REFRAMING THE GAZE: EUROPEAN ORIENTALIST ART IN THE EYES OF TURKISH WOMEN ARTISTS

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore an overlooked subject at the juncture of gender studies and art history by examining the responses of three Turkish women artists to Orientalist art, especially that which portrayed the female form as highly eroticised and exoticised. Orientalism, the European art movement that flourished in the nineteenth century, is being debated visually by these contemporary women artists, who have brought gender issues 'back home' to the original site of Orientalist imagining. Yet, the works of these Turkish women artists raise a critical question: by adjusting their focus on European Orientalist art, do they effectively challenge or unwittingly re-awaken the Orientalist gaze?

Keywords: gender, art history, Orientalist art, portraits, exotism

Introduction: The Gendered Gaze

The European art movement which became known as Orientalism (on the multiple meanings of Orientalism, see MacKenzie 1995: 43; Quinn 2008: 4; Varisco 2007: 81) flourished in the nineteenth century, a period of competing empires and a time of male monopoly on visual representation. Three contemporary women artists in Turkey – Gülsün Karamustafa, Selma Gürbüz, and Reyyan Somuncuoğlu – have responded in different ways to this masculine monopoly, especially the Orientalist motif of eroticised and exoticised women. The three artists are based in Istanbul, which was once the Ottoman capital and which was also considered the capital of the mysterious 'Orient', a multivalent symbol of diametrical opposition – 'feminine', passive and weak in contradistinction to a rational, active, powerful, and 'masculine' Europe, with its imperial desires for domination and possession, as argued in Said's seminal *Orientalism* of 1978.

In any discussion of Orientalist art, it is impracticable to avoid (without laboured circumvention) facile binary oppositions such as Orient and Occident, East and West, Western and non-Western, but these binary terms conceal a range of nuances which should be borne in mind. For instance, during the nineteenth century – when Orientalism as a scholarly and artistic enterprise was at its zenith – the Ottoman *Tanzimat* reforms were intended to forge a modern Ottoman state, "a partner of the West rather than its adversary" (Makdisi 2002: 770). These reforms turned Istanbul into "the most modern westernised centre of the empire" (Makdisi 2002: 779) and heralded "a golden age" for upper- and middle-class women (Ortaylı 2007: 167; see also Frierson 2005; Safarian 2007).

Before examining the approaches of Gülsün Karamustafa, Selma Gürbüz and Reyyan Somuncuoğlu, who direct their artistic gaze on the Orientalist gaze, it is necessary to briefly survey representations of women in the 'Orient'.

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Painting by Formula

The heyday of Orientalism was the nineteenth century, but as early as the fifteenth century European painters in their treatment of the 'Orient' – as much a mythical space as a geographical space – had already begun their artistic oscillations between reality and fantasy (see Denny 1993: 229; Lemaire 2001: ch. 1). The 'Orient', particularly the Ottoman Empire which extended from Turkey through to the Arab Peninsula and North Africa, fascinated travelling and 'stay-at-home' artists. Among the Europeans, the French dominated the field, but the British also engaged energetically, and American painters contributed to the growing constellation of Orientalist works. Although the painterly Orientalist gaze was overwhelmingly a male and Western preserve, it was also projected by Western female artists (see Lewis 1992), nor was the Orientalist mindset entirely absent in the historical evolution of the feminist movement (see Abu-Lughod 2001; Weber 2001), but these topics lie outside the purview of this paper.

There was no school of Orientalist painting identifiable by a definitive style; it was the thematic content which linked the works (Thornton 1994a: 4). These themes may be divided into three broad, but not mutually exclusive, categories. The first was posited as documentary record; the second was motivated by political propaganda (at the expense of the Ottoman Empire); the third was construed through the lens of 'exoticism' (for details, see Denny 1993: 219). Within the third category, one of most commonly portrayed genres was that of the fleshly female body – composed as a naked or semi-naked corporeal formula, configured in intimate settings of the harem and the Turkish bath (hamam) – inviting a voyeuristic gaze (for an illustrated survey, see Thornton 1994b).

By the close of the nineteenth century, the sexual imagery in Orientalist art had become increasingly pronounced and stereotypical, casting women as the generic seductress and converting the Turkish bath and the harem into "erotic clichés" (Lemaire 2001: 270). Jean-Léon Gérôme's hamam paintings, set in Turkey and Cairo, were "little more than an exercise in prurience" (Lemaire 2001: 270). The hamam, the harem and the sultan's seraglio were private and domestic spaces inaccessible to European males. Nonetheless, Orientalist artists scoured a spectrum of sources: imagination, fellow artists' paintings, unreliable hearsay, and literary accounts. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres was one of the 'armchair' artists: he never travelled further than Italy; it was in his Paris studio that he created the extremely influential and highly eroticised *La Grande Odalisque* (1814) and *The Turkish Bath* (1862).

The words *odalisque*, *hamam* (or *hammam*), *harem*, and *seraglio* (for etymologies, see DelPlato 2002: 9; Kahf 1999: 95) package both pictorial and political content. The ubiquitous odalisque, oriental 'sex slave' and object of sexual fantasy, became an icon of Orientalist art, with her iconographic props such as the divan and the ottoman. Lexically, the 'divan' on which the ever-reclining, indolent odalisque lounged is derived from *Divan*, referring to an Ottoman council of state (where the viziers would sit on a cushioned platform, hence 'divan'). Similarly, the word 'Ottoman' was diminished into an item of

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furniture, the 'ottoman', which was also imagined as an accessory of harem life. The juncture between sexual imagery and imperial lust is thoroughly investigated by Nochlin (2002), who argues that Orientalist art cannot be disassociated from the ideologies of Western imperialism.

The female body was not only an 'erotic cliché', it was also a twofold cipher: the body belonged to an anonymous woman a person of no consequence and this female body symbolised an enigmatic, submissive, and feminised 'Orient'. The three women artists from Turkey, the successor state to the Ottoman Empire and an heir of the 'Orient', have responded in their own art to these archetypical images in Orientalist art. Although the artists' responses are but one facet of their vast and diverse artistic output, seen collectively they enrich the ongoing debate on the legacy of Orientalist art.

Gülsün Karamustafa and 'Oriental Fantasies'

Gülsün Karamustafa (born 1946) is both an academic and an artist, with a well-established reputation in the domestic and international art circuits. She uses painting as an expressive medium, as well as installation, video, photography, and performance art to interrogate socio-cultural and political issues. Of the three artists under discussion, only Gülsün Karamustafa defines herself as a feminist (Platt 2003: 35) and her rejoinder to Orientalist art has been the most confronting visually.

Her major works on the subject of Orientalist art appropriate, by way of reproduction, some of its most enduring and emblematic images. Her installation, 'Presentation of an Early Representation', was a hugely magnified illustration by a 16th century German chronicler of an Ottoman slave market. It was first exhibited in *Inclusion/Exclusion, Art in the Age of Post-colonialism and Global Migration*, in Austria (1996) and later in Germany (1998). The simplicity of Karamustafa's approach belies the complexity of her message, for magnification results in amplification of the chronicler's frame of inclusion: Ottoman cruelty and brutality against women (and, as depicted in the German illustration, it was European women being sold into slavery). Simultaneously, the commodification of 'oriental' women in paintings by European Orientalists is the 'exclusion' hidden from sight. Kosova (2002: 60) describes the piece as a critique of the "Eurocentric gaze and its apparatus of representation", but the gaze sweeps over a much wider spatio-temporal terrain.

An integral part of this installation features a display of self-referential questions, one of which is: 'Why do I have the feeling that I am always going to be questioned?' The questions accumulate, touching on 'the Cyprus problem', 'the Kurdish conflict', 'women and Islam'. One of the most telling is: 'What if I announce that I am tired of being questioned?' This gruelling interrogation parodies the persistent and probing questions through which difference (or 'othering') is constructed, and through which the 'insider' artist is transmuted into mouthpiece of her entire nation. Viewers of the installation have their questions echoed before their eyes. This reverberation or doubling back process is also affirmed in Karamustafa's choice of image: a German illustration to exhibit in Austria

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and Germany. She is throwing back the gaze which has been bifurcated through visual and textual formats.

Karamustafa relentlessly pursued the 'gaze' in three conceptually interrelated works exhibited in European art galleries (Stuttgart, Berlin, Copenhagen, Amiens) between 1999 and 2000. Her '-from the outside-' consisted of a long wall frieze of familiar Orientalist fantasies: images of sensual odalisques and naked women in Turkish bath scenes. This 'outside' wall of mythologised harem life is punctured by an alcove, where a video installation recounts the inner psychological realities, based on the memoirs of Leyla (Saz) Hanimefendi (1850-1936), who spent her early years in an imperial harem. Karamustafa not only questions the Orientalist formula of women but, through the device of the video, the place of women in the narrative of Turkish history. The work has similarities to her earlier piece: the inside/outside relationship, the implicit complicity in the act of viewing, and the cognitive friction of textual and visual elements rubbing against each other. Conceivably, this last strategy is an ironic meditation on Orientalist representations, since painting and literature fuelled each other, especially in the form of sexual material (on the nexus between the two mediums, see de Groot 1989: 121).

With the installation 'fragmenting/FRAGMENTS' Karamustafa's counter-imagining of Orientalist imagining is incisive. By dissecting the eroticism of Orientalist art, her work pushed the objectification of women's bodies to an anatomical apogee. Fragments of famous paintings by Delacroix, Ingres, and other nineteenth-century Orientalists are reproduced, cut up, and juxtaposed in grids, resembling mosaic tiles. (Islamic tiles were often painstakingly painted in hamam scenes to lend an aura of ethnographic verisimilitude.) In the hands of Karamustafa the 'oriental' woman, as eroticised object on display to the viewer-voyeur, is subjected to an artistic autopsy, dissected into anonymous and interchangeable body bits. This pictorial dismemberment anatomises the gaze: by enclosing the close-up body parts in boundaries (the tile-grid), she not only forces the viewer to question the permeable boundaries between erotic art and pornographic imagery, but she fragments the canons of art history.

In the piece 'Double Action Series for Oriental Fantasies', Karamustafa erected nearly life-size standing cut-outs from reproductions of Orientalist paintings. These cut-outs (mostly of the naked female form) had been detached from hamam, harem and slave market scenes, that is, the ornamental settings had been stripped away, settings which imparted 'authenticity' to Orientalist representations. The figures are doubled through the use of their mirror images, with doubling suggesting the erasure of identity – the ivory white, passive odalisque is a template; she is reduplicative, endlessly reproducible (as is the black servant, as is the Ottoman slave dealer).

Karamustafa cuts up and cuts away oriental fantasies with surgical precision. She maintains that "the gaze on the orient has never changed since the 16th century until today" (quoted in Olsen 2000: 65), a perspective which makes her art 'bifocal': a corrective to the past and an indictment on the present.

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Selma Gürbüz and 'Harem Fantasies'

An artist of national and international repute, Selma Gürbüz (born 1960) is a painter, sculptor, and fibre artist, who works in both Istanbul and Paris. These two geographical bases hint at a more conciliatory and abstruse interpretation of Orientalist art. She is also an artist who eludes easy classification, as revealed in Lemaire's chapter 'New Visions of the Orient' (2001: 332):

Selma Gürbüz wants to explore the ambiguity of that meeting [between 'East' and 'West']; she wants to push the conflict-ridden conjunction of these two ways of understanding the world to the very limit...

Lemaire reproduces two of her paintings in private collections, *Women in a Turkish Bath* (1993) and *Oriental Still Life* (1993). Though the standard nomenclature of Orientalist painting is articulated in the titles, the substance (bulky geometrical shapes in red, black and grey) expresses a playful mocking of Orientalist themes.

The 'two ways of understanding the world' is also discernible in a group exhibition*, Harem Fantasies and the New Scheherazades*, which was held at the Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona (CCCB) in 2003. The exhibition (which also travelled to Lyon, France) was conceived by the Moroccan writer, sociologist and feminist, Fatema Mernissi. The fictional heroine Scheherazade, the narrator in *The One Thousand and One Nights*, told her stories in the space of the harem and the 'new Scheherazades' tell their visual stories in exhibition spaces.

Among the twelve 'new Scheherazades' is Selma Gürbüz, with her fibre artworks in the sub-section 'Weaving Erotic Taboos'. One of her woven pieces is 'Adem ve Havva', Adam and Eve (whose story is also recounted in the Qur'an), but in Gürbüz's visual story the protagonists are scarcely recognisable as human; grotesque in form, they resemble primeval apparitions culled from folk-memory. The two figures are identical in pose and appearance: the only gender differentiation is the symbolisation of their sexual organs: Eve's takes the shape of an eye and Adam's a scorpion. The figures are balanced in symmetry: Eve's feet stand on the feet of an upside down Adam, who is a paler reflection of Eve.

Gürbüz and the other women artists display their works in Hall 4. The exhibition lay-out is instructive: Hall 1 Scheherazade; Hall 2 Views of the Harem; Hall 3 The Last Harems (with a sub-section 'Matisse and Atatürk', contrasting Matisse's odalisque paintings of the 1920s with Atatürk's vision for women in the newly founded Republic of Turkey in 1923); Hall 4 The New Scheherazades. This is the final space, as described in the following excerpt (CCCB 2003):

Here we show the work of her [Scheherazade's] successors in order to explore the way in which Eastern women today enrich contemporary society by using a personal visual language that challenges the very basis of traditional attitudes to women in the Near East and North Africa, transgressing sexual taboos and the sinister power of domestic objects. These new Scheherazades take risks and bravely expound their intimate,

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rebellious thoughts. With imagination, talent and a great sense of humour, they assert their identity and deconstruct the Orientalist myth of the voiceless woman.

Between Scheherazade and 'her successors' are the display spaces allocated to renowned Orientalist paintings, on loan from equally renowned galleries and museums. Critical commentaries accompany the Orientalist artworks, but it is unlikely that the criticisms crafted in words carry the same potent magnetism as the visual language of the original Orientalist paintings. The question inevitably arises: do the venerable European male Orientalists have more exhibitionary prestige than the female 'new Scheherazades', hailed in the exhibition's title but last in sequential order. These women artists may 'deconstruct the Orientalist myth of the voiceless woman', but they have to wait their turn to 'speak'.

After her participation in *Harem Fantasies and the New Scheherazades*, Gürbüz held in Istanbul in 2004 a solo exhibition of ink drawings, *The Fairy and the Genie*. The works excavate more whimsical and macabre beings from her fertile imagination, whilst artfully mediating the binary oppositions of Orient/Occident, fantasy/reality, human/non-human, male/female (such as the drawing named 'Transvestite'). Also dwelling in the fantastic realm of hybrid entities, fairies and genii is a family of figures labelled 'The Europeans I', 'The Europeans II', 'The Europeans III', and 'The Europeans with Umbrellas'.

This studied focus on Europeans invokes an inverse relationship to the customary uni-directional Orientalist gaze and reverses the Orientalist norm of who mythologises whom. In one sense she 'orientalises' Europeans, who are drawn bereft of individualised identity, since they are drawn as black silhouettes in the tradition of shadow puppets (a cultural characteristic of Ottoman theatre). The cluster of figures in swirling skirts fosters the impression of women in motion, but an optical illusion is also perceptible – the flared skirts imitate the movement of whirling dervishes. Gürbüz's art trawls through what she calls "an inheritance of innumerable images" (quoted in Lemaire 2001: 331). She does not hack away at Orientalist motifs; she works with a lighter touch, layering symbols, transforming identities, fusing cultures, and negotiating dichotomies.

Reyyan Somuncuoğlu's 'Ottowoman' Fantasies

Lesser known than Karamustafa and Gürbüz is Reyyan Somuncuoğlu (born 1959), who in the late 1990s commenced painting canvases of imperial women of the Ottoman harem. Somuncuoğlu accentuates the Ottoman attributes of these women, for they came from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. In 1999 she exhibited four portraits of the mothers of reigning sultans, and such women held the official title of *valide sultan*. The paintings were exhibited in three venues: the National Arts Club in New York, the Yildiz Palace in Istanbul, and the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. This solo exhibition was entitled *Ottowoman* and the venue of Topkapi Palace was particularly well-suited, for it was the seat of the Ottoman sultans and the imperial harem was the source

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of inspiration for recurring Orientalist harem fantasies of the sultan's sexually-charged seraglio.

The four royal mothers portrayed by Somuncuoğlu were selected because they piqued her interest as "powerful figures in the harem" (quoted in Kangüleç 2009: 11) and Somuncuoğlu immersed herself in the study of Ottoman culture under the guidance of a historian. Three of her portraits depict charismatic women who were closely identified with the so-called 'sultanate of the women', a term used derisively to condemn what was seen as women's interference (especially that of 'foreign' women) in politics (see Goffman 2002: 124; Peirce 1993: 7). Royal women became politically influential during a period spanning roughly from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century. The imperial harem as a site for political activity and manoeuvring (for a feminist analysis, see Peirce 1992, 1993) was completely eclipsed, in both literature and art, by the richly-embellished myth of the sultan's seraglio as a purely lascivious sexual site.

The artist continued painting imagined portraits of Ottoman women and held another solo exhibition also entitled *Ottowoman* in Los Angeles in 2005. She persevered with this subject, culminating in another exhibition – again entitled *Ottowoman* – in 2009, at the Erenus Art Gallery, Ankara. On this latest exhibition of sixteen new pictures Kangüleç (2009: 11) reports that Somuncuoğlu "has set out to break this [Orientalist] image by treating Ottoman women as individuals with distinct characters and making them the centrepiece of her portraits".

Somuncuoğlu 'empowers' the women of the Ottoman court by employing portraiture, borrowing a genre of representation which evolved in the West. Unlike their counterparts in Europe, royal women of the Ottoman court did not have their portraits painted, but through their patronage of architectural works, they could provide a highly visible embodiment of their institutional power. Thus, Ottoman female authority was not painted; it was built (for an indepth examination, see Thys-Senocak 2006). A tantalising aspect of some of Somuncuoğlu's portraits is the presence of fragmentary buildings and structures in the background, but whether this architectural reference is an allusion to this historical female patronage is difficult to determine.

The artist delineates a sharp division between her harem paintings and those of Orientalists, or in the words of Somuncuoğlu:

We are acquainted with portraits of Ottoman sultans but we have not seen their mothers who raised and protected them. ... Western painters focused on the harem and eroticism when they depicted Ottoman women. However, I want to display Ottoman women's individuality... (quoted in Kangüleç 2009: 11).

The oil paintings are intended as portraits but one does not know of whom (excepting the four *valide sultan*s whose names and dates are given). The anonymous faces are devoid of the 'individuality' which the artist claims, for each flawless 'Ottowoman' appears like a figure in a replicable series. Moreover, all the women possess enlarged limpid eyes and tightly sealed lips. Somuncuoğlu explains these common physiognomical traits in the following manner: "Big eyes show that these women see everything while

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sealed lips mean that they keep many secrets" (quoted in Kangüleç 2009: 11). The anonymity and the 'secrets' of these royal women of the harem are reminiscent of Orientalist art which pictured harem women as beautiful ciphers.

In order to challenge misrepresentations of Ottoman women by European Orientalists, Somuncuoğlu creates a parallel fantasy in which imperial women became figures of power due to their all-seeing and secret-keeping abilities. The silent woman is not very far removed from the Orientalist brushstrokes which produced the myth of the 'voiceless woman'. In addition, a myth cannot be dispelled by inventive wordplay (and 'Ottowoman' makes a cogent case only in English). The lexical castration of 'Ottoman' in the tenacious title may suggest a radical re-assessment of women in the imperial harem, but Somuncuoğlu supplies serial visual mirages – their promise remains unfulfilled.

The Exhibitionary Gaze

The three Turkish artists in their individual and idiosyncratic ways attempt to fracture the Orientalist gaze. Karamustafa, a feminist, proceeds by dismemberment both figuratively and physically: she tears apart centuries-old fantasies inscribed in Orientalist art. Gürbüz proceeds through bricolage: she assembles heterogeneous ideas and recomposes them in ways which collapse boundaries, thereby subverting a monolithic interpretation of the gaze. Somuncuoğlu attempts to deflect or reposition the gaze: the harem of sexual intrigues is supplanted by the harem of political intrigues.

The artists revive the agenda of Orientalist art in order to reframe it, to dismantle its assumptions, particularly the formulaic depiction of women. The artists' visual critiques clearly have resonance in the present, for at work is another revivalist project, comprehensive, authoritative, and insidious: the staging of Orientalist art exhibitions in Europe and America. Lemaire (2001: 349-350) furnishes a detailed bibliography of primarily European-based exhibitions (apparently unimpeded by Said's *Orientalism*). Since Lemaire's book was published in translation, exhibitions have increased in number, scope, and specialisation. For instance, there was *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in American Culture, 1870-1930*, held between 2000 and 2001, and organised by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. There was the more recent *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, held in 2008, and organised by the Tate Britain, London, in partnership with the Yale Centre for British Art in the United States.

Significantly, the vocabulary of 'wicked pleasures' and 'lure' in the titles speaks unambiguously in the language of desire and seduction, rhetoric which reiterates the 'Orient' as a metaphor of sexuality and perpetuates othering through pictorial 'documentation'. Harem and hamam works are pivotal to such exhibitions. The exhibition website of the Tate Britain (n.d.) informs: "The harem was the defining symbol of the Orient for Western Europeans, and is today the definitive category of Orientalist imagery for us." The usage of an 'us' presupposes a 'them'. Yet, the issue is far more complex, for this Orientalist exhibition is travelling to cities in the former 'Orient': Istanbul (2008-2009)

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and Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (2009). Orientalist art has come full circle. Will Turkish and Arab citizens evaluate the exhibition as a materialisation of an 'us' and 'them' mentalité, as an opportunity to gaze upon their orientalised history, as a mechanism of re-orientalisation, or as an innocent exercise in nostalgia?

Nochlin (2002: 69-70) detects little innocence in Orientalist exhibitions, whose organisers disingenuously disengage from the debate by retreating into the safe haven of art history and aesthetic merit. Images of 'oriental' women still exert a strong hold on the imagination and, as succinctly put by Kahf (1999: 179), "For all that Western culture retains today of its own ebullient parade of Muslim women is a supine odalisque, a shrinking violet virgin, and a veiled victim-woman." This is a viewpoint with which Karamustafa would concur, for the historical weight of the gaze bears down on contemporary realities.

Whereas the three Turkish women artists endeavour to splinter or counter the gaze, Orientalist art exhibitions re-animate it through their sheer scale, spectacle and special effects, offering for consumption panoramic displays of the female body – eroticised, fetishised, and fantasised – in varying degrees of undress, but clothed in the legitimacy of art scholarship. This exhibitionary industry of Orientalist art means that its vision is ever-present, circulating in an ever-widening orbit and entrenching ways of seeing (gender, culture, religion, power). An age of post-colonialism does not necessarily imply an age of post-orientalism.

Conclusion: The Big Picture

The works of the three Turkish artists must be seen in the context of the larger geo-political canvas. Through the medium of Orientalist exhibitions what sort of 'portrait' is displayed of Turkey, a nation which aspires to membership of the European Union? The European Union has designated Istanbul as one of the 2010 European Capitals of Culture. How will Istanbul, which was firmly lodged in the European collective memory as the capital of the mysterious, exotic, and feminised 'Orient', exhibit its credentials as a European capital? Undoubtedly, three residents of Istanbul – Karamustafa, Gürbüz, and Somuncuoğlu – will see their artistic horizons expanding, as their city prepares for renewed scrutiny under a European gaze in 2010.

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