ECHO AND RETORT: THE CONTEMPORARY LITERARY AND VISUAL ART RESPONSE TO 19TH-CENTURY FRENCH ORIENTALIST ART

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ECHO AND RETORT:
THE CONTEMPORARY LITERARY AND VISUAL ART RESPONSE TO 19TH-CENTURY
FRENCH ORIENTALIST ART

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ABSTRACT

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In the mid 1800's, Eugène Delacroix and Jean Auguste Dominique Ingrès painted the Arab world in a hyper-eroticized and exotic style later be called Orientalist. Although their work has been analyzed countless times over the years, there is very little research done, which incorporates their pieces with contemporary works of literature and visual art that directly engage with their art. The combination of the fields of French/North African literature and art history allowed me to assess each piece in a very unique way: I could look at a painting as if it were a novel, and a novel as if it were a painting. This study explores the dialogues, whether intentional or not, between these pieces of past and present. It includes analysis of three novels, one artist interview, and several personal analyses of specific works of art. The paper discusses the literature of Assia Djebar and Leila Sebbar, and the contemporary visual art of Lalla Essaydi to show these North African artists interact with the notion of Orientalism; particularly how it relates to specific pieces of Orientalist art done by these aforementioned French painters. By analyzing these two mediums side by side, a more nuanced picture appeared of the relationship between the French and North Africa. This project of hybrid disciplines provides new ground for research to build upon on this subject.

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I. Introduction

> "The Middle East today is routinely viewed through the all-too-predictable prism of strife, oppression, terrorism. From this vantage point it is perceived as dark, distant, ambiguous, other...They also obscure a history of cultural activity that goes back centuries" (*Look Again,* Lisa Farjam).

It is difficult to find anyone, including myself, who upon looking at 19th-century French painter Eugène Delacroix's 1834 masterpiece *Femmes d'Algers dans leur appartement* doesn't become completely mesmerized. The elegant poses of the women luxuriating upon silken pillows and rich oriental rugs of a shadow-filled 19th-century Algerian harem catch the viewer's eye and draw it inwards. This exotic and alluring depiction of female Arab life has continued to seduce the Western world for over a century. Delacroix's art belongs to an artistic style known as Orientalism, which was made popular in France in the 19th-century during its conquest of North Africa. Orientalism is a Western way of viewing the Orient or Arab world that rationalizes Western domination by portraying of Arab culture – and particularly Arab women - in a hyper-erotic, exotic, and oppressed manner. To quote the famous literary critic Edward Said, "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it, in short, Orientalism is a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1962: 2).

As a student of French, Arabic, and Anthropology, my fascination for Orientalist art made me question what it was about these images that I found most appealing, and how they influenced my own perceptions of the Orient. Studying abroad in Morocco last spring challenged me to think beyond the Delacroix painting. I experienced North African culture in a deeply

intimate manner, and saw how local culture was embraced and ancient tradition cherished. However, while walking through the winding streets of the *medina qadima* (old city) by my host family's house in Rabat, I noticed that all the tourist shops sold postcards bearing classic Orientalist images of belly dancers, khol-eyed women wrapped in scarves, and exotic desert landscapes. I was puzzled firstly by the fact that Moroccans were aware of the Western appetite for images of this fantastical Orient presented on these postcards, and second, that they chose to capitalize on this market, even if it meant perpetuating negative stereotypes about their own culture, heritage, and women. I wondered what role these Orientalist images played in North Africa historically, and how they continued to shape contemporary concepts of North African identity. I decided to dedicate my senior thesis project to explore this topic further, and to also examine in what way contemporary literary and visual arts respond to 19th-century French Orientalist art.

During the question and answer session at the recent Undergraduate Research Conference at the University of Massachusetts Amherst where I presented my research, an audience member asked me whether there is a hierarchy in manners of artistic representation; that is to say, whether it was more important to depict something realistically or creatively.[1] This question touches on a fundamental element of my project, and certainly a very crucial issue when critically analyzing works of art. It is problematic that so often a dichotomy is created with aesthetic realism and imagination, for both provide different yet complimentary components to an artistic critique. The intention of creating art is not to provide the viewer with a completely realistic representation of the subject matter. If someone were to create a 'fully realistic' representation of a subject or

[1] The question was posed to me by Professor Patrick Mensah, the chair of my thesis project.

scene, I would be more inclined to call it a diorama or schema, for it is devoid of any real personal opinion or interpretation. It is impossible for any work of art, even a photo, be completely objective, for the artists' gaze and position inevitably influences the piece. While a simple photograph may appear completely truthful, the unique perspective that the photographer holds for the scene provides the necessary creative component to balance the honesty of a photo lens. The juxtaposition of imagination and reality in a piece of art is what produces the fruitful dialogue between all the various influences that helped create the piece: the contexts historically and contemporarily of the themes expressed, subjects portrayed, the artist, and the position of the viewer. This engagement with a plurality of perspectives is especially important when considering Orientalist art because of the heavy historical baggage that it carries. Decades of critics believe that the element of Western imagination - in the form of the hyper erotic and exotic gaze of the painter - is socially degrading to Oriental culture, particularly Oriental women. However, this element of imagination provides a glimpse of the complex, inter-subjective relationship between French and North African society to this very day.

My project consists of three sections. First, I trace the history of French involvement in North Africa; outlining the trajectory of French colonialism in the Maghreb, beginning in the early 1800's and ending in 1962 with Algerian Independence. I also use this section as an opportunity to explore the fascination that North Africa—and particularly North African women — held for a generation of French artists, represented by Delacroix and Ingrès. I am interested in how French artists were caught up in the political, economic and diplomatic projects of the colonial period, and how in the postcolonial era, female Maghrebi writers and artists have

claimed the authority to respond to, subvert and engage with 19th-century representations, dramatically shifting the way artistic gazes circulate between France and North Africa.

I illustrate this in my second chapter through a reading of novels by Franco-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar and Algerian author Assia Djebar, which engage with seminal paintings by Delacroix and Ingrès. I examine how contemporary writers either challenge or reinforce the notions of Orientalism expressed in the work of these 19th-century French painters, and how their own autobiographical experience influences their perspectives on the subject. Included in this discussion is an exploration of the role that contradictions play in Sebbar and Djebar's efforts to subvert the Orientalist consciousness. I highlight their juxtapositions of voice and silence, visibility and veiled, and masculine and feminine in order to see how their method of echo and response challenges the reader to discern for themselves what is real and what is imagined.

Finally, my third chapter considers the contemporary Moroccan-born visual artist Lalla Essaydi's series *Les Femmes du Maroc* (created between: 2005-2008). This series responds to not only Orientalist art - particularly works by Delacroix, Ingrès, and Gérôme - but also engages with themes expressed in Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar's novels to create a multifaceted 21st-century critique of Orientalism. Like Sebbar and Djebar, Essaydi uses contradiction and mimicry in her artwork by intentionally imitating the work of Orientalist painters while infusing elements inspired from her own heritage as a Moroccan woman, creating a lively dialogue between East and West, past and present, and masculine and female, on her canvas. In this chapter, I discover how Essaydi uses her hybrid identity as a Moroccan-born Western-trained artist to address and challenge Orientalist notions of the Arab woman. The fact that Essaydi creates art for a Western audience while drawing from her position at the cultural cross-roads of East and West gives her

artwork the exciting potential to demystify popular Oriental myths seen in famous works of French 19th-century art. Furthermore, with exhibitions occurring all over the United States and even Europe, it is clear that Essaydi is at the forefront of the movement to reconsider and reappropriate the Orient from within the culture as well as from outside it, making her a valuable addition to this study.

II. Setting the Stage: A Brief History of North Africa From 7 CE to Present Day

"The Orient is a misunderstanding, a mirage, a promise that appeases an over-excited, impatient imagination weary at times of the pallor of the sky or of human pettiness. The Orient exists because great artists invented and transformed it. Some thought they found it in the turmoil of an open-air market, or in the sensuality of a veiled woman crossing the patio of a beautiful mansion. The Orient is an idea, a way of life, a way of honouring the dead and of believing in the sky and the trees, a mania for bringing a little madness and magic into everyday life, a habit of adding colour to the hues of the climate, to the voluptuous waves of the dunes and the sea, and to the eyes of unruly children. The Orient is a dream which grows up in childhood memories and which pursues the artist and the poet who finds 'beauty to be bitter' but invents the colour of vowels before leaving for the desert, 'the burnt orchard' offering itself to the sun, the 'god of fire'"

- Tahar Ben Jelloun, Prologue from *Delacroix in Morocco*

Orientalism is a Western cultural attitude that views the East through a hyper-erotic and exotic lens, which continues to shape both Eastern and Western identity. This notion was perpetuated through the 18th and 19th-century as the Western world sought to legitimize their occupation and domination over many regions of the Arab world. To quote Edward Said,

> The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idead, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of the European *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabular, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles"(1968:2).

In the 19th-century, France asserted its political dominance over North Africa by occupying Morocco and Tunisia and colonizing Algeria. France's strengthening of diplomatic relations with North Africa contributed greatly to the proliferation of Oriental themes, which invaded French

art and literature during the 19th-century.[2] French painters were fascinated by Oriental myths and filled canvases with romantic images of khol-eyed women reclined and submissive within the walls of opulent harems and exotic desert scenes, and thereby perpetuating the stereotypical and oppressive notions the West held towards the Orient. Depictions of the Arab world as a weak, barbaric, and feminized "Other" helped to reinforce the West's self-image as strong, dominating, and inherently masculine. Orientalist art was a crucial aspect in creating a sociopolitical hierarchy. With the pervasion of Orientalist art in the Western world throughout the last century, this distorted and repressive perception of the Arab world continues to affect French national discourse and its relationship with North Africa. This chapter will introduce the social, political, and economic context of how North Africa, and the results of French political involvement and colonization. I will also discuss important artistic, intellectual, and cultural works that helped to shape, interrogate, and challenge the concept of Orientalism from the 19th-century through to the present day.

I begin with an overview of North African history prior to French imperialism, and then turn to focus primarily on Algeria and its colonization by France. Unlike both Morocco and Tunisia which were French protectorates, French colonization in Algeria pervaded all levels of society, and impacted the consciousness of the colonizers and colonized alike. By drawing attention to the art that emerged in France during the colonial period, I will discuss how French imperialism in North Africa altered French consciousness and sparked a fascination with Oriental culture, known as Orientalism. In particular, I highlight the work of Eugène Delacroix as an example of an Orientalist artist whose unique experience traveling in North Africa ignited his

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[2] Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Delacroix in Morocco: Exhibition Organized by the Institut Du Monde Arabe* (Paris: Institut Du Monde Arabe, 1994).

passion for Oriental culture and changed the way he painted the world around him. In contrast to Delacroix, I offer a brief analysis of painter Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingrès to show the spectrum of French Orientalist art of the mid 19th-century. The chapter concludes by calling attention to how artists emerging from postcolonial North Africa grapple with the Orientalist legacy in order to reclaim their own personal and national identities.

* * *

Located at the crossroads of several different cultures, North Africa has historically been a land of intersecting trade routes, ethnicities, and ideas. North Africa underwent many waves of conquest and contact with other societies, primarily by the Hyksos (Asiatics/Canaaanites), Phoenicians, Kushites, Carthaginians, Greeks, Macedonians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Ottomans (Turks), Spanish, French, British, Jews, and Italians.[3] As a result, it is important to discuss North African history in a transcultural and pluralistic context. To begin with, the Imazigh people[4] are considered the original indigenous population of North Africa and continue to have large populations throughout Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and the Sahara. The Arabs constitute the other main ethnic group found in North Africa, having arrived in the 7th-century CE. Waves of Arab tribes moved into North Africa through the 11th century and resulted in the Arabization of North African culture.[5] The Arabs brought their religion, Islam, to North Africa and subsequently converted many Imazighs. Through the spread of Islam and the Arabic language, North Africa took on a Muslim cultural identity. Over the centuries, several affluent

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[3] Naylor, *North Africa: A History from Antiquity to Present* (Austin: University of Texas, 2009) 7.

[4] Though historically the Imazigh people are known as Berbers, I choose to refer to them as their self-proclaimed name as "Imazigh", which can be translated to "freeborn". The word Berber has a complicated and controversial history, with its roots coming from the word "barbaric", which I consider to be prejudiced and denigrating.

[5] Naylor, NA, 5.

Muslim dynasties in North Africa had promoted commerce and culture, thereby making the region an important trading area for Europe, Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Though there is evidence to show that there were major dynasties that ruled over the area beginning in the 7th century with the Arab conquest, it must be stressed that North Africa has always had a pluralistic identity. The rich and diverse group of influences that passed through North Africa over the centuries fostered a complex, multifaceted national identity that exists to this very day.

French imperialism in North Africa resulted out of the third wave of European imperialism beginning towards the end of the French Revolution and lasting until the late 1800's. This era of Western European expansion came to be known as a time of, "quiet imperialism," due to its, "subtle yet relentless global extension of European power and especially involved North Africa, most notably Algeria,"[6] which French forces captured in 1830[7] and held until Algerian Independence in 1962. Before 1830, France had recognized the Ottoman Regency of Algiers as its own independent state and had established strong commercial ties. During the French Directory of 1795 to 1799,[8] France used Algeria's land for grain production. During this time, tension rose between France and Algeria because of France's imperious attitude towards the outstanding debts they owed to Algerian grain exports. The final ruler of the Ottoman regency in Algeria, Husayn Dey, became frustrated by France's pompous attitude towards their unpaid debt and in 1827 it is recorded that, "the dey slapped (or tapped) the consul with a fly whisk. This diplomatic affront resulted in the French blockade of Algiers."[9] Shortly following the blockade,

[6] Naylor, NA, 152

[7] French troops occupation of Algiers in 1830

[8] Naylor, NA, 153

[9] Naylor, NA, - 153

the unpopular French King Charles X ordered the invasion of Algiers in an attempt to distract the public from his conservative policies. In June of 1830, Napoleon and his fleet sailed to Algeria and invaded Algiers. On July 5, 1830 the dey surrendered Algeria to French authority. According to the French, their intervention in Algeria was justified on the basis that the current ruling group, the Ottoman regency, was a corrupt state that had, "given over to slavery, piracy, and tribal anarchy in a backward society-that could no longer control its own internal affairs and was a hazard to other countries in the region."[10] In 1848, Algeria's status as a colony was upgraded to an integral part of French society, which inevitably relegated the North African people to the status of second class citizens at the mercy of their colonizers, or the *pied-noirs,* as they came to be known. The *pied-noirs* settled and exploited arable land for the colonizers' benefit and often left uncultivable land for North Africans, resulting in the uprooting and displacement of rural populations and wide-scale suffering.

During the 132 years of French colonial rule, the "Orient" came to play a particular role in France's collective consciousness. As Edward Said argues in his groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, Western Europe, and particularly France, developed a vast scholarly, political, and artistic apparatus to categorize, objectify, and ultimately control the Orient. Art played an important part in this venture. The art created during France's occupation of North Africa manifests Orientalist themes such as the hyper-sexualization and exoticization of Arab female space, objectification of the female body, and an opulent and fantastical depiction of North African daily life. French artists, enchanted by the myths circulating about the Orient, painted scenes that reinforced stereotypical notions of Arab extravagance, laziness, and passivity, while

[10] .Harold D. Nelson and Richard F. Nyrop, *Algeria, a Country Study* (Washington: American University, 1979) 27.

also emphasizing the oppression of Arab women, eroticism, and exoticism. The French treated the colonized land no differently than they treated the people: as a virginal territory full of intrigue and ripe for exploitation. The *pied-noirs* experienced a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to normalized Arab cultural practices such as slavery, polygamy, and the harem.[11] Since these foreign cultural elements were so far removed from their own European value system, it was easy for the *pied-noirs* and the French painters who captured these scenes to consider North African life as surreal and malleable to satisfy their own personal Oriental fantasies.[12]

The proliferation of Orientalism in French culture during the 18th and 19th-centuries can be credited to the strength of French diplomatic relations with the Oriental world during this time[13]. As France continued to explore and conquer the Orient, Oriental themes conversely invaded French art and literature. Towards the end of King Louis XIV's reign during the Regency and through the reign of King Louis XV emerged an obsession with Eastern exoticism and an inclination towards fantastical and picturesque art.[14] In 1704, Antoine Galland made the famous Oriental tale of *The Arabian Nights* accessible to the French people by translating it into French. Ten years later, Charles de Ferriol, the French ambassador to Constantinople, published a book filled with engraved illustrations on costumes of the Ottoman Empire. "The fruits of this

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[11] The harem was an extremely popular scene to paint because of the French's fascination with the secret lives Oriental women.

[12] Emily Apter, *Harem: Colonial Fiction and Architectural Fantasm in Turn-of-the-century France* (London: Routledge, 1998).

[13] Though the concept became prominent in the 18th and 19th-centuries, the concept of Orientalism can be dated as far back as the 17th century when Jesuits introduced Chinese and Japanese languages and culture to Western Europe, "...and from this point on French culture was marked by an increasing attraction to an imaginary Orient"(Delacroix in Morocco, pg. 32).

[14] Alaoui, DM.

‘orientalism’ left an indelible mark on the French imagination...the Orient was a mythical space, a land of ever-changing frontiers.”[15] By the beginning of the 18th-century, the Oriental aesthetic had completely infiltrated French society as the *style à la mode.*

Not only did North African culture provide inspiration for French artistic endeavors, but it also served as a tool for the political legitimization of France’s social dominance and oppression over North African society. The French made the ultimate symbol of the cultural divide between “civilized” French society and “backwards” North African society the Islamic veil, understood as a masculine tool to hide Arab women from the public gaze. The French used this notion of Arab oppression of women as a crucial argument to prove their own cultural superiority, and therefore rationalized colonization as a “civilizing mission”.

> L’administration coloniale peut alors définir une doctrine politique précise : “Si nous voulons frapper la société algérienne dans sa contexture, dans ses facultés de résistance, il nous faut d’abord conquérir les femmes ; il faut que nous allions les chercher derrière le voile où l’homme les cache.” C’est la situation de la femme qui sera alors prise comme thème d’action. L’administration veut défendre solennellement la femme humiliée, mise à l’écart, cloîtrée...Le comportement de l’Algérien est dénoncé très fermement et assimilé à des survivances moyenâgeuses et barbares. (1968: 19).

In this extract from Frantz Fanon’s essay *L’Algérie se dévoile,* Fanon discusses the way the French colonial administration saw conquering Algerian women as a strategy to collapse Algerian society. They believed that by looking behind the veil where the men hide them, Algerian women are the ultimate determinant of North African barbarism[16]. The veil restricts women from being active members of the public sphere, and therefore ensures an unjust gender hierarchy. While French officials claimed to be staunchly opposed to Arab women’s oppression, the very “invisibility” of these women behind the veil made the French supremely fascinated by

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[15] Alaoui, DM, 30.

[16] *Sociologie D’une Révolution* (Paris: François Maspero, 1968)19.

what was hidden from view. The French male created his own fantasies about what happens not only behind the literal veils that cover female heads and bodies but also the cultural veils which prevent foreign gazes from penetrating the private Arab female space.

Though many French artists capitalized on the Orientalist trend, few did it as well as Eugène Delacroix. Though stylistically considered a Romantic, Delacroix was a huge proponent for intellectualism, theorizing aesthetics and color theory for several contemporary magazines. In 1832, Delacroix had the opportunity to accompany Ambassador Charles de Mornay on a diplomatic mission to Morocco meet with Sultan Moulay Abd al-Rahman to ensure Moroccan neutrality as France occupied neighboring Algeria. Though his primary reason for going to Morocco was political, Delacroix took it as a unique opportunity to experience firsthand the exotic life of the Orient that captivated the French people. With his critical eye, he attempted to assimilate himself into Moroccan customs to ensure as accurate a portrayal of the people as possible. Delacroix analyzed clothing, accessories, and character meticulously before starting any of his pieces, and this trip greatly altered his aesthetic sense and overall technique. His trip began on February 24 in Tangiers where he stayed until the 5th of March, at which point he left with the Ambassador for Meknès on horseback. After twenty days in Meknès, he then returned to Tangiers to then depart for a small excursion in Cadix and Séville. On June 1st, Delacroix returned to the Tangiers port, only to set off again towards Algeria where he visited a harem in Algiers. On July 5th, Delacroix returned to France bearing a new attitude not only towards the art he created, but towards the Orient that he was depicting.[17] Over the course of his trip, Delacroix filled seven notebooks with sketches of figures, architecture, and landscapes plus another

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[17] *Art in Theory, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) Letters and Notes on His Journey to North Africa* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998) 92-3.

notebook with 18 watercolors.[18] These journals filled with images and detailed notes not only acted as a personal record for Delacroix to revisit repeatedly as he worked on works that would become masterpieces, but also acted as a historical record in a time before photography. Though Delacroix's journals attempt to recognize cultural differences and evoke a sense of authenticity in his work in a manner that clearly surpasses most of his peers, I will demonstrate in the following chapters how Delacroix still retains an Orientalist perspective in his art.

It is crucial to consider Delacroix's journal to fully comprehend the nuances of his relationship to the North African world that he painted. As mentioned previously, Delacroix was a multifaceted individual who supplemented his love for art with his propensity for intellectualism. During his six months in Morocco and Algeria, Delacroix kept a detailed journal of everything he saw and experienced. Interestingly, each journal entry resembles a miniature ethnographical study rather than personal notes. Many of the entries even take the physical form of lists or bullet points of a series of phrases describing the characters, architecture, and clothing of the scene he finds himself in. On February 21, 1832, Delacroix writes a passage about a Jewish wedding he attended. He writes, "A pillar cutting out, dark in the foreground. The women to the left are in lines one above the other like flower pots. White and gold dominate, their handkerchiefs are yellow. Children on the ground in front."[19] In this excerpt, Delacroix's writing style resembles the quick pencil sketch of a foreigner. His observations are devoid of any emotional attachment, equating women to inanimate objects for the sake of describing the overall spatial setup of the scene. It also suggests his western, objectifying gaze onto North African women. By comparing the women to flower pots, he essentializes their characters into shapes

[18] *Art in Theory, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863)* 93.

[19] *Art in Theory, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863)* 86.

and positions that fill up negative space on his mental canvas. The quotation also shows Delacroix's preoccupation with color. Upon arriving in Morocco, his determination to portray the Orient accurately included his obsession with capturing the lighting of North Africa, even in shadow.[20] Because of this, Delacroix's use of color changed dramatically over the course of his travels.

Delacroix also wrote many letters while in Morocco to friends and colleagues back home, which shows us a different side of his experiences. Attempting to express his overflowing fascination with the new world before his eyes, he often describes Moroccan life phantasmagorically; writing through the lens of a romantic painter seduced by the mysteries of the Orient rather than an intellectual obsessed with aesthetics and anthropological methodology. On February 29, 1832, he writes rosily to Frédéric Villot,

> This place is made for painters. Economists and Saint-Simonians might find much to criticize as regards human rights and equality before the law, but beauty abounds here; not the over-praised beauty of fashionable paintings. The heroes of David and Co. With their rose-pink limbs would cut a sorry figure beside these children of the sun, who moreover wear the dress of classical antiquity with a nobler air, I dare assert. If you ever have a few months to spare, come to Barbary and there you will see those natural qualities that are always disguised in our countries, and you'll feel moreover the rare and precious influence of the sun, which gives intense life to everything. I shall doubtless bring back some sketches, but they will convey very little of the impression that all this makes one one.
>
> - Tangier, 29 February 1832[21]

In this quote, Delacroix attempts to express the overwhelming beauty before him, while at the same time acknowledging that the beauty he is describing holds itself to a different set of standards than what is classically considered beautiful in the French art Salons, who at the time adhered to classical Greco-Roman aesthetics. This era of painting emphasized classic Greek and

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20 *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present* Ranjana Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2008).

21 *Art in Theory, Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863)*

Roman architecture, mythological scenes, and also the study of female nudes. Notions of beauty reflected the scientific and mathematic influences of Greek and Roman culture, which prioritized proportion, balance, and ratio in artistic representation. Delacroix denounces the significance of these classical artistic relics, arguing that the people of the Maghreb adhere to the same dress code but carry themselves with a "nobler air". Furthermore, he claims to feel a strong sense of rejuvenation by life in North Africa, where the "natural qualities" and the strong influence of the sun give him a new sense of purpose and vigor. Though his description is enchanting and clearly written with the best of intentions, it is unavoidably problematic. Just as he painted *Femmes d'Alger* with the intent of creating an authentic portrayal of Oriental life, Delacroix's depiction is unable to fully shake the heavy element of Western fantasy. In a way, even his flattering remarks can be translated as patronizing. In one breath, he claims that North African society is superior to that of Greece and Rome, and yet he also talks about how their lifestyle harkens back to a simpler era where people lived by the sun and had a more intimate relationship with the natural earth, which suggests primitivism. He continues this thought in his April 28th journal entry,[22]

> They are closer to nature in a thousand ways: their dress, the form of their shoes. And so beauty has a share in everything that they make. As for us, in our corsets, our tight shoes, our ridiculous pinching clothes, we are pitiful. The graces exact vengeance for our science.

Again, his comparison of North African and French society is filled with controversy and ambiguity. Initially, Delacroix acknowledges the standard Western critique of Arab culture. Yet, he follows the statement by questioning the position of his own society in terms of social advancement. He argues that North Africans have more beauty in their life by living closer to nature, while French society is "pitiful". His usage of the word "beauty" and the differences he

[22] *Art in Theory ,Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863)*, Journal entry from Tangier, 28 April 1832.

holds in his standards of Western and Eastern ideals of beauty is also important. By contrast, Delacroix speaks of North African culture holding a more impressionist attitude towards beauty by living intimately with the world's natural rhythms. As a result, Delacroix was able to paint them in a more emotive and visceral way. Delacroix replaces geometrical ratios with drama and intimacy expressed through Romantic brush strokes and rich color palate.

In comparison to Delacroix's rich representations of North Africa, critics view painter Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingrès' depictions of the Orient as mere idle luxury, since his exposure to Oriental life and culture is completely nonexistent. It is important to note the fact that Ingrès never traveled to North Africa like Delacroix did not prevent him however from fulfilling his own Orientalist fantasies through his paintings, because it shows just how prevalent the Oriental obsession was in 19th-century French society.

> In his fantasies, Ingrès imagines harems full of odalisques and bathing women whose undulating nudity fired the dreams of the sultans and eunuchs. From *La Grande Odalisque,* 1814 to his much later masterpiece of oriental voluptuousness, the *Turkish Bath,* 1862, Ingrès unconsciously slid from an 'icy eroticism' into an uneasy sensuality…"(*Delacroix in Morocco,* 50).

In this quote, Ben Jelloun explains Ingrès' role as the hand who manifests the erotic dreams of French society with brush and paint. Unlike Delacroix, Ingrès shares in the collective Western fantasy of the Orient as a world filled with sensual nude females barred within harem walls. Ingrès feels no obligation to try to appeal to any aspect of authenticity. Instead, he uses his art as a way to realize the sensual fantasies of Oriental women. In the following chapters, I will further elaborate on the differences between Delacroix and Ingrès' art in relation to the Orientalist discourse both historically and contemporarily.

Though the French conquest of North Africa was a relatively small moment in North Africa's long history, the experience had a profoundly transformative impact on both the

colonizer and the colonized. However, within this overarching statement, nuances must be acknowledged. While Algeria was fully colonized by the French, Tunisia and Morocco were only French protectorates, and as a result were able to maintain their monarchies throughout occupation. Though Tunisia and Morocco were pardoned from the worst of the French imperialist wrath, they were still undeniably exploited. While on the surface it appeared that France was creating expansive improvements in Moroccan and Tunisian infrastructure, all the interests and investments made were tailored for ultimate French benefit. During World War I, France used Tunisians and Moroccans (and Algerians) to fight on their behalf in the Western Front. This unapologetic exploitation lasted through World War II, when Moroccans and Tunisians became fully aware of the abusive tactics used by their "protectors" to keep their society oppressed and subservient. By the end of World War II, Moroccan and Tunisian society had become charged with nationalist sentiment to create a strong and united front against the foreign imperialist power. Through persistence, political demonstrations, and occasionally brute force, Morocco and Tunisia were granted their independence from France in the 1950s.[23]

As seen in the case of Algeria, decolonization does not end simply by the physical eradication of the oppressing force. Algerian independence from French rule was a far more delicate and painful due to the fact that it was a full-fledged French colony and not just a protectorate. Embedded in the collective psychology of the French and Algerians alike was the notion that, "Algeria is France", which made the process of independence incredibly difficult to realize. Not only did Algerians have to liberate themselves physically from France, but also psychologically from their traumatic colonial pasts, as over a century of occupation had left them

[23] Naylor, NA

with feelings of inferiority and stripped them of a true national identity. Of course, Moroccans and Tunisians were not completely exempt from identity crises and colonial trauma. However, it is undeniable that the Algerian postcolonial condition was far more severe due to the intensity of its experience as a former French colony. Furthermore, Algeria was forced to confront imported Western cultural and political ideologies,[24] which created feelings of extreme alienation. Though France left Algeria physically, its cultural, political, and economic influences haunted the country through the postcolonial period, resulting in a search for a personal and national identity known as the "postcolonial paradox".[25] While freed physically from French domination, Algeria was still mentally chained to France; finding remnants of its rule planted deep within its consciousness. France's residual influence on Algerian society can be most easily seen through the dominance of the French language in Algerian economics, politics, and academia even to this day, despite national efforts to Arabicize public institutions.

The postcolonial era in North Africa is marked by extreme political, social, and economic instability due to France's colonial exploitation of the region's resources and people. Notions of Western superiority over the Orient created a dichotomy between Muslim culture and modernity, presenting newly independent Algerians with an existential identity crisis. Not only did Algerians find themselves torn between identifying with their Muslim heritage and their desire to be a part of the "modern" culture, but they also were faced with the task of rebuilding and defining their nation after being ravaged by colonialism and war.[26] In March of 1962, the Evian Accords - a cease-fire agreement between the French government and the Front de Libération Nationale

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[24] Namely the Western concept of 'modernization' and 'development'.

[25] Naylor, NA

[26] Naylor, NA

(National Liberation Front; FLN) - was signed by the French government. In July of the same year, the Algerian people approved the agreement in a referendum, which also supported economic and social cooperation between the two countries. Upon approval of the referendum by the Algerian people, full independence of Algeria was established, which allowed the FLN to take control of the country. From 1962 to 1988, the FLN managed to dominate Algerian politics uncontested by banning any political opposition. The FLN is an Algerian nationalist political party, which adhered the greater movement of Pan-Arabism as a transnational identity. The first years following Algerian independence were incredibly difficult, as the state was in the midst of a violent political power struggle and a collapsing infrastructure as a result of the exodus of the *pied-noirs.* In response to their crisis, France sent aid of workers such as technicians and teachers to help support the Algerian infrastructure. Though the return of French presence to Algeria was utterly contradictory and seemingly counterproductive to their efforts of independence, Algeria was left with no other choice. When Algerian Foreign Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika visited Paris in July of 1973, it became clear that both countries depended on one another. At the time, approximately one million Algerians were living and working in France, and therefore were a vital component to their flourishing economy. France also relied on Algeria's abundant natural resources of hydrocarbon and oil. Conversely, Algeria needed France to maintain stability in their infrastructure weakened by a century of colonialism.

In an attempt to find a national identity to unify and strengthen the newly liberated Algeria, the Algerian government became intrigued by the ideology of Pan-Arabism, which calls for a unified Arab identity connecting the entire Arab world. While allured by images of a unified Arab world, this ideology only further contributed to the postcolonial identity crisis and the

overwhelming sense of alienation felt by the Algerian people. During the FLN political domination in the years following independence, Ben Bella, premier of the Algerian National Assembly, embraced the Pan-Arab movement that began with Nasser in Egypt and started the Arabicization in primary school classes. "Ben Bella and his successors posited directly and indirectly that Algeria still needed to free itself form foreign political, economic, social, and cultural influences to create an authentic national identity. Thus, in some ways, Fanon's psycho-existential condition persisted in the postcolonial era."[27] Although Pan-Arabism was meant to establish a unified national identity, it ultimately acted as a tool for alienation by disregarding other non-Arab identities such as the Kabyles, the Christians, and the Jews who also called Algeria home.

Alienation, as defined by Frantz Fanon, is the inability of an individual to recognize and develop oneself, and always has contributing economic and intellectual aspects.[28] Fanon believes that colonized people are subjected to the economic conditions of alienation, which results in a phenomena called *aliénation intellectuelle* - or intellectual alienation - where the colonized self identify with racial stereotypes imposed upon them by their colonial oppressors, thereby accepting their subservient positions. The reality of exploitation and abuse that both physically and mentally surrounds the French-Algerian colonial discourse ensured that Algerians would remain the weak and inferior society while France only grew stronger. Since the colonial period, Algerians internalized Western notions of North African barbarism and subordination as the accepted reality. The Algerians' *aliénation intellectuelle* caused them to believe that they were

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[27] Naylor, NA, 218.

[28] Renate Zahar, *Frantz Fanon: Colonialism and Alienation: concerning Frantz Fanon's Political Theory* (New York: Monthly Review, 1974).

incapable of developing a revolutionary class-consciousness, and therefore continued to be silent and helpless at the mercy of the dominant Western world.[29]

An aspect of Fanon's *aliénation intellectuelle* deals with the role of language as a form of both colonization and alienation. Indeed, the French language was the ultimate symbol of oppression to Algerians. During colonization, French became the language of academics and business. Algerian youth who had the privilege to go to French schools eventually turned into French-educated elites who belonged to a higher rung of society than other Algerians. Illiterate Algerian peasants who were unable to speak French associated the language with the debasing commands shouted at them by the *pied-noirs.*[30] In the years following Algerian independence, the FLN radio station added French to its programs that were previously broadcasted in Arabic and Kabyle in an attempt to liberate the 'enemy language' from its oppressive and historic ties.[31] Author Assia Djebar also engages with Fanon's notion of language as an element of *l'aliénation intellectuelle* in her writing. Unable to locate Algerian women's experiences within her francophone narrative, Assia Djebar underwent twelve years of silence before writing her novel *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement.* Echoing the situation felt by the entire country after independence, Djebar struggled to reconstruct a complete Algerian female identity that explained their history while contextualizing them as individuals in postcolonial Algeria.[32] After over a decade of pensive silence, Djebar uncovered a loud chorus of many harmonious voices singing as one. She realized that rather than a single unified Algerian female narrative, there was a

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[29] Fanon, SDR, pg. 15.

[30] Fanon, SDR

[31] Fanon, SDR

[32] Jane Hiddleston *War, Memory and Postcoloniality* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2006).

plurality of identities; each contributing its own particular perspective to the collective Algerian female history. Interestingly enough, Assia Djebar herself has a hybrid linguistic identity. While her *langue d'écriture* is French, she actively works to integrate her other maternal languages that she carries within her through her writing, even if she does not choose to write in them.

Like Assia Djebar, contemporary artist Lalla Essaydi's art tells the story of her quest to find her own personal and artistic voice. She believes that attempting to speak for her "people" in general will only dilute her artistic statement. Essaydi uses her art to express her unique take on the world shaped by her specific cultural imprints. She says, "My work documents my own experience growing up as an Arab woman within Islamic culture, seen now from the perspective of an artist living in the West, and maintaining close ties with her original culture."[33] As a North African woman bearing a hybrid identity, she believes it is her duty and her passion as an artist to try to understand the cultural crossroads between East and West that she finds herself inhabiting.

Female Franco-Algerian writer Leïla Sebbar also self-identifies as *une croisée,*[34] citing the isolating experience of growing up in Francophone Algeria and being deprived of her father's Arabic. Out of this overwhelming sense of detachment from living between two cultural worlds, Sebbar found inspiration in writing as a way to share her story as well others' who lived through the war of national liberation in Algeria. Unlike Djebar, however, Sebbar's novels are typically set in HLM *banlieues*[35] rather than in Algeria, and the characters are generally Maghrebi immigrant youth or *Beurs,* who attempt to negotiate personal space and identity between two locations, languages, and cultures in France. In Sebbar's novel *Shérazade,* the main female

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[33] Excerpt from personal interview conducted with Lalla Essaydi in February 2011.

[34] Can be translated to mean a 'cross-breed', crusader, or someone 'at the crossroads'.

[35] Low-income housing projects in the Parisian suburbs

protagonist Shérazade is a *Beur* searching for ways to come to terms with her sense of marginalization by French culture and how her heritage relates to the 19th-century French Orientalist paintings that she is fascinated by.

The renewed interest in Orientalism by contemporary writers and visual artists comes out of a need for reassessment and reconciliation of their colonial heritage. After years of silence and reflection, female Maghrebi writers and artists Lalla Essaydi, Assia Djebar, and Leïla Sebbar are using 19th-century French Orientalist paintings to engage with Orientalist discourse by countering Western fascination with Arab women's reciprocated fascination onto the Western painter.[36] The role of Western economic, political, and cultural hegemonic power in preserving Orientalist discourse captivates these female artists; particularly when this power is further denoted by Western male portrayals of Arab female bodies.[37] For this purpose, gender and background of the artist plays an important role in the dialogue they are creating; primarily because of its symbolic value. While 19th-century Orientalist art was dominated by Western males who used their superior sociopolitical position to circumscribe Arab women within Oriental myths and stereotypes, contemporary works of art and literature that challenge these notions are produced by women who identify with those silenced or objectified a century beforehand.

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[36] Anne Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing between Worlds* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001).

[37] Donadey, RP, pg. 103.

III. The 20th-Century Response to Orientalism: Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar

Nearly a century after Eugène Delacroix and Dominique Auguste Renoir Ingrès painted their masterpieces *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* and *La Grande Odalisque*, North African female authors Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar write their novels *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* and *Shérazade* in an attempt to dialogue and respond with the Orientalist themes expressed in their paintings. This chapter will highlight elements that these paintings and novels share as a way of facilitating a comparison across artistic and literary disciplines. The first section begins with a discussion of space in Arab culture and its pivotal role both in understanding the two paintings as well as Sebbar and Djebar's critical responses of them. From private and public space, I will then analyze the notion of *le regard volé* and perspective in the paintings and the novels. Following this, I will present Sebbar's main character named Shérazade and how she exemplifies the element of mutual fascination between the Orient and the Occident, and how this concept has drawn North African Arab writers into a dialogue with Orientalist painters. This will spark a discussion involving Orientalist paintings as well as Assia Djebar's novel. The third section will include a focus on the role of voice and the unique perspective both Djebar and Sebbar can bring to their work because of their hybrid subjectivity. Finally, the chapter will explore examples in Sebbar's text where she compares contemporary and traditional Arab culture.

I.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, an important element of Orientalist artwork is its public display of private female space. There are numerous paintings by Delacroix and Ingrès

that are set in the intimate spaces of the Arab home in areas where men outside of the family are usually forbidden. Their paintings of the harem embody the sexual metaphor of colonial occupation discussed by critic Anne Donadey in her book *Recasting Postcolonialism*[38] and Edward Said, as both argue that Orientalists created, "an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex."[39] By fulfilling their colonial duties, these male French painters cross the cultural barrier and penetrate into vulnerable and intimate Arab female space. Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger* depicts a darkened salon with heavy drapes and richly colored rugs and pillows, evoking a feeling of a highly confined feminine space shut off from outside contact; a physical manifestation of the Arab female body from the perspective of the Western colonizer. Both Djebar and Sebbar address this aspect of speaking from different private feminine areas in their novels. While their literature embodies an inherent quality of resistance, it is important to note that this is not entirely their intention. Functioning within an oppositional framework only perpetuates the "us" and "them" dichotomy that both helped to justify colonial conquest *and* figures in the key stereotypes in Orientalist art. Instead, both Sebbar and Djebar invite the reader to see various situations from multiple perspectives, thereby creating a more nuanced dialogue. In "Shérazade", Sebbar depicts Shérazade taking a bath and her personal ritual attached to it.

> "Elle s'enferma dans la salle de bains avec la radio. Elle chantait en se savonnant. Elle commençait toujours par les pieds, et comme elle frottait consciencieusement ses orteils l'un après l'autre, du plus petit au plus grand, d'abord le pied droit, toujours le côté droit avant le gauche, elle ne savait pas pourquoi…" (1982: 136).

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[38] Donadey, "Representations of '"Oriental"' women in painting (such as Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*) illustrate the repetition of an encounter forced on the Orient by the West, and portray the site of an impossible desire. In much Orientalist literature, the conquest of the land is expressed in sexual terms, as Western desire for the Orient mixes with the violence and death inflicted on its people" (Donadey, RP, 104).

[39] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 188 ; Donadey, RP 104.

Sebbar's detailed description of Shérazade's bath harkens back to the fascination and detail associated with Orientalist depictions of the Arab *hammam.*[40] Interestingly, bathing is an aspect in Arab culture where the public and private arenas are inverted. The *hammam* is a unique area where Arab women can commune together publicly. While still maintaining an element of ritual rooted in traditional *hammam* culture, Shérazade's bathing scene adheres to the French model, which occurs behind closed doors and is a far more private affair.

Djebar also plays with the notion of space in her novel. Writing from within the intimate circles of women from different generations, Djebar recounts their personal stories of turmoil and questions the meaning of freedom. In this context, the women of the novel are able to fully express themselves while simultaneously reappropriating their feminine space. Djebar describes, "Elle songe aux femmes cloîtrées, même pas dans un patio, seulement dans une cuisine où elles s'asseyent par terre, écrasées de confinement...coupures d'eau trop régulières, odeur des urines d'enfant, criailleries, soupirs...plus de terrasses, plus de trouées du ciel au-dessus d'un maigre jet d'eau, pas même la fraîcheur consolatrice des mosaïques usées…"[41] While Orientalist art eroticizes daily life in North Africa, Djebar's characters' frank depictions of their experiences respond to this art with a multivocal perspective. This quotation shows the reader the extreme level of confinement that many North African women experienced during the era of colonization. However, Djebar shows that multiple perspectives exist to this discourse. In one of the rare occasions in the novel where we hear a male perspective, one of Djebar's characters discusses marital gender roles with his friend Ali, saying,

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[40] Traditional Arab public bath house

[41] Assia Djebar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (France: Albin Michel, 2002) 87.

> "Je suis le seule mâle ici qui refuse, sous tout prétexte d'enfermer une femme...Chez moi, elle sera sûre de s'envoler en toute sécurité… - Il avala d'un trait un autre verre.
> - Tu crois qu'elle sera d'accord, elle ? Répliqua Ali.
> - Ton doute me blesse ! Déclama le peintre qui inclinait dans un début d'ivresse douceâtre" (Djebar,FA, 85).

Instead of actively thwarting Delacroix's presentation of private female space as completely inaccurate, Djebar tries to present the vastness of perspectives that exist, particularly on this one particular topic dealing with the Arab wife. In the *Ouverture* of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Djebar stresses this notion by stating that her intention as a writer is not to speak for or in place of other women, but rather to create solidarity with her Algerian sisters and give them the means to tell their own personal story.[42]

II.

Another important and well-established element of the colonial male fantasy in Orientalist art is the notion of *le regard volé*, or the stolen gaze. In the pieces *Femmes d'Alger* by Delacroix and *La Grande Odalisque* by Ingrès, the, "...representations of 'Oriental' women in painting (such as Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger*) illustrate the repetition of an encounter forced on the Orient by the West, and portray the site of an impossible desire. In much Orientalist literature, the conquest of the land is expressed in sexual terms, as Western desire for the Orient mixes with the violence and death inflicted on its people."[43] In this way, the paintings act as hyperbolized microcosms of the social climate in North Africa during colonization through the eyes of the Western male, where emotions are expressed in extremes of lust, violence, and death. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Delacroix spent months traveling through Morocco and Algeria. As a man from the dominant French culture, Delacroix was able to enter female spaces that are generally forbidden from the male gaze, such as the interior of the harem, and in a way

[42] Djebar, FA, 9.

[43] Donadey, RP, 104.

penetrated this intimate and mysterious zone. Edward Said argues that Orientalists created, "an almost uniform association between the Orient and sex"[44] and states that colonization can be simplified down to the acts of penetration and insemination where the act of conquest over the land and its women become nearly inseparable.[45] Just as the Maghreb is referred to using feminine pronouns, describing it as vulnerable, mysterious, and beautiful, so too are the women who live there. This lexicon is a way for the Western colonist to rationalize its complete domination over both land and body. In Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger,* his privileged viewpoint as a Western male allowed him to enter the harem to paint this famous scene of three Arab women seated on the carpeted floor of a darkened room filled with pillows, heavy drapes, and an African slave in the background. Although he was physically able to enter this private feminine space because of his cultural dominance, Delacroix is still unable to fully engage with the subjects of his pieces because of what Assia Djebar calls *le voile culturel.* Because of his own Western privilege, Delacroix cannot understand the Algerian women's cultural positioning, and therefore cannot break down the final barrier between himself and his Arab female subjects. Conversely, Djebar's literary response to this painting shows that Arab women know very little about the life of the Western male colonizer, thereby creating the phenomenon of reciprocated fascination. Djebar describes the sense of Arab female objectification by *le regard volé*, "On photographiait dans les rues vos corps dévêtus, vos bras vengeurs, devant les chars...on souffrait pour vos jambes écartelées par les soldats voleurs. Les poètes consacrés vous évoquaient ainsi dans des diwans lyriques. Vos yeux révulsés...quoi...vos corps utilisés en morceaux, en tout petits

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[44] Said, *Orientalism,* 188

[45] Said, *Orientalism*, 219

morceaux…"[46] Again, Djebar chooses to use violent language to remind the reader of the heavy colonial oppression placed upon Arab women during the colonial period and throughout their struggle for Independence.Her words embody the essence of *le regard volé*[47] by juxtaposing the literal and brutal objectification of the Arab woman with colonial images of the soldier, the tank, and gore. Djebar's description lifts the *voile culturel* off of the scene; showing the situation in a visceral and painfully real way. Just as Delacroix takes the viewer into a forbidden world, so does Djebar through her writing. By interacting so intimately with the work of Delacroix, she forges a bond between artistic portrayal and reality that Delacroix was not able to create himself because of his position as a privileged Western male.

This cultural separation is what maintains the hierarchal structure between the Western artist and the Oriental subjects and facilitates the act of mutual fascination. As discussed in the previous chapter, French fascination with North African culture, fashion, and particularly their women, greatly fueled the artistic genre. As seen through the work of Delacroix and Ingrès, specifically as they are critiqued and explored through the novels, the artist's fascination stems from a masculine colonial desire to conquer the mysterious territory of North African land politically and the Arab female body physically and emotionally. As the final frontier left for the colonizer to cross, French painters grappled with trying to penetrate *le voile culturel,* which separated themselves from their Algerian female subjects. However, it is evident through their hyper-sexualized and exoticized depictions of the Arab female the painters miss the mark. In the novel, *Shérazade* mentions a long list of Orientalist paintings that she looks at including at least

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[46] Djebar, FA, 118-9

[47] "stolen gaze"

ten different *Odalisques* painted by various artists.[48] For the sake of discussion, consider Ingrès' *La Grande Odalisque* as it exudes the Occidental obsession with Oriental women and their harem culture. As the focus of the painting, a nude woman is reclined on a sofa covered in silken cloth and pillows. The dark and rich colors of the blue background accentuates her feminine curves and pale skin, thereby playing into the Western male desire of the mysterious and sensual Arab woman. The fact that Ingrès never traveled to the Orient makes this painting especially intriguing. His personal fascination with the Oriental woman is manifested by imposing a loose concept of the Arab world on top of a mélange of his own self-tailored female fantasy and popular images of Oriental women circulating in Paris at the time. By contrast, Delacroix spent months traveling through Morocco and Algeria, therefore giving him a very different perspective on the Orient as compared to Ingrès. During his travels, Delacroix was mesmerized by Maghreb culture, and tried to immerse himself within it as much as he was able.[49] The journals that he kept during his trip were filled with notes of detailed descriptions of landscapes, traditional outfits, and people he encountered along the way. Although he was never able to fully "master" or define the Orient, is clear through Delacroix's journal entries that his experiences in the Maghreb allowed him to realize that North African people - and particularly the women - were more than just a product of his own fantasy.

The novel *Shérazade* by Leïla Sebbar reincarnates the character of Shérazade as a 17 year-old runaway who escapes to Paris to escape an identity crisis. As a *Beur*[50] girl growing up in

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[48] Sebbar mentions: *Odalisque au turban blanc, Odalisque au coffret rouge, Odalisque dans la pose du bouddha, Odalisque au magnolia, Odalisque au feuillage vert, Odalisque à la culotte rouge, Odalisque à la culotte grise, Odalisque au fauteuil, Odalisque* by Lefèbvre, and *L'Odalisque* by Ingrès.

[49] Ben Jelloun, DM.

[50] French slang meaning Arab

France, Shérazade finds herself at the crossroads between two identities: her Algerian heritage and her contemporary French upbringing. As the story progresses, every new character that meets Shérazade is fascinated by her name. It harks back to the story of Shérazade the heroic storyteller from *Arabian Nights* who saved herself from execution and made the King fall in love with her. The folkloric character of Shérezade is the absolute embodiment of the Arab temptress painted by Delacroix, Ingrès, and their peers. Popularly depicted as being draped in jewels and lying on sumptuous cushions with eyes smudged with khol, the Shérazade of *Arabian Nights* perfectly exemplifies the exotic and erotic nature of the female Orientalist subject. In Sebbar's novel, the character of Shérazade is unable to avoid the connection between her name and the cultural baggage attached to it. She spends many of her days getting lost in art museums around Paris, where she studies works of Orientalist art of North Africa by Ingrès, Delacroix, Lefèbvre, Manet, and Renoir[51] where, "tous des portraits de femmes dans des positions, des attitudes différentes mais presque toujours allongées sur un sofa ou assises avec un livre, brunes ou rousses, les yeux noirs ou verts" (243). Along with coming to terms with the cultural significance of her name, Shérezade also must confront physical similarities that she shares with the orientalist women in the paintings, particularly in Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, where she realizes that one of the women in the painting also has green eyes. "Lorsqu'elle alla au Louvre...pour les *Femmes d'Alger*, elle remarqua que la femme de gauche appuyée sur un coude, les jambes repliées sur la *fouta* rouge et dorée, avait des yeux verts."[52] She constantly visits museums to study the works of Delacroix, Ingrès, Manet, Corot, Vernet,

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[51] Other artists mentioned in the novel include Corot, Matisse, Fromentin, Théophile Gautier, and Horace Vernet.

[52] Leïla Sebbar, *Shérazade: 17 Ans, Brune, Frisée, Les Yeux Verts: Roman* (Paris: Stock, 1982) *13.*

Lefèbvre, and other 19th-century French painters' depictions of the Orient. Although one of her primary intentions of visiting the Louvre is to critique the pieces, she is also attracted to them at the same time. She finds herself surrounded by these images and themes on a regular basis, and is drawn back to museums for closer inspection. Shérazade considers the fact that both she and the painted woman resting on her elbow have green eyes to be more than just mere coincidence. Just as her name is a classic symbol of Oriental fantasy, so is the feature of green eyes. She begins to see herself as one of the women in the painting, which further complicates her path towards constructing her own distinct identity.

While it is easy to get caught up in merely considering the Occidental fascination with the Orient, it must not be overlooked that the sentiment is reciprocated. *La Nuit du Récit de Fatima* is a story that Djebar added to the second edition of *Femmes d'Alger* that was published in 2002 in hopes of further clarifying, "la solidarité de toute parole femme comme une lampe."[53] In the chapter titled, *Ecole*, Djebar tells the story of a little Algerian girl whose family raises her to revere French culture as superior to Maghrebi culture. On two separate occasions, her father says to her uncle, "-Ma fille, à six ans, elle ira à l'école des Français : c'est décidé !".[54] Her father believes that the ultimate pride is to have his daughter become a *fillette française*. As a result of French occupation, most North Africans believed in a hierarchy of French culture, and wished to assimilate into it for social benefits. If an Arab family was financially able, they would send their children to a French school, which would ensure a quality education and the necessary tools to become integrated into a more privileged rung of society. Within the same story, however, Djebar also presents a conflicting discourse in the character of Nadir who says, "Oui, je me sentais moi,

53 Djebar, FA,10-11

54 Djebar, FA, 32-3

comme un petit Français ; l'aliénation coloniale, j'en devenais un bon produit."[55] Here, Nadir sees through the fantastical portrayal of the Occident and asserts his awareness of the true impact of colonialism: alienation and objectification. As Nadir moves further away from his Arab cultural roots to follow his fascination of the Western "other", he finds it easier to recognize that French colonization brought isolation and objectification rather than of power and righteousness.

III.

In the introduction to *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, Djebar questions which voice is most effective when talking about Orientalism. As an Algerian woman who escaped the enclosure of the traditional harem and go unveiled[56] through the French school system, she sees herself as a hybrid subject caught between the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized.[57] Language in Djebar's novel is a domain in which her multifaceted social position is put on display. Though she was brought up speaking both French and Arabic, Djebar chooses to write in French because of her strong French academic background. Donadey responds to this choice by saying that, Djebar's "*female emancipation was thus achieved at the cost of linguistic colonization.*"[58] Donadey finds it ironic for Djebar to write in French because it uses the language of the colonizer as a tool to represent Arab women who were historically oppressed by it. It is unfair to consider Djebar's decision to write in French as a symbol of weakness or voluntary colonial subjugation. Rather, it is Djebar's recognition of her strength in the French

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[55] Djebar, FA, 47

[56] Donadey, RP intro. Djebar's father was the one who actively permitted Assia to not veil and insisted she go through the French school system.

[57]Donadey, RP

[58] Donadey, RP, intro. xix

language that led her to choose it as a vehicle to assert her female hybrid subjectivity.[59] Furthermore, Djebar's reappropriation of French challenges traditional notions of who rightfully owns the French language.

Brought up by an Algerian father and French mother, Leila Sebbar shares Assia Djebar's pluralistic social position, which is expressed through her writings on Orientalism. Sebbar and Djebar also share their French paternal tongue despite both being raised in Algeria. Though from the same generation as Djebar, Sebbar's work tends to evoke a greater concern for the voices of the younger generation, particularly the *Beur* youth living in France.[60] In *Shérazade*, Sebbar uses her teenage girl protagonist to simultaneously engage with and oppose the deformed representations of Arab women in Orientalist paintings. Traditionally, the character of Shérezade in Orientalist literature and art is one of extreme beauty and leisure, spending her time reclined on top of pillows, recounting tales, and exuding feelings of lust and opulence. Sebbar's Shérezade on the other hand directly challenges the characteristics of her namesake. While Shérazade in Orientalist art is represented as a silent and objectified object of mystery and desire, Sebbar's Shérazade gives a contemporary and youthful response to this stereotypical and oppressive portrayal of Arab women. Not only does Sebbar use the element of voice in the text as that which must be vocalized for the voiceless female subjects of Orientalist paintings, it also presents the major difference between her Shérazade and the character from Oriental folklore. Instead of oral tradition, which was the domain of the Shérazade from *Arabian Nights*, Sebbar's Shérazade prefers to read, "Elle disait, en se moquant d'elle-même, qu'elle préférait lire. 'C'est

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[59] As noted earlier, her strength in French stems from her background in French schools.

[60] Donadey, RP.

ma drogue, c'est mon vice."[61] Historically, storytelling has been considered a female practice. However, to Sebbar's Shérazade, reading stories is a form of pleasure as well as power. Shérazade finds satisfaction in not only her ability to read, but in the knowledge she gains from it.

As seen in her novel's appropriation of the title of Delacroix's infamous painting *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement,* her novel confronts many elements of the Orientalist viewpoint that defined French artwork of the 19th-century. Anne Donadey highlights the importance of Djebar's unique perspective and method for creating,

> "counter hegemonic narratives" by using, "mimicry, in the form of repetition with a difference, to rewrite their intertexts from an oppositional perspective...Sebbar and Djebar come to terms with, and deconstruct, the violence of Orientalist (literary and pictoral) representations of Arab women. They subvert these intertexts by reappropriating and recontextualizing them, thus initiating a dialogue between women from past and present. At the same time they recognize their ambiguous fascination with the expression of Orientalist desire in these European works" (2001: xx).

Donadey's research on Djebar and Sebbar's literature makes her an important source to consider in this chapter. By borrowing Delacroix's title *Femmes d'Alger*, Djebar instantly forces the reader to compare her novel with the painting whose name it shares. Throughout the novel, Djebar plays with the notion of the harem that Delacroix evoked in this painting by setting her novel in the same location. This juxtaposition of the fantastical harem and the authentic expressed in Djebar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* creates a thought provoking dialogue between past and present; viewer and subject. The use of mimicry and repetition to

[61] Sebbar, Shérazade, 49

present a conflicting viewpoint is something that I will revisit when discussing the work of contemporary artist Lalla Essaydi in the following chapter.

Characteristically, Orientalist painting served as the visual manifestation of North African colonization by France; it can be seen as a clear display of Western masculinity that dominated and silenced the voices of the vulnerable feminine colonized nation . In Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger,* the three women are viewed from the outside gaze of the male colonizer. As a Western male with no outside knowledge of Arab culture, particularly Arab female culture, Delacroix assesses the scene from a single lens. Unfortunately, Delacroix does not share Djebar's hybridized viewpoint that allows her to simultaneously engage with White colonial burden as well as Arab female colonial oppression. Though she chooses to write in French, Djebar invites Arabic words and phrases to disrupt the narrative. Her forced bilingualism not only reminds the reader of her own pluralistic pluralistic identity, but also those of her Algerian sisters silenced by Orientalist oppression. "J'avais pu écouter ces voix dans n'importe quelle langue non écrite...toujours avec un timbre féminin et lèvres proférant sous le masque...mots du corpts voilé, langage à son tour qui si longtemps a pris le voile."[62] Written archives and oral accounts of both Orient and Occidental experiences are woven throughout the text and present a pluralism of voices and perspectives that were previously unheard, veiled by the French colonial agenda. By using her crucial position on the margin of French and Algerian society, not only can she challenge traditional notions of Orientalism, but also give a voice to those who previously were silenced by exaggerated exotic depictions of the Orient painted to fulfill colonial fantasies of domination.

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[62] Djebar, FA, 8

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The social position of Sebbar's Shérazade also critiques the classist nature of Orientalist art. Shérazade believes,

> "Pour eux, la peinture de musée c'était la culture bourgeoise pourrie, l'Occident décadent, c'était vieux, rassis, mort… Ça n'existait pas. Ils vivaient leur vie à côté, ailleurs...Un musée de peinture aurait brûlé, ils ne s'en seraient pas émus...Un Picasso, un Renoir, ou un Delacroix cambriolés chez des collectionneurs ou dans des musées, c'était une anecdote qui leur permettait d'évaluer les risques et les bénéfices de l'opération, mais pour l'objet lui-même, c'était un objet" (1982: 238).

While Shérazade is always shown atop pillows in lavish harems and boudoirs, the Shérazade of Sebbar's novel lives in a Parisian squat where she pays no rent, sleeps on a mattress on the floor, and barely owns any personal belongings. Though the traditional Shérazade leads a life of bourgeoisie decadence, storytelling is her only form of personal agency. Ironically, Sebbar's contemporary Shérazade is completely autonomous while living in squalor and stealing to survive. Although the character of Shérazade is repulsed by the fascination her name and alluring physical features produce, her interest in Orientalist art is undeniable. She constantly walks through museums and contemplates the individual pieces both through internal monologue and dialogue with friends.

Through the character of Shérazade, Sebbar initiates a provocative dialogue between Orientalist paintings and the reality of contemporary fashion modeling. Shérazade finds herself in a very similar position of objectification as the female subjects of Orientalist painting, specifically of Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger*. Although earlier on in the text she denounces modeling as a form of prostitution, she and two friends accept a modeling opportunity by a man

who is fascinated by the girls' exotic features; Shérazade's eyes and her friend France's dark skin in particular. On the set, the photographer describes his vision, "Il avait parlé en termes déguisés de photos osées qui se payaient très cher surtout trois filles ensemble - des beautés exotiques - … Elles devaient l'écouter, faire ce qu'il demanderait, il connaissait les goûts des clients - et des clientes - ajouta-t-il pour prouver à quel point le public était large et c'était un public généreux, des clients privés, sur la discrétion desquels on pouvait compter."[63] The manner in which Sebbar illustrates this interaction suggests that the character of the photographer is strongly influenced by Orientalist theme of female exoticization. He claims that *photos osées* (risky or provocative photos) are lucrative projects, especially when including three girls together - *des beautés exotiques*. The fact that Sebbar chose to use three girls for this particular scene begs a comparison with Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger,*[64] where there too are three "exotic" women posing for an Occidental man's art. Furthermore, the photographer justifies his work with nearly the same explanation that is used to contextualize Orientalist art, by claiming that this is the sort of work that wealthy clients are interested in supporting. He continues, "On aime beaucoup les scènes de jungle et de forêt vierge en ce moment...il manque une panthère, mais j'ai de quoi dans le coffre...Mais dégagez-vous bien qu'on voie les seins, les fesses, il faut pas être pudibondes. Si vous étiez dans un sauna ou un *hammam* puisque c'est la mode, vous seriez toutes nues ça ne vous gênerait pas, eh bien là, c'est pareil. Allons-y."[65] Although he chooses not to shoot the girls in a classic Orientalist harem or *hammam* scene, he still wishes to depict them in lush jungle and forest scenes; a manner that still evokes a strong sentiment of exotic fantasy. Unlike Delacroix's

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[63] Sebbar, Shérazade, 152

[64] 1834 version

[65] Sebbar, Shérazade, 154-5

Femmes d'Alger, however, he asks the girls to be nude and defends his request by saying that there is no reason to be uncomfortable because it is the same feeling as being at the *hammam*. The photographer rationalizes his hyper-sexual objectification of the three girls by referencing the classic Orientalist site of the *hammam*, and in doing so Sebbar creates a call-response dialogue between the notion of the Orientalist painting and modern-day modeling. It is interesting also to consider the language that is used for photography. *La prise* of a subject suggests perhaps a violent action of domination over the object of focus for the piece. Like colonial conquest, a photograph instantly captures the essence of its subject. The finale of Sebbar's photography scene occurs when the girls stand up against his objectifying demands by holding him down and beating him up. "Les filles dont on parlait avaient immobilisé un professionnel du porno à la bombe anti-viol et lui avaient donné une raclée."[66] Sebbar concludes the scene by having the girls not only fight back against their modern-day masculine oppressor, but also symbolically resist the Orientalist notion of women being treated as exotic mannequins of male fantasy.

Finding themselves at the cross-roads of French and Algerian identity, writers Assia Djebar and Leila Sebbar use their unique sociocultural positions to simultaneously challenge and subvert Orientalist discourse perpetuated a century earlier by French painters such as Delacroix and Ingrès. In the novels *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* and *Shérazade*, Djebar and Sebbar (respectively) tackle Western preconceptions of North African female identity by presenting alternative narratives inspired by their own personal experiences. Though Djebar and Sebbar challenge many of the elements presented in Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger* and Ingrès' *La*

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[66] Sebbar, Shérazade, 156

Grande Odalisque, they also acknowledge their important place in the North African historical narrative by echoing aspects of the paintings in their novels.

IV. Creating Visual Art Where East Meets West: Lalla Essaydi

This chapter will discuss how contemporary mixed media artist Lalla Essaydi engages with the Orientalist works of Delacroix and Ingrès to offer a feminist, postcolonial response. I begin by introducing the artist and describe her relevant background, inspiration, and artistic intention. The chapter focuses on a particular series that she created between 2005 and 2008 titled, *Les Femmes du Maroc* because of its clear connections to the Orientalist paintings *Femmes d'Alger* by Eugène Delacroix and *La Grande Odalisque* by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingrès, which will be further elaborated upon. I then conduct an in-depth analysis of two of Essaydi's pieces from the series in relation to the works by Delacroix and Ingrès. The analysis will discuss how Essaydi appropriated common Orientalist themes in ways that challenge the viewer to question traditional Orientalist depictions of Arab women. It also considers the relationship between Essaydi's art and novels *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* and *Shérazade*, and whether Essaydi is perhaps not only responding to the works Orientalist painters such as Delacroix and Ingrès, but also to engaging in a dialogue initiated by Maghrebian female writers such as Djebar and Sebbar.

"In a sense, I feel I inhabit (and perhaps even embody) a 'crossroads', where the cultures come together -- merge, interweave, and sometimes, clash. As an artist, I am inhabiting not only a geo-cultural terrain, but also an imaginative one. This space continues to define itself, to unfold and evolve, and as an artist, I feel it is my job (and my passion) to try and understand it, and to make work that flows from this continuing investigation" (Lalla Essaydi, February 2011).

In February of 2011, I had the opportunity to conduct a short interview with Moroccan-born artist Lalla Essaydi, who had this to say regarding her unique position as both included in and excluded from the Arab woman discourse. Born into a Muslim family in the city of Marrakech,

Essaydi left Morocco to receive her diploma in fine arts from the Musée de Beaux-Arts in Paris and then her diploma in photography from Tufts University in Boston, Massachusetts. As she herself acknowledges, her hybrid background experience of growing up in Morocco but living her adult life in Europe and the United States places her in a unique position at the crossroads of two worlds. As an Arab woman born in a predominantly Muslim country in North Africa, a large part of her personal identity expressed through her art is drawn from her experiences growing up in this environment. However, her cultural hybridity allows her to see the world from two different directions: East to West and West to East. By identifying with both Occidental and Oriental cultures, she can assess each one using two different sets of eyes: those from within and those from outside.

As an artist, the ultimate goal of her work is to “demystify” the Arab-Muslim woman. As mentioned previously, the Orientalist painters depicted Oriental women as figures shrouded in mystery and desire. The painters translated their lack of understanding of cultural differences between Europe and North Africa, particularly regarding female dress and female space, into a fantasy of the unknown, or *an Orient mythique*. In her art, Essaydi uses photography and mixed mediums to challenge these simplistic or caricature-like images of the Arab-Muslim woman during the occupation and colonization of North Africa by the French. She disagrees with the Orientalist artists’ desire to find *l’Orient mythique*, which she believes fetishizes and stereotypes Arab-Muslim women, and that the Western gaze on Oriental women was used simply as a form of objectification. With her unique perspective as both an “insider” and an “outsider” to female-Arab-Muslim culture, Essaydi’s art invites the viewer to reconsider Orientalist depictions of Arab women by providing them with a direct contemporary response.

Created between 2005 and 2008, Essaydi's series, "Les Femmes du Maroc" responds to the indulgent and eroticized depictions of North African women produced by 19th-century artists such as Eugène Delacroix, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingrès, and Jean-Léon Gérôme. For the sake of my discussion, I will be primarily focusing two of Essaydi's pieces from the series "Les Femmes du Maroc": *Les Femmes du Maroc No. 1* and *La Grand Odalisque* because of their direct connection to the pieces *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* by Delacroix[67] and *La Grande Odalisque* by Ingrès[68] respectively. Her inspiration for these specific works is explicitly shown in the way that she mimics many of their compositional arrangements and in certain cases chooses to borrow their titles. By doing this, Essaydi hopes that the viewer will instantly be compelled to make a comparison between her piece and the Orientalist painting from centuries prior. She thus challenges the viewer to actively engage with a counter argument to traditional 19th-century depictions of Oriental women.

Essaydi's art sets itself apart from other artists dealing with similar subject matter by her intriguing blend of mediums and her assertive methods. Henna is a signature medium that Essaydi uses throughout the *Les Femmes du Maroc* [69] series. In each piece, the entire scene (including the models) are covered by a continuous flow of traditional Arab calligraphy written in henna, which provides an inarguably decorative aspect to the otherwise white washed setting. Essaydi uses the mediums of photography, henna, and Arab calligraphy to represent the way Orientalist artists such as Delacroix and Ingrès portrayed Arab women who lived during the mid

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[67] 1834 version

[68] 1819

[69] http://www.houkgallery.com/artists/lalla-essaydi/Edwynn Houk Gallery, *Lalla Essaydi,*http://www.houkgallery.com/artists/lalla-essaydi/ (March 1, 2011).

19th-century to the beginning of the early 20th century.[70] These 19th-century artists objectified women as luxuriant "Others" and a source of intrigue to the Western male gaze.

The words written in henna calligraphy which cover each scene are taken directly from Essaydi's own personal journals. There are several ways to interpret Essaydi's intentions for covering the scene with calligraphy done in henna. If looking at the painting from a few feet away, the intricate calligraphy covering all surfaces of the piece muddle the division between the Arab female subjects swathed in white cloth and the white walls that surround them. The sea of words can be seen to liberate the women in the piece by giving them a voice through the experiences written in the excerpts of her journal passages. By contrast, as Assia Djebar emphasizes in her discussion of Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger,,*the women in the painting are silenced. Though through the painter's gaze the viewer is able to see the private interior of the harem, the goal of the painting is to satisfy the West's fascination with Oriental women rather than provide the female subjects with agency. The viewer's appetite for fantasy is quenched through the warm colors of the sumptuous and exotic scene. Though Essaydi mimics the models' positions from the Delacroix piece, the intention of her work is to educate. By covering the women with words from head to toe and the scene from ceiling to floor, she gives them a voice. While Essaydi's intention is to leave the text illegible, that doesn't negate the fact that she is giving her female subjects a voice. Instead, the words should be interpreted as symbols representing the female Arab-Muslim voice that was once silenced by the Western male gaze but now can be heard. On top of the traditional Delacroix format, Essaydi uses her models as vehicles to express her personal experiences as an Arab-Muslim woman.

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[70] "Lalla Essaydi démystifie la peinture orientaliste" EMarrakech : Le Quotidien Maghrébin, *Lalla Essaydi Démystifie La Peinture Orientaliste,* http://www.emarrakech.info/Lalla-Essaydi-demystifie-la-peinture-orientaliste_a32027.html/ (April 3, 2011).

The words can also be interpreted as a commentary on the symbol of the veil. Just as traditionally *burqas* or *hijabs* shroud Muslim woman from head to toe, so too does the henna calligraphy in each photograph. It seems that Essaydi is using two definitions of the veil in her work. First, she engages with the contemporary Western perception of the veil as a symbol for Arab female oppression. Since French colonialism in North Africa, the Arab woman has been popularly defined in the West by the veil as a sign of enslavement and mystery**.**As Fanon notes in his essay *L'Algérie se dévoile*, the symbol of the veil was a major element used by French colonists as a rationale known as "colonial feminism" in hopes of convincing Muslim women to unveil and therefore undermine the Islamic tradition[71]. The French believed that the veil was a symbol of gender inequality in Arab society, which they considered to be a symptom of a backwards culture that must be "righted" by the dominant Western culture. Essaydi challenges this view by "veiling" her models twofold:[72] once with white cloth and a second time with henna calligraphy. The first "veil" of cloth is a direct response to the Western notion of the veil. Although the scene takes place within the house, the women keep their head coverings on, which reminds the viewer that though the photographs are shot within harem walls, the piece is intended to be for public view, and therefore according to Muslim culture it is traditionally appropriate for women to wear a head covering. Also, by choosing to dress the models (particularly in her rendition of Ingrès' *La Grande Odalisque*), Essaydi places the women in a position of power rather than of vulnerability and promiscuity. Instead of creating the women

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[71] "Between the Harem and the Battlefield" Victoria Best, "Between the Harem and the Battlefield: Domestic Space in the Work of Assia Djebar", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27:3 (2002), 873-79 (http://www.jstor.org/).

[72] I have chosen to place veiling in quotations because this is my own personal opinion and it has not been confirmed whether this was Essaydi's intention.

into objects of desire by rouging their cheeks and covering their supple bodies in delicate and sumptuous fabrics, Essaydi allows the women to speak for themselves by swathing them in a neutral draping. The second tier of Essaydi's "veiling" in the form of henna calligraphy is a direct criticism of the skewed vision of the Arab world depicted by Orientalist painters. As mentioned previously, though Orientalist painters such as Delacroix were able to enter into the private female harem, there is a cultural veil that still remains. Through his inevitable Western gaze, Delacroix's depiction of *Femmes d'Alger* shows a level of cultural misunderstanding of the scene, which is shown in his sensual color palate and lavish setting. By writing her own personal stories on top of her models, Essaydi simultaneously creates and destroys the cultural barrier that exists between the Western viewer and her Arab subjects. Though symbolic, her incorporation of intimate anecdotes provide a sense deeper level of understanding to what is going on in the scene. While it is illegible, the words hold symbolic proof of the existence of an authentic female Arab narrative, unadulterated by the Western perspective. Yet, while this helps deconstruct the cultural veil and provide a new level of depth to the Arab female identity, Essaydi's decision to write the text in Arabic calligraphy reminds us of the insurmountable barrier that continues to exist between the Western viewer and the Oriental subjects.

Assia Djebar also uses the notion of voice as a central theme in her novel *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement.* In the *Ouverture,* which was added in the 2002 re-edition of the book, Djebar discusses at length the situation of Arab women in relation to language, and what role language plays when writing a collection of stories about women who before now had no voice to share their experiences. She writes,

> J'aurais pu écouter ces voix dans n'importe quelle langue non écrite, non enregistrée, transmise seulement par chaînes d'échos et de soupires.

> Son arab, iranien, afghan, berbère, ou bengali, pourquoi pas, mais toujours avec timbre féminin et lèvres proférant sous le masque.
> Langue desquamée, de n'avoir jamais paru au soleil. D'avoir été quelquefois psalmodiée, déclamée, hurlée, théâtralisée, mais bouche et yeux toujours dans le noir" (2002: 8).

The quote begins by describing the varieties of language that she hears; from the very meek and vulnerable to the loud and dominating. However, she notes, even when the voice is roaring, the mouth and eyes still remain in the dark; unseen. She even claims that the female language itself has been shrouded by its own veil. Djebar wishes to use her writing to bring all these voices left in the shadows of the harems of the past into the public light for all to hear. She continues,

> "Comment oeuvrer aujourd'hui en sourcière pour tant d'accents encore suspendus dans les silences du sérail d'hier ? Mots du corps voilé, langage à son tour qui si longtemps a pris le voile.
> Voici donc une écoute où je tente de saisir les traces de quelques ruptures, à leur terme. Où je n'ais pu qu'approcher telles ou telles des voix qui se hasardent dans le défi des solitudes commençantes" (2002:8).

In this quote, Djebar compares her task as a writer to that of a water dowser, wondering how she should search for the voices that remain suspended in yesterday's harem. She describes the words of Arab women as belonging to a veiled body, and therefore they too must wear the veil. Essaydi's use of text in her artwork evokes a similar notion regarding voice and representation. Though not intended to be read easily, Essaydi too integrates text into her artwork. For Essaydi, however, the decision to incorporate personal experiences into her art holds a more symbolic purpose than that of Djebar's. Unlike Djebar, Essaydi deliberately inhibits the viewer's ability to directly obtain any clear information from her pieces as a way of playing between text as graphic symbolism, its literal meaning, and the assumption that the written holds the only real access to truth. In this sentiment, Essaydi also addresses the topic of private and public space, which is another theme that Djebar believes to hold much importance. Traditionally, there is a strong

association between oral language and feminine tradition, and written language as reserved for men. Therefore, by keeping the text indecipherable, Essaydi challenges the viewer to reconsider the notion that only written language - the dominant masculine language - is legitimate.

It is evident through their art that both Djebar and Essaydi are interested in exploring the dichotomy of silence and voice. Throughout *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* Djebar gives a voice to Arab women who have lived their lives in a forced silence. Djebar's writing reminds the reader that just because these women whose stories she's telling are silenced, it does not mean that they don't have experiences to share or that they are at all passive individuals. Each story invites the reader to enter the private feminine sphere, where women speak with one another candidly about their hopes, discontents, and fears and act autonomously. During the *Interlude* of the story titled *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* the characters Sarah and Anne discuss silence and freedom. Sarah tells the story of the day that she found her mother dead in her house. In Algerian culture, aside from special circumstances of extreme grief or celebration, women are not allowed to publicly express themselves, and therefore, Sarah had to hide her grief from the outside world. She explains,

> "Je crois que j'ai dû penser : je ne sortirai plus de cette prison-là ! Depuis ce jour … c'était comme si mon corps, à chaque mouvement, heurtait les murs. Je hurlais silencieusement… Les autres ne percevaient que mon silence. Leila l'a redit encore hier : J'étais une prisonnière muette. Un peu comme certaines femmes d'Alger aujourd'hui, que tu vois circuler dehors sans le voile ancestral, et qui pourtant, par crainte des situations nouvelles non prévues, s'entortillent dans d'autres voiles, invisibles ceux-là, bien perceptibles pourtant… Moi de même : des années après Barberousse, je portais encore en moi ma propre prison !" (2002: 123-4).

Sarah describes the experience of having to veil her sadness from the world as living in her own personal prison. Djebar also brings up the valuable point that although many modern day Algerian women choose to not wear the veil in public, they find themselves in unexpected

situations where they become tangled up in other socially imposed veils, which keep the women as prisoners within themselves. By giving these women voices, Djebar hopes to liberate them from their own private prisons and that these stories will be, "...comme une lampe sur ce seuil, pour éclairer la solidarité de toute parole féminine, notre survie."[73] Djebar strongly believes in the importance of a global solidarity for female speech, and that her writing helps shed light on the lives of Arab female individuals to raise awareness and support from the local and international communities alike. Essaydi also uses writing as a way to break down the culturally imposed silence of Arab women. By incorporating experiences taken from her personal journals into her artwork, Essaydi gives a voice to subjects who traditionally do not have the right to express themselves.

Although all the journal passages done in henna calligraphy are tediously written by hand, Essaydi's intention is not to make the writing legible. Rather, she wishes to use the calligraphy to evoke a more stylistic element while keeping the cultural significance of the mediums and the sentiments evoked in the copied journal entries.

> "Each photograph is planned carefully with specific text pertinent to the Orientalist painting that I am working from and from the personal experience it is base[d] on. I deliberately make the text illegible that yield little direct access to information. I do this to play between graphic symbolism and literal meaning and the large[ly] assumptions that the written holds access to reality are constantly questioned" (Essaydi, February 2011).

Essaydi's choice to make the text illegible elicits a connection to the history of Islamic calligraphy. Many interpretations of Islam believe that it is *haram*[74] to depict *Allah*.[75] Since *Allah*

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[73] Djebar, FA, 11

[74] Arabic word meaning a forbidden act; a sin

[75] God

is the creator of all living things, these interpretations also forbid artistic representation of anything in nature. As a result, throughout the centuries Islamic calligraphy became an important artistic medium because of its use of words rather than natural elements. Islamic calligraphy is known for its geometric patterns and floral designs. Like Essaydi's henna calligraphy, the traditional graphic aesthetic of Islamic calligraphy, while decorative, comes at the expense of legibility.

Traditionally, henna is not used to write calligraphy in Arab culture because the art of henna is considered to be a feminine art while calligraphy is strictly a masculine one. It is customary for Arab calligraphy to only be used to write excerpts from the Qur'an or the *Hadith.*[76] By combining the techniques of both henna and calligraphy, Essaydi simultaneously embraces and challenges her cultural heritage and its often severe gender roles. In traditional Arab-Muslim society, the world is divided into male and female areas. While men dominate the public sphere and are free to express themselves and live as they please, women are expected to remain within the home, tend to the house and children, and shroud themselves from view from the outside world by veiling when in the street. The intentionally conflicting messages in the artwork bombard the viewer and encourage a reconsideration of Western stereotypes towards Arab women, traditional Arab gender roles, and the significance of the Orientalist paintings from which she draws inspiration. Just as she finds herself at the intersection of several different identities, so too do we see this sentiment reflected in the themes and images that she uses in her artwork.

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[76] The words and actions of the Islamic Prophet Mohammed collected between the 8th and 9th-centuries

Essaydi believes that there are both physical and metaphysical limits that restrict women in their daily life.[77] North African women in particular are imprisoned by the walls of their own homes, as they represent a clear barrier between the masculine public sphere in the street and the cloistered feminine sphere found within the architecture of the house. In her series *Les Femmes du Maroc,*which clearly borrows the title from Delacroix's famous paintings (and Djebar's collection of stories) with a strikingly similar name, Essaydi shot scenes in an empty house in Morocco that belongs to her family. This house has particular significance to her because she remembers being kept there for long periods of time as a child when she misbehaved.[78] The white walls which frame the female models are a constant reminder to the viewer of the physical and mental confinement of Arab women within a traditional Arab home through both the architecture and the veil, as portrayed by Delacroix in his *Femmes d'Alger*. The scene represents her exploration of "imaginary boundaries"[79] and "open spaces" and its ability to traverse cultural and physical borders that are codified in Muslim society.[80] As mentioned earlier in the chapter, if the piece is viewed from a distance, the use of henna covering the entire scene and subjects blurs the division between boundaries imposed within the piece, and in a way liberates Essaydi's subjects from the confining walls around them. Yet at the same time, the henna acts like a veil, which separates the female Arab subjects from the Western viewer by an explicit cultural barrier.

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[77] Cynthia Becker, "Art, Self-Censorship, and Public Discourse: Contemporary Moroccan Artists at the Crossroads," *Contemporary Islam* 3.2 (July 2009): 143-66.

[78] http://www.houkgallery.com/artists/lalla-essaydi/

[79] I choose to use quotations around this particular phrase because it is a term coined by author Fatima Mernissi. In her book *Dreams of Trespass*, she tells the story of her life as a child within the walls of a Moroccan harem. Mernissi explores this idea in great depth by using the architecture of the house as a metaphor for the situation of harem women as one of simultaneous confinement as well as adoration for their exquisite physical features. It has also been verified through my interview with Lalla Essaydi that Fatima Mernissi played a key role in her work and she has a close relationship with her.

[80] Becker, Art Crossroads, 143-66.

Essaydi also makes a commentary about the use of color in Orientalist art by using a completely opposite palate. Instead of the warm colors used in Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger* or the rich deep tones from Ingrès' *La Grande Odalisque,* which evoked feelings of lust, luxury, and mystery, Essaydi maintains a very organic palate in her work. The rusted brown tones from the henna, the white cloth, and the soft skin tones of the models give each piece overall a very neutral hue. Furthermore, the scenes that she replicates lack any sort of lavish elements at all. Simple white fabric replaces the rich dark harem scenes of Delacroix and Ingrès covered in silken cushions, jewels, and heavy drapes. In *Femmes du Maroc #1,* white cloth is substituted for the ornate fabrics covering the women's bodies in Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement. La Grande Odalisque* uses the same white cloth to cover the model's body instead of leaving her nude as did Ingrès in his *La Grande Odalisque*. It is also important to note that the materials that Essaydi chooses to use - the neutral color of henna, the white fabric that drapes over her models and the background - are both traditionally feminine items in Arab culture.

Lalla Essaydi's position as a female artist at the cultural crossroads of North African and Western culture provides a unique and provocative response to 19th-century French Orientalist art. By blending images borrowed from Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger* and Ingrès *La Grande Odalisque* along with traditional cultural elements taken from her Moroccan heritage such as henna and calligraphy, Essaydi challenges the Western viewer to reconsider their Oriental preconceptions. Her use of juxtapositions such as voice and silence and liberation and freedom extend the discussion presented in Assia Djebar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* into the medium of visual contemporary art. Through her incorporation of 20th century literary influences by Djebar and the 19th-century paintings of Delacroix and Ingrès, Essaydi is not only

able to express her own hybrid perspective but also engage with Orientalist discourse on a variety of historical levels. A connection can also be made between Essaydi's resistance to the Orientalist discourse and that of the character Shérazade in Sebbar's novel. In the same way that Essaydi incorporates her own personal journal entries while leaving them illegible to thwart the penetrating Western male gaze into intimate female Arab space, we saw in Chapter 2 how Shérazade challenges the Orientalist reading of her identity by embodying characteristics that directly contradict those of the classic Shérazade of Oriental folklore. In their work, both Essaydi and Sebbar refuse the Western desire to read their identities like a book open on its binding, or an enchanting 19th-century painting hanging on the wall of a French museum by simultaneously erecting and destroying cultural boundaries between the Western audience and the Eastern woman.

V. Conclusion

> I consider Orientalism's failure to have been a human as much as an intellectual one; for in having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience. The worldwide hegemony of Orientalism and all it stands for can now be challenged, if we can benefit properly from the general twentieth-century rise to political and historical awareness of so many of the earth's peoples...If the knowledge of Orientalism has any meaning, it is in being a reminder of the seductive degradation of knowledge, of any knowledge, anywhere, at any time. Now perhaps more than before.
>
> Edward Said

Edward Said's assessment of Orientalism aptly sums up my own feelings after dedicating over a year of research on the relation between 19th-century French Orientalist paintings and contemporary literary and visual art responses to it. As highlighted in *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* by Assia Djebar, *Shérazade* by Leïla Sebbar, and *Les Femmes du Maroc* by Lalla Essaydi, Orientalist depictions of North African culture - particularly North African female culture - was devoid of not only historical accuracy, but also of any real humanizing qualities. By treating the Arab female subjects of their paintings as merely ornamental objects of intrigue and lust, 19th-century French painters such as Delacroix and Ingrès failed to present an authentic depiction of the Orient. Even though Delacroix had the opportunity to travel to North Africa and paint from his own experiences, he was never able to fully eliminate the cultural barrier that inhibited his Western male gaze from fully penetrating the Arab female space.

As Said mentions, however, there is potential in contemporary artistic and literary discourse for these ideas to be challenged on a global scale. In the 20th century, Franco-Algerian writers Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar wrote texts that openly responded to French Orientalist paintings done a century prior. Engaging with their own personal experiences living through the

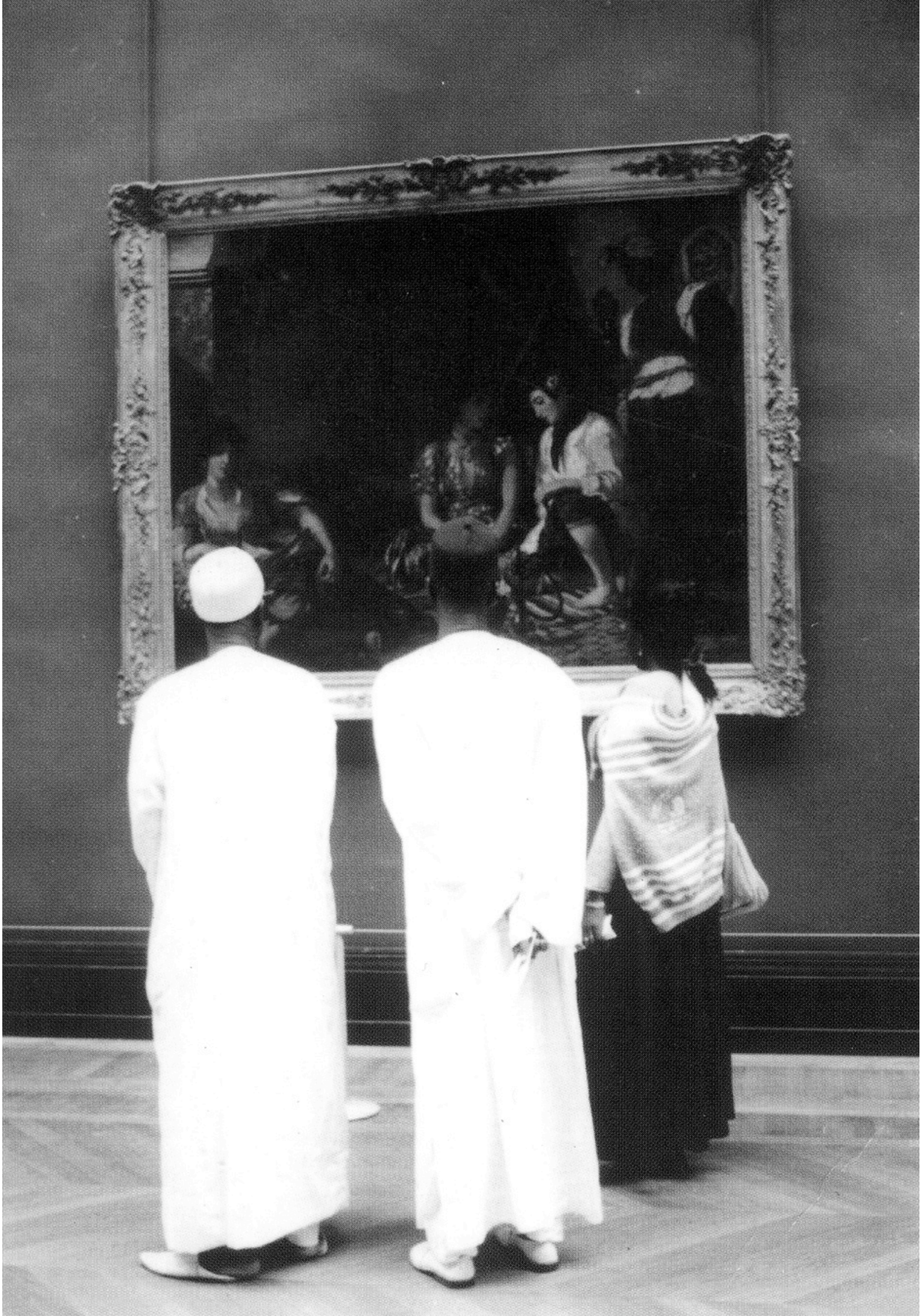
French colonization of Algeria and witnessing the way North African women were targeted by the French as the ultimate symbol of Oriental "backwardness", Djebar and Sebbar use their hybrid perspectives to subvert oppressive stereotypes perpetuated by Orientalist paintings and reappropriate the concept of a pluralistic yet unified Arab female identity. As a 21st-century visual artist, Lalla Essaydi builds upon themes constructed both in 19th-century French Orientalist art as well as in the novels by Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar. By replicating juxtapositions seen in Djebar and Sebbar's works - such as voice versus silence and liberation versus imprisonment - in the context of visual art, Essaydi creates a fresh and provocative contribution to the Orientalist discourse. Through her combinations of traditional and contemporary and Eastern and Western perspective, she simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the cultural frontier between the Western audience and the Eastern woman.

Approaching this project through an interdisciplinary lens and interweaving the disciplines of art history and literature acknowledges the fact that identities and cultural phenomena are not limited to one sphere of influence. In addition to drawing on such primary sources as Delacroix's journals, Assia Djebar and Leïla Sebbar's fiction, and Lalla Essaydi artwork, this research also engaged Anne Donadey's work on how Djebar and Sebbar's novels interact with postcolonial discourse. I was also inspired a great deal by my opportunity to meet with Michèle Hannoosh at the Clark Institute of Art in Williamstown, Massachusetts, to discuss her extensive analysis of Delacroix's travel journals. I am also grateful to Lalla Essaydi for according me an interview over email. Insights from both Hannoosh and Eassydi helped me achieve a more nuanced comprehension of the greater history of Orientalism and the comtemporary response to it. Finally, I was inspired by the art book *Unveiled: New Art from the*

Middle East compiled by the Saatchi Gallery. This book proved to me that, as Said mentions, Orientalism is just as alive today as it was back in the time of French occupation of North Africa. There is a constant demand from Arab artists to reclaim and respond to stereotypical Western notions of Oriental culture - specifically female culture. I would like to thank my readers, University of Massachusetts Amherst professors Kathryn Lachman and Patrick Mensah for their interest in this topic and their incredible dedication to the project, and the University of Massachusetts Amherst Undergraduate Research Conference for providing a space where I could present a portion of my project and excite an audience into thinking critically about the role French Orientalist art plays on contemporary North African society, and how these inaccurate portrayals are being challenged in literature and visual art. I would like to thank Sidi Mohammed Baghdadi, the director of my study abroad program for giving me the opportunity to begin thinking about Orientalist and how it continues to play into Moroccan identity. I also want to thank my Rabat host mother for culturally immersing me and treating me as one of her own. She gave me a completely new perspective on what it means to be a North African woman. Finally, I would like to thank my family for supporting me in my endeavors to pursue this project and my dear friend Nico who watched the project unfold and constantly provided me with encouragement and companionship.

To end on a note of contemplation, I leave off with a postcard image that presents traditionally dressed North Africans looking at Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* in the Louvre in Paris. I am grateful to Michèle Hannoosh, for sharing this startling image, as it is one she herself often uses to conclude lectures on Orientalism. To my mind, this image represents the way in which the Orientalist narrative has come full circle. Whereas during

the colonial period it was the French who gazed at the North African subjects, the postcard shows contemporary North Africans staring back at the French painting, which depicts their culture as seen through the distorting and oppressive gaze of the Western male painter. It is also interesting to note that the North Africans' backs are turned to us, impeding us from gaining any insight on their reactions to the painting through facial expressions, while the reclined Algerian woman in the painting stares back at us, as if to challenge our gaze. With the regard facing inwards rather than outwards, the Western viewer of the postcard appears to be watching a nonverbal interaction between contemporary North African identity and its historical portrayals. In this situation, the Western viewer is the one who is alienated and vulnerable rather than the Algerian female subjects. Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement,* a fundamental symbol of French Orientalist painting, hangs in the Louvre as the Western gaze waits in anticipation for a reaction while the North African audience excludes them from the discourse. Does the North Africans' stance not only subvert the Western gaze but represent a new form of power through silence?



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