



*The Colonial Dimensions of the Painting 'Women of Algiers in Their Apartment':
A Cultural and Artistic Approach*

Mohamed Lamine amor

University of Djelfa (Algeria).

l.amor@univ-djelfa.dz

Abstract ;

This paper explores the colonial dimensions of the painting 'Women of Algiers in Their Apartment' by analysing Orientalist paintings of harems. The aim is to develop a clear understanding of the reasons behind this false representation and the motivations that led Orientalist artists to engage in colonial projects through their art. The study aims to avoid the stereotypical images often portrayed in Orientalist art that romanticise the East and its exoticism while overlooking non-aesthetic considerations that serve the economic and political interests of the colonisers. Much of what has been depicted is merely a Western invention aimed at reconstructing the 'Other' according to specific perceptions and interests, which forms part of the justification for colonialism

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1. Introduction

The term 'Orientalism' has meanings that cannot be confined to its purely academic definition. The common definition of Orientalism as the study of the Eastern 'Other' by the Western self, and the characterisation of Orientalism as the cultural superiority of the West, are both insufficient as they allow for analytical interpretations that often contradict each other¹.

Alongside the broader scientific Orientalist movement, artistic Orientalism has various aims and functions, working to satisfy the urge for knowledge about the East and to benefit from its aesthetic capabilities. In his famous book *Orientalism*, Edward Said reinterpreted the concept as a 'policy applied to the East given its weakness compared to the West, and the historically fabricated and manipulated image of the East as inferior and backward'².

This implicitly justifies European colonialism and control over the Arab Islamic world. Art historian Todd Porterfield has also observed that the themes present in Orientalist paintings are integral to Western colonial strategies, which involve seizing land by violating the sanctity of the harem and expressing sexual desire towards Eastern women³.

Orientalist artworks were not innocent; they supported colonial policies and produced maps and images that armies

used to invade other countries⁴. This article focuses on the painting *Women of Algiers in Their Apartment* by the French artist Eugène Delacroix. The painting features a voyeuristic gaze and depicts three women and their Black servant surrounded by Eastern furnishings and arrangements. Delacroix travelled to North Africa as part of a diplomatic intelligence mission in 1832, two years after the occupation of Algeria. It should also be noted that the painting was part of French imperial propaganda.

The painting *Women of Algiers* represents how, despite their significant influence, colonial schemes were subject to Delacroix's feelings and perceptions of the East, which he explored first-hand. A close examination reveals that the painting differs from typical representations of that era. Delacroix incorporates details that go beyond what Said postulated in *Orientalism*: that although Algerian civilisation is less advanced than French civilisation, it is closer to human nature and embodies the values of ancient Rome that have eroded in the West.

The painting contains numerous contradictions, including the frustrated voyeuristic gaze of the seated women and the standing servant. The servant's dark skin tone contrasts with that of the women, and the dark background against the clear foreground, with its mixture of dark shadows and bright colours, evokes a sense

of calm at times and density at others. This contradiction reflects the duality of truth and imagination.

Our research paper aims to shed light on the reasons behind the widespread depiction of harems in Orientalist paintings and reveal the causes of their false representation. To this end, we will analyse the painting 'Women of Algiers in Their Apartment' by Eugène Delacroix, widely considered to be one of the most famous artworks in the history of Orientalism. We will subject it to artistic and postcolonial cultural criticism.

We will also explore the historical context in which Delacroix created the painting, highlighting its significance in the use of Orientalist imagery within colonial schemes and how it can be evaluated in terms of historical impact and artistic merit.

2. The Image of the Harem in Orientalist Painting:

To understand the changing factors within which Delacroix operated, it is essential to re-evaluate the depiction of harems in Orientalist paintings. Orientalist artists often relied more on imagination than reality.

The European conception of the East stems from recurring stereotypes in Orientalist paintings depicting the harem. These paintings often show the harem as either a luxurious wing of a Turkish palace where many women and concubines await the return of their master (known as the

'favorites'), or as a place where women are treated as possessions by their husbands, who have complete authority over them⁵.

The idealised portrayal of the Eastern harem posed a significant challenge to the prevailing artistic Orientalist vision throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. This Orientalist perspective coincided with the onset of colonial expansion, which sought to define the Eastern self through subjugation, as was applied to colonizable peoples⁶.

For centuries, the East has exerted an allure and influence over Western artists. The most impactful period was the 19th century, which was marked by a frenzy of travel made more accessible than ever by the advent of steamships and railways, reducing the distance between East and West to just three days⁷.

Many 19th-century Orientalist painters who never left their homelands resorted to repetitive, stereotypical depictions of harems. These paintings typically depicted Eastern women as being free from moral constraints, often portraying them as naked or wearing suggestive clothing. This presented the East as a paradise of love, where sexual freedom was more prevalent than in the West⁸.

These stereotypes were not confined to Orientalist painting, but also permeated literature. For example, the Irish author Oliver Goldsmith wrote to a friend: 'I have been told that there are no parties in the

East... but there is the harem... I have also been told that Eastern women are the most responsive in matters of romance.' Similarly, the English writer Thomas Moore described Eastern life as 'a world filled with women with wide black eyes, filled with love and desire, yet imprisoned by wicked men. It is also overflowing with lavish feasts, silks, jewels, perfumes, dances and poetry.'⁹

Many Western artists drew inspiration from harem scenes, particularly the behaviours of women and royal concubines depicted reclining naked or in Eastern garments, based on rumours and fantasies sourced from Western travellers who often exaggerated their descriptions of various phenomena they observed or heard about¹⁰.

One such artist who could not access the world of the harem was Auguste Dominique Ingres, who never travelled to the East. However, he drew inspiration for the nude women in his famous painting *The Turkish Bath* from letters written by Lady Montague, wife of the English ambassador in Istanbul. Dr Tharwat Okasha termed these artists 'painters of comfortable seats'.

The East was often depicted as a barbaric area rife with backwardness as a means of propaganda to justify French colonial policies in its occupation of certain regions, transforming the goal of control into one of enlightening and developing the area. One example is the artist Gérard de Lairese, who never travelled to the East, yet his works in the Louvre clearly depict Eastern

architecture and miserable characters. Similarly, Antoine-Jean Gros, known for his painting *Bonaparte Visiting the Plague Victims at Jaffa*, drew scenes inspired by the works of Lord Byron and Victor Hugo. Many Orientalist paintings were commissioned by the state to provide suitable interpretations and garner support from the French populace for colonial expansion policies, if not explicit propaganda¹¹.

3. Causes of the False Representation of the Harem in Orientalist Painting:

Edward Said explained how Orientalism produced a stereotypical and imaginary image of the Eastern woman, asserting that this image was a false portrayal within the framework of imperial domination over the East. Orientalists used the private lives of Eastern women to depict the East as backward and controllable, contrasting this with the masculine dominance of the West. This served to justify colonialism in Arab societies¹².

In line with this ideological interpretation, Michel Foucault views exposing the Eastern woman as a means of subjugating the 'Other' in Western thought. As the execution of this idea requires realistic thought, the entrenched image became an effective mechanism for reshaping Western perceptions of the East. The repressed Western desire to consume the 'Eastern apple' is not merely the apple of desire, knowledge and power contested by deities in Greek mythology, but a Newtonian apple

symbolising attraction to untouched fields of knowledge regarded as archaeological monuments¹³.

4. Analysis of the painting 'Women of Algiers': The Model of Edmond Fleidman:



Figure 1: 'Women of Algiers in Their Apartment' by Eugène Delacroix

4.1 Description:

This painting plays a significant role in the assessment of Orientalist painting as a colonial tool. Compared to many contemporary works, it is considered original in that Delacroix travelled to North Africa and managed to enter an 'Islamic harem' at a pivotal time in France's history, when the country was preparing to invade Algeria.

Delacroix's travels took place two years after France's invasion of Algeria in 1830, which was a consequence of King Charles X's attempts to gain the trust and loyalty of his people during confrontations with Britain in the Mediterranean. This threatened France's prestige, prompting King Louis-Philippe to send Count Charles

Edgar de Mornay as an ambassador to Morocco. He hoped to negotiate with Sultan Moulay Abd al-Rahman for greater control over Algerian territories¹⁴.

De Mornay invited Delacroix to accompany him after his first choice, Jean-Baptiste Isabey, who was already a renowned painter at the start of the French campaign in Algeria, declined the invitation, citing the "curiosity demon" that had overtaken him in Algeria. Delacroix was chosen as a replacement because of his renowned Orientalist works¹⁵, including 'The Massacre at Chios' and 'Death of Sardanapalus', which were inspired by Lord Byron's play about the last Assyrian king¹⁶. Although de Mornay did not specify what Delacroix should depict, he had certain expectations based on his previous

work, which is why he invited him on the journey.

But how did Delacroix manage to paint Algerian women in their rooms in such a conservative society? Through historical and artistic research, we will attempt to determine whether the artist truly entered the private space of the harem. No written accounts from Delacroix's time in Algiers confirm that he visited an Algerian home. Researcher Kamal Chaïb notes that, among the foremost specialists in the history of Orientalist art, it is acknowledged that 'what has been repeated is mere hearsay, and there are no witnesses who saw the artist rest briefly that evening in June during his stay in Algiers'¹⁷.

Several questions arise regarding the house Delacroix visited: Could the homeowner have been Sidi Abdullah, after whom Kasbah Street is named? He held the position of Minister of the Navy during the Ottoman period. His house was located between Amour Street and Mosque Khider Pasha Street. However, Sidi Abdullah denied hosting Delacroix after colonial authorities seized houses for administrative purposes. Consequently, there is no evidence in local archives to confirm this claim, and certain parties deliberately concealed the identity of the man who received Delacroix.

Conversely, the women of Algeria were considered 'authentic' because Delacroix was a rare eyewitness to them, thanks to his connections with the French army. This

allowed him to enter the sacred space of the harem, which was socially and normatively renowned for its strict privacy. Moreover, his portrayal was considered "original" because, unlike what was prevalent, his depiction of women did not show them completely naked. Despite conflicting impressions at the Paris Salon, critics overwhelmingly spoke about its authenticity, overlooking the painting's aesthetic qualities¹⁸.

Upon its display, Economy Minister Louis Adolphe Thiers exchanged the painting for its significant value due to its 'Oriental substance', regardless of its success in conveying the imperial message to the French people. However, in 1834, King Louis-Philippe insisted on purchasing it to place it in the royal museum¹⁹.

It is also important to note that Delacroix first painted it in watercolours, relying on his memory, before creating the oil version. He lamented the time gap between capturing the freshness of the transient on the one hand, and recollecting and fixing images suitable for oil painting on the other, as oil painting requires slow work with colours. Furthermore, watercolour is better suited to intense heat than oil paint²⁰.

Delacroix's choice of title for the painting was unusual for Orientalist paintings of that era, which often had sexual connotations.

4.2 Formal analysis:

In a confined space, three women sit on an Eastern carpet within a harem. According to the artist's initial sketches for the painting, the woman seated on the left is the host's Turkish wife, Zohra Touboudji, while the two women seated on the right are her sisters, Zohra and Mounia Ben Sultane²¹.

The painting features some traditional depictions of the harem, such as a room filled with oriental objects like shishas, glass vases and opulent clothing, typical of oriental style. The black servant draws the curtains, aligning with the narrative of the 'dramatic unveiling of the harem' of their master. However, an objective observation of the women's bodies reveals that they are wrapped in multiple layers of clothing, despite the stereotypical Orientalist imagery.

Delacroix also paid attention to the room's decoration, using dark colours ranging from brown to black to keep the description vague and create a contrast that enhances the lighting on the elements he focused on the most: the beautiful women at the heart of his subject. Additionally, the women's fuller figures deviate from the idealised, seductive image of femininity, surprising critics who noted that the painting was lacking in realism²².

4.3 Interpretation:

This painting transcends all clichés about Eastern homes, depicting women shrouded in an unclear melancholy that contrasts with any sensual representation. Instead, the painting conveys a tranquillity that permeates the space²³.

The artwork is characterised by the meticulous manipulation of shapes and colours. It is composed of brilliant white, radiant gold, pale pink and deep red. Cézanne was so struck by the red shoe that it pierced his vision, likening it to the way wine penetrates the throat. This symbolises the strength of its redness and his profound admiration for Delacroix's philosophy of colour²⁴.

Delacroix painted the interior and wall decorations of the house using oil painting techniques reminiscent of Renaissance Venice. On the right, blue-painted ceramics adorned with floral motifs are visible. These were imported during that period from Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and Tunisia. The tiled walls are topped by a niche containing silver and brass vessels for decoration. The slightly ajar black and red wall doors reveal a glimmer in the semi-darkness, suggesting an arrangement of glass or brass utensils.

We notice a curtain drawn over a dark opening behind the sisters. The curtain is coloured in shades of brown, with golden yellow and blue waves. In the top left corner, we see a mirror in a gilded frame. Mirrors were luxury items that symbolised opulence and were often imported from

Italy. Meanwhile, on the far right, behind the servant's head, there appears to be a panel inscribed with Quranic verses, though the letters bear no relation to Arabic. This indicates that the artist was unable to master Arabic calligraphy. At the centre of the triangle formed by the women's legs is an incense burner, which could be used either to burn incense and enjoy its fragrance or to light the shisha with the coals within²⁵.

The most exceptional aspect of the painting is Delacroix's skill in achieving balance through contradiction by placing rectangular, window-like panels alongside strong vertical lines juxtaposed with the parallel diagonals along the top and bottom edges of the painting. This harmony of contradictions is significant, reflecting the nature of the painting itself: the fusion of colonial imagination with European standards in Orientalist art, as seen in his six-month journey to Morocco and Algeria.

Delacroix produced the painting two years after his trip to Algeria, initially sketching it in watercolour on paper before recreating it on canvas in his Paris studio using oil colours²⁶. Some critics have noted that the faces of the women appear familiar and even resemble those on Turkish banknotes from that time. He based their forms on models of Greek sculptures, though some claim he based them on Jewish models²⁷.

4.4 Judgement:

Any reader of Delacroix's diaries will see that he held North Africa in far higher regard than his home country. France constructed its civilisation by inventing the East in the name of the 'Other'. Delacroix portrayed North Africa in stark contrast to bustling urban Parisian life. This romantic interpretation is reflected in the painting, particularly through the women's inward-looking gazes. The mirror in the top left-hand corner reflects light onto the kneeling woman's body, symbolising the moral decline in France²⁸. Cournault, who accompanied Delacroix, noted that upon seeing the women, Delacroix stood and exclaimed, 'It is as if in the time of Homer!'²⁹

Delacroix's painting, 'Women of Algiers', continues to fascinate and is regarded as a reference point for Orientalist painting and a source of inspiration. Many have attempted to recreate it. In this regard, Picasso sought to replace Delacroix's colonial perspective with a revolutionary view when he painted fifteen versions of 'Women of Algiers in Their Apartment' between 1954 and 1955, titled 'The Bearers of Fire' (referring to Algerian women who participated in the Algerian Revolution), thereby liberating the women from the constraints they were subject to. "Painting was not made to decorate apartments; it is an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy that violates human laws."³⁰

5. Conclusion:

We can conclude that the image conveyed by Orientalist paintings, and particularly Delacroix's depiction of Algerian women, was not innocent. Rather, it was part of various schemes, the most important of which were colonial plans. Delacroix's portrayal was a manipulative fabrication and gross distortion aimed at selling colonialism, especially given the 19th-century fever pitch of interest in the East and Eastern studies. Despite the successful annual auctions held by Christie's and Sotheby's, among others, the significant popularity enjoyed by Orientalist art continues to this day. This does not justify the artistic value of Orientalist art, nor does it represent an authentic portrayal of the East. Instead, it creates an imagined image of the East to affirm a politicised reality rooted in the long history of Orientalism and its relationship with the European project (imperial colonialism). In other words, Orientalist painting rarely aligned with reality; what was represented was a Western invention. There are numerous motivations and incentives for this representation, some of which are artistic and stem from dominant 19th-century artistic trends, the allure of Eastern civilisation, and an obsession with Orientalist materials in all their forms. However, most of these motivations stem from the pervasive colonial impulse and its ideological orientation aimed at undermining the status of the East by depicting it as inferior and backward.

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*Concubines: The word "concubine" is derived from a term meaning literally "room" or "chamber," which symbolizes in the Turkish palace the hall of important women in the harem.
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