position of moral, cultural, political and economic authority and superiority.

Colonization, thereby, lead to a 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, by default, was very much Orientalist in its approach, themes and subject matter—it depicted the Orient both as romantic, mysterious and exotic, as well as, culturally, socially, morally and politically servile, savage and debauched. The inspiration was both, fascination and visual documentation of the Orient as colonizers. Because of Europe’s romance with the Orient, wherein, it idealized and romanticized as well as desired to overpower it, this period of Orientalist art was known as the Romantic Era. Among significant artists were the French such as, Eugene Delacroix, Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Manet and British artists like Tilly Kettle, William Hodges and Johan Zoffany. The dominant style at the time was French Realism or Academic or Salon style that gave preference to genre painting i.e. depicting everyday life as opposed to historical, religious or mythological painting.

The recurrent and standard topos of Orientalist art was Oriental women, harems, life, cultures, societies, customs and peoples. The purpose was not only, as mentioned earlier, the portrayal of Oriental exoticism and backwardness, but also, visual documentation of the ‘Other’ for political reasons. Consequently, the Europeans also did ethnographic studies, studies of the natural world (flora and fauna), landscapes (both picturesque and sublime), interiors, and they depicted climate and architectural otherness. There was a considerable number of Orientalist artists, as Lynne Thornton examined “...no fewer than 148”, and the Mathaf Gallery, London, dealing in Orientalist art listed “…100 artists whose paintings pass through its hands”, including “…many amateurs, architects and military men...as well as trashy imitators.” (MacKenzie, 1995, p. 44).

In order to fully grasp the context of Orientalist art, it is imperative to grasp the nature of involvement of the West with the East. In the culture of “positional superiority”—‘us’ and ‘them’—and from the standpoint of Imperial domination, the East was inferior and backward and an ‘object’ of desire with endless political, economic and sexual possibilities. And it was portrayed precisely in this vein in 19th century Orientalist art. Moreover, European understanding
of the Orient was superficial and external—they were foreigners interacting with alien cultures and societies without any cultural, social, or historical referents. As a result, they misrepresented the Orient, as very aptly stated by Ananda Coomaraswamy:

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 [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.5

The Orientalist conception of the East was also unsympathetic and shallow for it stemmed from a position of dogma and power. Thus, Europe spoke for the Orient as it understood and the way it wanted to portray it to suit its imperial, economic, and political interests. The assumption and pretext was, of course, that the Orient could not speak for itself as evident by Karl Marx’s statement: “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” (Said, 1972, xiii).6

Another pertinent example of Orientalist ideological assumptions was Flaubert’s account of an Egyptian courtesan, which could be applied to the Orient itself. Said’s response to Flaubert was:

...[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.”7

Thus, it was this relationship of power with the Orient 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.

There was an exteriority—similar to European understanding of the Orient—in Orientalist art as well—the European artist was an outsider representing, speaking for and depicting the East, the


‘Other’. And since the East could not represent itself “...the representation [did] the job, for the West, and...for the poor Orient.” (p. 21). He used realistic representation to make it seem like the Orient, but, it was only visual depiction and not the real Orient. Discussing textual representation of the Orient, Said observed that:

...various Western techniques of representation...made the Orient visible, clear, “there” in discourse about it. And these representations relied upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient.⁸

In my opinion, the above was equally true for Orientalist visual representation. Documentary and scientific realism, picturesque information, “realist mystification”, lack of identification with the subjects and being consciously detached from what was represented, were pictorial tools employed to reinforce ‘otherness’ and create the “reality effect”—to make the Orient appear as mysterious and as convincing as if it was the ‘real’. In other words, it served the purpose of ‘Orientalizing’ the Orient for Western audience much as Kuchuk Hanem was ‘Orientalized’ by Flaubert.

Orientalist visual imagery was the reality of the white man and not that of the Orient or the perception of the ‘Oriental’ about himself: “...the white man [was]...always implicitly present...with his controlling gaze, the gaze which brought the Oriental world into being, the gaze for which it [was]...ultimately intended.” (Nochlin, 1989, p.37). Thus, Orientalist artists were not reflecting a given reality but in fact “producing meanings” in and through their works. The realism, the detached empiricism, the objectivity, accuracy and “authenticating details” were tools used to “...make the viewers forget that there was any “bringing into being” at all” of the art work, and to eradicate “...all traces of the picture plane...[and] any clue to the art work as a literal flat surface ...[or] that the image consisted of paint on canvas.” (pp. 37, 38). The aim was, of course, to lend credibility to and convince the Western viewer that the representation was essential, authentic, “pre-existing” Oriental reality without any adulteration or personal interpretation of the artist. However, these were at best only ‘representations’ reflecting Orientalist vision, fantasies and ideology about the East as the mysterious, exotic and decadent.

⁸ Ibid., p. 22.
Thus, Orientalist art was produced in the context of Orientalist ideology (discussed earlier) originating from a specific power configuration, i.e. Imperialism, and it had its cultural, social and political uses and functions. Artists such as Eugene Delacroix whose paintings were archetypal of the picturesque and romantic “...clearly distinguished between its [Orient’s] visual beauty...which [they]...treasured, and its moral quality, which [they]...deplored” (p. 52).

Discussing Jean-Léon Gérôme’s picturesque Snake Charmer (Fig. 1.1), Linda Nochlin remarked that “...the defining mood of the painting [was]...mystery...[and the] sexually charged mystery at the center of th[e] painting 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 i.e. the artist and the European viewers: “Our gaze [was] meant to include both the spectacle and its spectators as objects of picturesque delectation.” (p. 35). The “realist mystification” and alienation of subjects was meaningful as it signified a detachment, a non-identification of the viewer and the artist with what was being depicted.

In other words, the visual and conceptual message was that the East, though mysterious and inviting, was a distant and remote reality with which the white man could not identify. He was morally, existentially and emotionally detached from it and could only have a detached response of wonderment, curiosity, sexual or erotic pleasure or even disgust. The Turkish tiles in the background, painted painstakingly, and showing later repair work were meant to reflect the neglect and laziness of the Orientals and served a moralizing function by “…commenting on the corruption of contemporary Islamic society...[and] the barbaric insouciance of Moslem people, who...literally charm[ed] snakes while Constantinople [fell] into ruins.” (pp. 38, 39).

The “absence of a sense of history, of temporal change” was another significant note of Gérôme’s painting by Nochlin. Thereby, she argued that the Orient was represented as stagnant, deteriorating, lacking progress and unaffected by the advances of modernity and civilization influencing the West. As discussed earlier, it was a political motive to portray the Orient as savage and untamed, to be civilized by the West. As a result, 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)* (Fig. 1.3); political authority of the colonists, or, in the words of Akbar Naqvi referring to British colonial paintings of India, “...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) (Fig. 1.4); a white woman (Britannia) slaying a tiger (a visual code for India) in Edward Armitage’s *Retribution (1858)* (Fig. 1.5); and so on. It was, therefore, upon the West to cultivate, educate, civilize and modernize the backward and inferior Orient and teach it all the “elements of Western civilization” (p. 36)—its language, arts, customs, culture and values.

Thus Orientalist art, ensuing from Imperial sovereignty and a moral, cultural, social and political high ground, aimed at the objectification, exoticization and representation of Eastern lands and peoples as backward, inferior and servile, with the aim to colonize them.
Feminizing the Orient: Critical Visual and Contextual Analysis of 19th Century Orientalist Paintings:

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.9

The crux of the above analysis by visual theorist, Griselda Pollock, was that colonization at its core meant a relation of power, sex and servitude with the colonized. Consequently, Orientalist art, along with depicting the Orient as subjugated and servile, also portrayed it as feminine and sexual. This being a predominant feature of Orientalism governed almost all aspects of the relationship of the West with the East. By portraying the East as feminine, a sexual and gender difference was created, reflecting the desires and fantasies of the colonizers about the colonized.

Fascinated by Oriental female sexuality, the West indulged in creating many imagined and romanticized tales about it and “…the East was often viewed through the fantasized metaphor of the Eastern woman” (Clayton and Zon, 2007, p.180). The Orient, thus, was the female, the romantic, erotic, sensuous, and a sexual haven in the male 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.10

In a similar observation Said claimed that:

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Just as the various colonial possessions...were useful as places to send wayward sons, superfluous populations of delinquents, poor people, and other undesirables, so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe.¹¹

The Orient and the Oriental woman were, therefore, viewed as one in Orientalist perception and imagination. And consequently, the Orient was always understood by the West in feminine terms and its image constructed on the basis of racism and feminisation.

Thus, the topos of eastern sexuality, sexual availability, passion, and sensuality 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 and fantasies about the Orient, and thereby, the images betrayed blatant voyeurism. The condemnation, however, was meant for the Orient for being backward, decadent, and debauched—ironical how Oriental societies and people were debased and demeaned at the cost of whom Western fantasies and imaginations were being fed. One finds a correlation here with the European tradition of nude painting where voyeurism and the idea of the spectator, the male gaze was the predominant theme. It was depicted pictorially with the nude woman either looking directly at the spectator suggesting awareness of being watched, or, then at herself in a mirror, suggesting surveying herself. Berger made an interesting analysis in this context:

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.¹²

The feminizing and sexualizing of the Orient pointed to another interesting and significant aspect of Orientalist painting: it allowed the European artists to project their sexual and erotic fantasies, secret desires and passions onto the Orient—they ‘Orientalized’, as it were, their own fantasies and desires by portraying them in an Oriental setting or situation, and in so doing, also


maintained a safe moral, social and cultural distance. Referring to Eugene Delacroix’s *Death of Sardanapalus*, (Fig. 1.2), Nochlin observed that “...[It did] not function as a field of ethnographic exploration...[but] rather, a stage for the playing out, from a suitable distance, of forbidden passions—the artist’s own fantasies...” (Nochlin, 1989, p. 42).

This was the ‘Romantic’ depiction of the Orient. Its emphasis was on romanticizing and sexualizing the Orient—not on objective documentation—in keeping with European male erotic fantasies and Orientalist ideological assumptions about the Orient. It was a sign of cultural imperialism and European sense of moral and racial superiority over inferior, non-European races. There were hundreds of Orientalist paintings depicting the ‘odalisque’—sex slave/concubine of the Sultan—in which the nude female body was used as a symbol for the East. The aim was to depict the Orient as the great temptation, the object, seductive, sinister and servile, which it was the white man’s prerogative to indulge in, and duty to tame, control and civilize.

It is interesting to note that Orientalist depiction of the East as female reflected 19th century European male attitude towards ‘woman’—the ‘Other’, the weak, passive, sexual, mysterious (and therefore trouble), and the object for male sexual pleasure and satisfaction. Nochlin described *Death of Sardanapalus* as a signifier of “...contemporary Frenchmen’s power over women, a power controlled and mediated by the ideology of the erotic...” (1989, p.42). She further remarked that:

...the 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...\(^\text{13}\)

It would be useful here to elaborate on the European tradition of ‘nude’ painting to understand European perception of woman and its intent behind depicting the Orient in feminine nakedness. The West had a long history of painting the female nude going back to the mythological and religious paintings of the Renaissance. The way the female body was represented implied European social conception of woman/the female body and “...the criteria and conventions by

\(^\text{13}\) Linda Nochlin, *The Imaginary Orient*, 1989, p. 42
which women had been seen and judged as sights.” (Berger, 1972, p. 47). In the same vein, Berger offered a telling insight into the historical and social reality of women: because of their social and economic dependence on men, women also developed their identity and “social presence” in relation to men—how they appeared to men.

Thereby, being continually ‘watched’ or observed by men, a woman embodied “the surveyor and the surveyed within her”. This determined not only the “relations between men and women” but also that the “surveyor of woman in herself was male: the surveyed female...[and thus] she turn[ed] herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.” (1972, p. 47). Hence, in the European nudes, the woman was always portrayed as aware of being watched, surveyed, judged by the ‘spectator’. With reference to the use of the mirror (mentioned earlier), which implied that the nude was surveying herself in it, Berger argued that “The real function of the mirror was...to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.” (1972, p. 51).

In the same context, Berger made a significant distinction between ‘nude’ and ‘naked:

To be naked is to be oneself.
To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display.14

Thus, the paintings of the nude female body served the voyeuristic, fetishist and erotic fantasies and desires of the spectator or owner of the painting. Simultaneously, they flattered and glorified the sexual and social self-image of the powerful male: the owner or spectator of the painting was always most certainly the European male, because the patrons of art—in terms of agents, gallery owners, buyers, and even artists—were always men due to their social and economic power. The nudity depicted, therefore, had to serve male sexual and social identity. Consequently, the subject, the nude was always depicted as conscious of being observed and on display for the male viewer. She, thereby, appeared passive and supine as if an object on display and unaware of her own person, desires or individuality, submitting her sexuality to the passion and demands of

14 Linda Nochlin, *The Imaginary Orient*, 1989, p. 54
the viewer. Discussing Bronzino’s *An Allegory With Venus and Cupid*, (1545), (Fig. 1.6) Berger aptly stated that:

Her body [wa]s arranged in the way it [wa]s, to display it to the man looking at the picture. This picture [wa]s made to appeal to his sexuality. It ha[d] nothing to do with her sexuality. (Here and in the European tradition generally,„[t]he woman’s sexual passion need[ed] to be minimized so that the spectator may feel that he ha[d] the monopoly of such passion). Women [we]re there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own.\(^{15}\)

The ‘act of looking’, therefore—both in relation to society and art—and the enjoyment attained therein, was always the prerogative of and an indulgence reserved for ‘man’. If one was to apply the psychoanalytic theory to art, asserting that looking at or viewing of art was dictated by unconscious, instinctual, psychic processes related to sexuality, then:

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 gratification is derived...through fetishism (where objects are endowed with sexual significance and through which sexual gratification is sought...) or voyeurism (where sexual gratification is achieved though surreptitious looking at the sexual activities or parts of others). [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.\(^{16}\)

Thus, it would be naive to treat Western nude painting as simply ‘art’ or depiction of ‘beauty’ for it existed in a very real historical, social and cultural context and related to ‘lived sexuality’. It was a reflection of the power relations between man and woman and the place and identity of women in European society. As rightly noted by Naqvi—while discussing the Bengal School enthused by Hindu revivalism, and Chughtai, the flag bearer for Muslim India—that “Art, despite its dreamy demeanour and other-worldly romance, responded nonetheless to what was happening in society.” (Naqvi, 2010, p. 5). Thus, the female nude in the Western tradition of art mirrored conventions of society that designated woman as the weaker sex and the female body


\(^{16}\) Tamar Garb, Gender and Representation, in *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, 1993, pp. 221, 222.
an ‘object’ for man’s sexual passion and fulfilment. She was represented accordingly in art as passive, vulnerable, and de-humanized, 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].¹⁷

In light of the above discussion—the arts of a society reflect its social and cultural values and norms—it would be interesting to note, that in other non European art women or the female body was depicted having dignity, social presence, a person and individuality, and as equal partners in representations of a sexual activity, as opposed to passive idealized bodies submitting to male voyeurism and sexuality. This indicted that in these cultures femininity was venerated and even worshipped: “...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 man...” (Berger, 1972, p. 53).

This would reinforce the theory that ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ were not determined by respective biologies and fixed, predetermined ‘natures’, but given meaning and value by society and culture, and this given value and meaning, established social and cultural norms: “...social conditioning and the learning of behavioural roles...become internalized as our natural ‘femininity’ or ‘masculinity’, usually called ‘gender’ differences.” (Garb, 1993, p. 221). Thus, our perception of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ depended not on ‘sexual differences’ themselves but on the meaning given to those by society and the social identities acquired by ‘man’ and ‘woman’ thereby. So, if art was a reflection of society, then ‘how’ femininity and masculinity were depicted in art reflected the social value and meaning attributed to them by society. Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock in their study, Old Mistresses (1981), asserted that art 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’ were related to gender identity and accepted notions of sexual pleasure were crucial in this respect.\(^\text{18}\)

It would be useful here to mention Edouard Manet’s *Olympia*, (1863), (Fig. 1. 7), an exception to the norm in 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century European nude painting. It aroused violent criticism because it broke the convention of the idealized and 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 idealized beauty. Because it did not fit the norms of traditional representation of femininity there was unacceptability of *Olympia* by the critics:

\[\ldots\text{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 somehow not in place in Manet’s work.” \(^\text{19}\)\]

Discussing the European social perception, and the concomitant, visual or pictorial depiction of women, was necessary to establish its connection with Orientalist visual depiction of the Orient in sensuous, languid feminine nudity. The connection was “contemporary Frenchmen’s...fantasy of absolute possession of women’s naked bodies” (Nochlin, 1989, pp. 43), which was transposed to the Orient. This gave the male European viewer the same satisfaction of possessing, controlling and indulging in a subjugated, compliant and inferior Orient. Nochlin’s was a fitting analysis of Gerome’s paintings of Oriental slave markets (Fig. 1.8):

\[\text{Like many other art works of his time, Gerome’s Orientalist painting managed to body forth two ideological assumptions about power: one about men’s power over women; the other about white men’s superiority to, hence justifiable control over, inferior, darker races...who indulge in this sort of regrettably lascivious commerce.}^\text{20}\]


Thus, the idea that there was the essential woman or feminine which was universal, natural, fixed, eternal, and pre-existing, was projected onto the Orient creating artistic myths about it. Similar to Western nudes, the Orient was mostly depicted as a reclining, erotically passive, unable to speak for itself, female nude inviting and seducing European male gaze, indulgence and control. The visual metaphor of the ‘odalisque’ with its ideological connotations was used profusely for the Orient by Orientalist artists.

Feminizing the Orient not only created gender or sexual otherness and difference, reiterating Western phallocentric, male heterosexual social and visual culture, but it also reinforced Orientalist ideology of the morally, socially, racially and culturally inferior ‘Other’. It indicated the relationship of the colonizers with the colonized—a relationship of imperial dominance, sex and servitude—where the colonizers held a position of racial, moral and cultural superiority, political and military dominance and control, and, the colonized were the object, the weak, the inferior and the sinister. Hence, the Orient was a place onto which they projected their deepest political, sexual and erotic desires, fears, dreams and fantasies.

However, the cold objectivity, the otherness, and the distance created in the narrative of the paintings, in terms of a distant land inhabited by non European, inferior races, invited “the (male) viewer...sexually to identify with, yet morally to distance himself from, his Oriental counterparts depicted within the objectively inviting yet racially distancing space of the painting” (1989, p. 45). The Death of Sardanapalus, (Fig. 1.2), for example, not only gave the pictorial message of a barbaric and debauched, but also, a ‘distant’ and far removed Orient (recall Delacroix’s ‘Orientalizing’ and thus distancing of his forbidden sexual fantasies about women’s bodies by situating them in an Oriental setting). The distancing helped in creating a narrative that neither the artist nor the viewer identified with morally, culturally or emotionally, but only sexually.

Underlying the ideology and narrative of the feminine Orient was also the imperial intent to characterize the Orient as backward and uncivilized to justify colonization to their Western counterparts back home. It served another politically driven, psychologically potent message: to make the colonized perceive and thus treat their own selves as weak, subordinate and unable to speak for themselves (recall Berger’s analysis of the use of the mirror in European nude
Naqvi’s analysis in relation to British colonial depiction of India was in a similar context:

...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.\(^{21}\)

Thus, Western representation of the East in terms of gender, sexuality and femininity was largely given to creating myths about and misrepresenting the East. The problem with Orientalist works of art like Gerome’s The Slave Market, (Fig. 1.8), The Large Pool of Bursa, (Fig. 1.9), Delacroix’s Algerian Women in their Apartments, (Fig. 1.10), Odalisque Reclining on a Divan, (Fig. 1.11) and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ The Grand Odalisque, (Fig. 1.12), was not only the objectification and feminizing or sexualizing of the Orient, but also lack of authentic representation of Oriental culture, society and women. For instance, the Oriental women portrayed in the above mentioned works, lacked familiarity with the physical appearance of Oriental women, as well as, culture and society: not only were they European in their features and complexion, but, it was also inconceivable for European artists to have access to enclosed women’s quarters or royal harems that were forbidden to all men except the Sultan.

Moreover, all 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). Hence, reinforcing the European perception of the ‘universal woman’ and projecting it on to the Orient, establishing the myth of a universal, essential, stereotypical, feminine Orient. An Orient that was sexual, eternal, unchanging and removed from temporal and historical processes of evolution and progress meeting 18th and 19th century West.

To sum up, it is quite evident that European artists were depicting the Orient not through real life encounters or experiences or as the Orient actually was, but on the basis of ‘Orientalist’ ideology

and assumptions (discussed at the outset) and Western conceptions of the East and Eastern sensuality. Ingres’ *Turkish Bath* (1862), (Fig. 1.12), for example, was:

...the supreme masterpiece of imaginative Orientalism. This was the apogee of a whole series of compositions…painted in Rome in 1808, by way of various odalisques and harem interiors, that had haunted Ingres all his life (though he never once visited the Islamic world himself, except through picture books and engravings.22

Orientalist art, in other words, was the aesthetic offshoot of European political, economic, militaristic and cultural propaganda against the East: “Orientalism responded more to the culture that produced it than to its putative object which was also produced by the West.”23

It is true that the West was fascinated and intrigued by the rich, luxuriant and sensuous Orient that offered romantic and sexual experience, apart from economic and political opportunity. And so, it was exoticized, romanticized and eroticized, depicting extravagant and luxurious Eastern fineries, women, and objects of wealth and desire. As a result, painted with either picturesque realism or romanticism, Orientalist paintings were abundant with suggestions of the romance, exotica and pleasures to be sought after in the East.

However, it is equally true, in my opinion, that Europe reacted to the East “as a man might react to a woman, by manifesting strong attraction or strong repulsion.” (Kabbani, 1986, p. 67). Just like the female gender was the ‘Other’, the mysterious, and therefore, dangerous in European male perception, the East was the ‘Other’ for the West. The Orient was the equivalent of ‘woman’ for Europe, and therefore, the female body became the symbol or the visual trope for the Orient. In short, Orientalist visual depiction of the East was political in that it was motivated by Western political, economic and militaristic interests, and, it reflected the relationship between the Occident and the Orient—a relationship of power, control, sex and slavery.

In order to further elaborate my standpoint I will be doing a critical visual and contextual analysis of Ingres’ *La Grande Odalisque*, (Fig. 1.13) that was considered to be iconic in

22 William Vaughan, *Arts of the 19th Century, Volume 1, 1780-1850*, pp. 37, 38

Orientalist pictorial imagery, and, an epitome of female beauty and femininity in 19th century European male dominated and defined 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.

As discussed earlier, in order to understand Orientalist art in its complexities it is imperative to situate it in the context of the particular power structure in which it was produced, and, in its historical, social and cultural context. At the time of Ingres’ *La Grande Odalisque* there was French Imperialism in Northern Africa and an expanding interest in the Ottoman Empire for trade and political reasons. French imperialist cultural and political propaganda and moralistic arrogance was endemic. The prejudices created thereby were deeply inculcated in Western psyche. Many contemporary European travellers, artists, writers, merchants and tourists ventured into Northern Africa and the Ottoman Empire. Their apparently objective encounters with and accounts of the East were informed by these biases. Referring to an English traveller, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s 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...[i]f...Montagu’s supposed objective spectatorship could have truly superceded 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 fuel the ‘orientalization’ of Northern Africa in the European ethos.\(^\text{24}\)

Quoting Joanna de Groot, Zeigenfuss noted that Montagu’s writings helped to construct:

...a topos for fictions and dramas of romance and fear, a signifier of intrepid expert intelligence gathering by those ‘in the know’, and a resource for intellectual speculation and demonstrations of virtuosity in philosophical and analytical commentaries on society, history and culture.\(^\text{25}\)


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

*La Grande Odalisque* depicted a languid nude—the Sultan’s concubine—sprawled on 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 apart from a slight glimpse of her right breast. She looked back 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 broach with a ruby and huge pearls in her hair, a gold bracelet on her right arm, and held an ornate peacock feather fan—another sign of affluence and 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 that complimented her flesh tones, 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 opulence and extravagance Ingres used rich colour and immense realistic detail and skill 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 by Ingres to accentuate and emphasize the figure.\textsuperscript{26}

In contrast to the acutely realistic rendering of the objects and drapes, Ingres’ depiction of the female body was abstract and fantastical. The reason why Ingres did that, in my opinion, was to

\textsuperscript{26} 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.
represent the ideal, eternal ‘feminine’ and to create an otherworldly, mythical and chimerical aura around not only the feminine but the Orient as well. There was a simultaneous gesture here of romanticizing, eroticizing and mystifying Woman and the Orient. The female body was not only idealized in the Classical sense but also distorted by elongating the spine and the pelvic area to suggest enhanced sensuousness, sexual pleasure and fantasy. The accuracy of the human body was, quite obviously, secondary to Ingres here as compared to the sensuousness and elegance of the female body.

The odalisque appeared to be other worldly or ethereal with no sense of a corporeal body due to the absence of body hair or visible genitalia—a visual trope used in the European tradition to make the woman depicted appear passive and submissive with no passion, desire or sexuality of her own but only there as an object for the sexuality and pleasure of the male viewer: “Hair [wa]s associated with sexual power, with passion. The woman’s sexual passion need[ed] to be minimized so that the spectator may feel that he ha[d] the monopoly of such passion.” (Berger, 1972, p. 55)

Moreover, her body turned away or hidden 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 (Fig. 1.15) with smooth ivory skin, a seductive gaze, and a receptiveness and mysteriousness offering indulgence and discovery. Her expression and posture did not define what she felt or desired but what the male viewer desired to ‘do’ to her. The fact that she was looking at the viewer suggested her complacency and subordination to voyeurism, the male gaze, and hence, enhanced the eroticism—she was aware of being observed and was “..offering up her femininity as the surveyed” (Berger, p. 55).

Contrasting Ingres’ La Grande Odalisque and Francisco Goya’s La maja desnuda (Fig. 1.14) William Vaughan made an important distinction between the ‘nude’ and the ‘naked’, a distinction expounded by Berger as well:

...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.27

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 19th century France.

However, in the context of the discussion here, *La Grande Odalisque* was certainly a product of French Orientalist propaganda, exoticization and fantasy about the supposed otherness, moral inferiority, sexuality, exotica and romance of the Orient. The theme was no doubt, difference, morality, erotica and mystery. Accounts of Oriental women and culture, public baths and harems, fascinated and titillated European imagination wherein the Orient came to be an evocative place of erotic, sensual and romantic pleasures and experiences.

It is a well established fact in art historical research that Ingres never visited the Orient and *La 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: the...‘Les Bains du sérail de Mahomet’...and French translations of extracts from...letters by...Montagu”...Leeks also states that “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.28

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 that bore no relation to an actual odalisque or harem. It was historically inaccurate as it was a Western construction of a harem woman and what a luxurious, sensuous and distant sexual experience would be like. Ingres used a European model to represent not only an Oriental woman (signifying historical misrepresentation) but also the ‘Orient’ itself. It was a creation of the ‘Other’, the East, a place of lascivious, sinister and novel sexual experiences. The exotic Oriental accessories—the fan, silk, jewels, hookah, musical instrument and cushions—and the textures and voluptuous folds conjured up a mysterious, sumptuous, and indolent Orient for 19th century French male audience.

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

In fact, Ingres’ *La Grande Odalisque* was often compared to Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (Fig. 1.15) and it was remarked, that 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. Thus, *La Grande Odalisque* symbolized Orientalist desires and fears about the Orient—desires for the erotic utopia it came to be in European psyche, and fear, one, of the unknown, the Other, and two, due to the long history of aggression and violence between the Christian West and Islamic East.

In light of the above discussion, it becomes quite evident that the Orientalist fantasy implied ‘femininity’ because of Orientalist erotic and romantic vision or idea of the East. However, there was another significant reason why Orientalism insinuated femininity and why the ‘nude female body’ became a visual trope for the Orient: it was to feminize and sexualize the Orient in disempowering ways. Just like the tiger became a visual trope for India in British Orientalist paintings (discussed earlier), where it was often depicted being slain or tamed by the white man or woman (refer to Fig. 1.5). By feminizing the Orient, it not only became sexually desirable for the European audience, but also symbolized woman, the ‘Other’, and so the weak, inferior,
subordinate, and passive. Hence, *La Grande Odalisque*, and many similar images that assigned femininity to the Orient, reiterated the European sense of moral, racial, cultural and political superiority and hierarchy. The image established a visual correlative to the racial difference, hierarchical power and sexual desire in which the West was the dominant, powerful male and the East was the subordinate, passive female. Quoting Michael D. Harris from his book *Colored Pictures*, Zeigenfuss stated:

...Harris believe[d] that the odalisques painted by Ingres mainly gave power to the European male spectator, who “possesse[d] the nude women through voyeurism and fantasy because the paintings present[ed] an intrusive scenario: only the male possessor of the harem...legitimately could have visual access to the woman” and “...reiterated colonial and imperial adventure and its appropriation of land, resources, and people”.  

Thus, Orientalist art, of which *La Grande Odalisque* was an iconic image feminizing and sexualizing the Orient, had an Imperialist, an Orientalist approach and theme—it signified Imperial power and control, and reflected European perception of the Orient as removed from temporal and historical evolution and culturally, morally, and racially inferior. It echoed the colonial assumption that the West had the power to represent and define the East as it could not speak for itself. The images depicting the Orient as passive, feminine, backward, and lazy perpetuated the myth of the primitive Orient and were used by Europe as a moral justification for being there—they endorsed the white man’s right to be in the East, controlling, moralising and civilizing the uncouth, uncivilized and barbaric. Moreover, the images served the purpose of making the ‘Orientals’ privy to their backwardness, inferiority and subordination, and hence, connive in treating themselves as such. Thus, the ‘female nude’ represented, or rather, was a personification of the Orient with all its implications.

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Conclusion:

The topic of this research *Feminizing and Sexualizing the Orient as the Mysterious Other in Nineteenth Century Orientalist Art* was of special interest to me as it related to my art practice of representing woman and the female body.

This research has increased my theoretical and conceptual understanding of representation and objectification of the female body, both, in art historical terms, as well as, contemporary art. It made me recognize 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 woman and the female body, and creating autonomous female interpretation and spectatorship of art representing women. My practice involves an even more independent, subjective interpretation of femininity, where it is moving beyond the boundaries and confines of gender. This study has facilitated my understanding of the significance and relevance of weaving the contemporary in, appropriating from what is and what has been, and situating it in the present.

It has 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 and 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 19th 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 here to mention some modern, post colonial responses to Orientalist art that racially, morally and culturally dehumanized, feminized and sexualized the Orient. Contemporary artists of both Arab and Muslim, as well as, non-Arab and 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 Zeid, Shirin Nishat, Anton Solomoukha, Jamnane Al-Aui and Bouchra Almutawakel. In a show in 1992 titled, ‘fine material for a dream...?’ A reappraisal of Orientalism: 19th and 20th Century Fine Art and Popular Culture Juxtaposed with Paintings, Video and Photography by Contemporary Artists, artists Preston, Hull and Oldham read Orientalist images as xenophobic and in the context of imperialism. They:

“...saw Orientalism as inexorably rooted in racism, as portraying fantasies of all that the artists hated and feared, creating essentialist images of an East that was both evil and servile...[and] sought to display the ways in which the Orientalist vision continues to be perpetrated in modern advertising and popular culture, and contrasted the work of modern Asian artists and photographers, burdening them with the need to counter the European visual appropriation of the East.”

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? (Fig. 1.16). 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 the 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.

Fig. 1.1 Jean-Leon Gerome, *Snake Charmer*, 1860s, Williamstown, Massachusetts, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute.

Fig. 1.2 Eugene Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827-8, Paris, Louvre.
Fig. 1.3, Johan Zoffany, *Colonel Mordaunt’s Cock Match*, 1784-6, Tate, Britain.

Fig. 1.4, Robert Home, *Reception of the Mysorean Hostage Princes*, 1793-4, National Army Museum, London.
Fig. 1.5, Edward Armitage, *Retribution*, 1858, Leeds Art Gallery, England.

Fig. 1.6, Bronzino, *An Allegory with Venus and Cupid*, 1545, The National Gallery, England.
Fig. 1.7, Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

Fig. 1.8, Jean-Leon Gerome, *Slave Market*, 1866, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Massachusetts.
Fig. 1.9, Jean-Leon Gerome, *The Large Pool of Bursa*, 1885, Alex Fraser Gallery, Vancouver.

Fig. 1.10, Eugene Delacroix, *The Women of Algiers (in Their Apartment)*, 1834, 1.80 m x 2.29 m, The Louvre, Paris.
Fig. 1.11, Eugene Delacroix, *Odalisque Reclining on a Divan*, 1825, 38 cm x 46.7 cm, The Fitzwilliam Museum, England.

Fig. 1.12, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Turkish Bath*, 1862, 1.08 m x 1.08 m, The Louvre, Paris.
Fig. 1.13, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, 0.91 m x 1.62 m, The Louvre, Paris.

Fig. 1.14, Francisco Goya, *La maja desnuda*, 1797-1800, 97 cm x 1.9 m, Museo Nacional Del Prado, Madrid.
Fig. 1.15, Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Fig. 1.16, Guerrilla Girls, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* 1989, Tate.
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Extended Essay

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

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