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### CRITIQUE OF THE REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN ORIENTALIST PAINTINGS: LALLA ESSAYDI AND THE RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF ORIENTALISM

*Oryantalist Resimlerde Müslüman Kadın Temsilinin Eleştirisi: Lalla Essaydi ve Oryantalizmin Yeniden Yorumlanması*

#### Ayşe ELMALI KARAKAYA

Öğr. Gör. Dr., Sakarya Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi, Felsefe ve Din Bilimleri Bölümü,  
Sakarya, Türkiye

Dr. Lecturer, Sakarya University Faculty of Theology, Department of Philosophy and  
Religious Studies, Sakarya, Turkey

[aysekarakaya@sakarya.edu.tr](mailto:aysekarakaya@sakarya.edu.tr)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1477-191X>

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## CRITIQUE OF THE REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN IN ORIENTALIST PAINTINGS: LALLA ESSAYDI AND THE RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF ORIENTALISM

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### Abstract

Edward Said argues that the West has always been biased toward the East. The opinions about the East are largely based on stereotypes developed in 19th-century artwork and disseminated by Europeans mostly through art. In her photographic works, Lalla Essaydi challenges these Western stereotypes of Muslim culture and offers a new perspective on issues of female identity in the Muslim world. Although there is some research that examines Orientalist paintings from different perspectives, a few studies focus on the representation of Muslims in 19th century Orientalist paintings and analyze them in comparison with contemporary artworks. This study discusses the representation of Muslim women in Orientalist art and the ways in which this representation is critiqued and restaged by Essaydi. The comparison of the two artworks shows that the perception of female identity has changed over the years. Whereas in Orientalist painting the veil was considered an object of exoticism and veiled Middle Eastern women are seen as oppressed and part of a mystical world, in Essaydi's works the veil is the symbol of modesty and women are symbolized as individuals from the real world rather than part of a male fantasy.

**Keywords:** Sociology of Religion, Sociology of Art, Orientalist Art, Muslim Women, Lalla Essaydi.

### Öz

The Edward Said, Batı'nın her zaman Doğu'ya karşı önyargılı olduğunu savunmuştur. Doğu hakkında Batıdaki görüşler büyük ölçüde 19. yüzyıl sanat eserlerinde Avrupalılar tarafından geliştirilen ve çoğunlukla da sanat yoluyla yayılan ön yargılara dayanmaktadır. Lalla Essaydi, hazırlamış olduğu fotoğraf serilerinde Müslüman kültürü ile ilgili Batılı, özellikle klasik oryantalist sanat eserlerinde öne çıkan ön yargılara meydan okur ve Müslüman dünyasında kadın kimliği sorununa yönelik yeni bir bakış açısı ortaya koyar. Oryantalist resimleri farklı açılardan inceleyen bazı araştırmalar olsa da çok az araştırma Müslümanların 19. yüzyıl Oryantalist resimlerindeki temsiline odaklanıp, çağdaş sanat çalışmaları ile karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz etmektedir. Bu çalışmada, Müslüman kadının Oryantalist sanattaki temsili ve bu temsilin Essaydi tarafından nasıl eleştirildiği ve bu eserleri yeniden yorumlanma biçimleri ele alınmıştır. Bu iki farklı dönem sanat eserlerinin mukayesesi kadın kimliği algısının yıllar içinde değiştiğini göstermektedir. Oryantalist resimde peçe/başörtüsü bir egzotizm nesnesi olarak kabul edilip örtülü Ortadoğulu kadınlar baskı altında ve mistik bir dünyanın parçası olarak görülürken, Essaydi yer yer eleştirirse de tesettürü muhafazakarlığın sembolü olarak çalışmalarında kullanmıştır. Onun çalışmalarında kadınlar oryantalist eserlerde olduğu gibi erkek fantezilerinin bir parçası değil, gerçek dünyaya ait, yaşayan birer birey olarak sembolize edilmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Din Sosyolojisi, Sanat Sosyolojisi, Oryantalist Sanat, Müslüman Kadın, Lalla Essaydi.

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, there have been many studies conducted regarding Muslim women in both the Islamic and Western worlds. The major focus of the research done is centered around women's status in society (Read, 2003), gender inequality (Moghadam, 2005), the veil, and its different dimensions and embodiments (Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Gole, 1996; Mernissi, 1987). The common thread connecting all of the studies is not simply their topics of interest, but that each of them is only perceptions of Muslim women in particular societies. In this context, cultural panorama, art in another word, is an important way to describe people's views on women in the Muslim or Western world.

Greenberg state that art is above other forms of culture; when a created object is defined by its people as "great art," this gives us information about that society's perception and preferences on the issues represented in a particular exhibit (Inglis, 2005). Therefore, it is suitable to say that when we intend to understand the perceptions about women in a society, or during a specific period of time, art is a credible witness to these opinions. This information can prove invaluable when analyzing the identity of Muslim women in society.

The aim of this study is, by focusing on the description of Muslim women in art, to examine the difference or similarity of the perception of Muslim women in past times and the current day, and how it has changed over time. In the study, I used semiotics to analyze the representation of Muslim women in Orientalist painting and how Essaydi criticizes those paintings in her works. Semiotics is the study of how symbols acquire meaning, how they come to represent information, and how the link between meaning and image influences how information is received by people (Thippawong, 2021). By using semiotic analysis, I will also be able to identify how Muslim women were portrayed in Western paintings in the 19th century and how these images had an impact on Western people's perception of Muslim women and Muslims in general.

In the article, following the introduction, I will discuss the orientalist paintings and the depiction of women in these paintings. Then, brief information about contemporary art in the Middle East will be given, and in this context, Lalla Essaydi's works will be presented. After that, in the last section of the article, I will discuss how Orientalist paintings works were criticized in contemporary art by focusing on Lalla Essaydi's work.

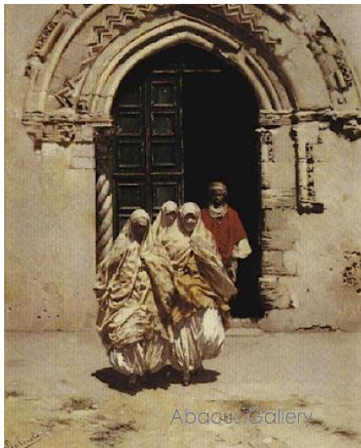
## ORIENTALIST PAINTINGS

Orientalists frequently used women figures in their paintings, and those paintings have been fastidiously critiqued by many artists throughout the years, yielding a plethora of documentation and interpretation of their content. The word "orientalism" was generally used to refer to the work of the Orientalist, a scholar with knowledge of the languages and literature of the Orient (which included the Middle East, Turkey, and India) and in the world of art it is used to identify the character and style which is commonly associated with the Eastern nations. Edward Said, who is the most celebrated academician concerning the description and critique of Orientalism, makes connections between imperialism and Orientalism; he defines Orientalism as imprecision and incorrectness in the Western thoughts toward the East (Said, 1978). According to Said (1978), the West has many biases regarding the East and its cultures; and illustrates their stereotypes concerning them through art and literature.

While Orientalism has several branches of criticism within the academic community, for the purposes of this paper, we are concerned only with its definition within the art world. In this context, the term is related to 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century paintings done by mainly French and some British artists who were traveling to North Africa and the Middle East (MacKenzie, 1995). Meanwhile, those artists were not traveling to these regions merely to observe the peoples and their customs. Several of the artists were members of official diplomatic or military missions. During their official duty, they also observed the people and drew many depictions of the societies (MacKenzie, 1995). Therefore, these

painters, such as Gentile Bellini and Fausto Zonaro, lived as officials among the people of the Middle East and mostly depicted women in the street (Mosa, 2014). Orientalist paintings usually depict the daily rituals of Islam, some scenes from the daily life of Muslims, and harem life, which is considered a mystical and secret place for Westerners. According to Denny (1983), orientalist art can be divided/analyzed into three main groups depending on the type of oriental imagery: (1) Rapportage Orientalism, in which imagery of Middle Eastern people and their lives are to be described as they actually exist. (2) Political Orientalism, in which Oriental imagery is used for some kind of political and religious messages, generally anti-Islamic messages. (3) Exoticism, in which artists use Oriental imagery to portray the emotions and themes of their paintings. Although it is the most popular group, exoticism is generally against reality, history, and cultural tolerance. In addition, exoticism usually focuses on sexuality and the harem (Denny, 1983). It should be mentioned that the last group has become a target of criticism more than the others. In this context, Orientalist paintings have been criticized repeatedly over the years, and this criticism is mainly related to the depiction of women and their status in Muslim society.

The depiction of women in Orientalist paintings can be separated into two groups. In the first, artists put forward the authenticity and simple beauty of women in the Middle East and North Africa. For instance, in Rubens Santoro's *The Morning Walk* (see Figure 1) women are depicted simply walking in the street in their long and loose daily outfit. Another example would be Bridgman's *Women in Biskra Weaving a Burnoose* (see Figure 2), a description of a simple domestic setting in Algeria, where women weave clothing while children play nearby. These kinds of Orientalist paintings reflect real life in those countries rather than the artists' desires for sexual control (Davies, 2005).



**Figure 1:** Rubens Santoro, *The Morning Walk*



**Figure 2:** Frederick Arthur Bridgman (American, 1847-1928), *Women in Biskra weaving the Burnoose*.

The second group concerning the depiction of women in the Orientalist paintings focuses mainly on harem and slave scenes (Davies, 2005). This group of paintings composes the main discussion about the depiction of women in Orientalist works. In this group, some of the most conventional paintings belong to Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863), Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780-1839) and Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904).

When these artists' paintings are reviewed, it is seen that in most of the harem scenes, as in Delacroix's *Odalisque* and Gérôme's *The Harem Bath*, women are often naked and represented as exotic sex objects. The main arguments surrounding this preference for depicting the women in the nude or in compromising poses is that the paintings reflect the artists' desire, rather than the reality

of life in a harem. These arguments attest that Orientalist artists who perpetuated the stereotype of harems stocked with nubile and garmentless women spread negative and awry images about the East. The irony is, however, that the images perpetuated and accepted as true by so many were fabricated themselves. Although some of these painters made trips to Muslim lands, the Orient, many of them never visited these lands and referred to reports from travelers in their paintings or took the nude figures in their paintings from Greek and Roman ancient sculptures (Ma, 2012; Uzunoğlu, 2018). Thus, the point to emphasize is that these artists' paintings depended more on their imagination than on the facts.

The word 'harem' stems from an Arabic word that means 'that which is forbidden,' meaning that forbidden or sacred place. It defines as the women's quarter of the house, inhabited by wives, daughters, sisters, and mothers, and off-limits to men other than husbands or male relatives (Esposito, 2003). So, European men, as well as any other men, were forbidden entry. Since they were not allowed to enter and it was not easy to gain access to the closed and guarded building, there were many stereotypes created from the imaginations of the frustrated artists in their paintings. As can be seen in the examples of the Orientalist paintings given above and others, women in the Muslim world were described as sex objects and the European fantasy of the harem was primarily addressed to male audiences (Roberts, 2002). This of course lent itself very well to the representation of naked and subservient women. The famous French painter Gérôme described mostly scenes in harems, and public baths. He combined an academic style with erotic subjects in his paintings like *The Slave Market* (1866) and *Stem, Harem Bathers* (1889) (Lemaire, 2000). Because of this kind of paintings, some people saw him as responsible for "the equation of Orientalism with the nude in pornographic mode" (Tromans & Kabbani, 2008, p. 136). In addition to the harem and bath scenes, in the Orientalist gaze, the veil also was considered to be an object of mystique, exoticism and eroticism. Within this context, veiled Middle Eastern women are viewed as oppressed, the object of fantasy and desire (Bailey & Tawadros, 2003).

Although male European painters portrayed women in the Muslim world as weak, in need of rescue, or jezebels, when we look into the paintings of European women painters who painted in the harem, we are met with totally the different depiction of life in the harem. In Henriette Browne's harem painting *Arrival in the Harem* (see Figure 3), the harem is represented as a space for social interaction among women, all thoroughly and modestly clothed, which differs mightily from the depiction of the harem as a den of sexual pleasure and abundance for men (Roberts, 2002). In addition, in most of the travel diaries of Western women, the depictions of harems challenge existing conceptions of the harem fantasy so perpetuated in some Orientalist paintings, and is described as a familial and social space (Lewis, 2004; Roberts, 2002, 2007). In this context, Browne's description of the harem can be considered as an important example for of 'real' life within a harem. She describes it as populated with 'silent and bored women ... chaste in the muslin of their long dresses, which barely show their frail and languishing bodies' (Roberts, 2002, pp. 180–181). It is important to state that this description and the paintings done by women travelers and painters disrupt the male's dreams of the Orient women and harems.





**Figure 3:** Henriette (Sophie) Bouteiller Browne, *The arrival in the harem at Constantinople*, 1861.

Considering this information, it is seen that Muslim women were described in two very different styles by male and female European painters. As was mentioned, there are totally different depictions of Muslim or Orient women in these two groups of Orientalist paintings. Nevertheless, even though women painters' depictions are more reasonable and accurate since they were allowed to enter the harem, throughout the years, the most well-known harem scenes are those painted by male painters. It will be accurate to state that the prevalence and reputation of male artists' paintings and their influence have caused the stereotype to be created that harems are exotic places with naked women strewn about, and that Orient women are weak and in desperate need of rescue and liberation.

### CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE MIDDLE EAST

In the past decade, there has come a growing interest in contemporary art in Muslim areas, particularly in the Middle East. Art exhibitions and festivals have been held in many Middle Eastern countries, like Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, among others. Artists generally depicted issues, either political or cultural, within their own countries and regions (Muller, 2009). They produce their art using a variety of mediums in different formats: photographs, videos, as well as paintings (Sloman, 2009).

Among all the topics and issues which are emphasized and pointed to in artwork, one of the most common and prevalent is that of women in the Muslim world. Nowadays, there are many artists, especially women, who focus on women's social status in Islamic nations, and reflect their psychological experience within Islamic societies in their artistic works. Deserving of mention are Shirin Neshat, with her photographic collections *Women of Allah* (1993-1997), *Rebellious Silence* (1994), *Speechless* (1996); Shirin Aliabadi, with *Miss Hybrid I-III* (2006); Lalla Essaydi, with *Converging Territories* (2005) and *Les Femmes du Maroc* (2005). They are among those female artists who have focused on women's status and people's perception of women in Islamic societies in their art. In addition to the previous artists, some contemporary art exhibitions have also been opened to showcase the contributions of female artists calling attention to the status of Muslim women and their situations in society (Sloman, 2009).

One of the prime examples of these exhibitions is 'Breaking the Veils: Women Artists from Islamic World'. In this exhibition, fifty-two women from 21 Muslim countries attended with their artworks regarding women. An important point of the exhibition is the use of the term 'Islamic world' to indicate the cultural world rather than that of the religion. For this reason, the exhibition was not limited to Muslims exclusively. Christian, Buddhist and Hindu artists from across the Islamic world also attended the exhibition along with their art. The Royal Society of Fine Arts in Jordan and the Pan-Mediterranean Women Artists Network F.A.M. in Greece organized the exhibition with the support and encouragement of the Queen of the Kingdom of Jordan, Rania. Queen Rania explained the main

aim of the exhibition as “to correct the image of women and inaccurate depiction of their role in Islamic tradition which is distorted, especially after 9/11” (Ali 2002).

Among all the artists whose works highlight and examine Muslim women and their status in society, the works of Lalla Essaydi are important as she restages and critiques paintings from nineteenth and early twentieth century Western Art. In her works she combines oriental art with contemporary art. In this study, Essaydi's artworks will be analyzed since she incorporates Orientalist themes into her photographs and criticizes and contextualizes them. (Carlson, 2004; Essaydi, 2009). Through examination of her work, I aim to glean an understanding of how much the perception of Muslim women in 19<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist arts has changed throughout the years and which symbols have been used by artists to identify Muslim women. Before the examination of Essaydi's works criticizing Orientalist art, I will give information about her art background and her work works briefly.

### LALLA ESSAYDI AND HER WORKS

Lalla Essaydi is a painter, photographer and installation artist. She was born in Morocco and lived in Saudi Arabia for many years before moving to Boston. She studied painting in France in 1994. In addition, she received her Master's of Fine Arts from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 2003 and received training in photography and installation there as well (Sloman, 2009). In her work, Essaydi discusses women's identities in Islamic societies. She uses her personal experiences from both Muslim (Arab) and Western societies to shape her artistic perspective (Buhmann, 2007).

Essaydi has two artwork series which were published in separate books: *Converting Territories* and *Le Femmes du Maroc*. *Converting Territories* is set in Morocco in a large house that belongs to her family, a setting she remembers well from her childhood (Carlson, 2004; Essaydi, 2009; Waterhouse, 2009). She explains her reasoning as to why she chose to set her work in this place, saying, “I wanted to set my work in the physical space where, in the house of my childhood, a young woman was sent when she disobeyed, stepped outside the permissible behavioral space, as defined by my culture. Here, accompanied only by servants, she would spend a month, spoken to by no one, a month of silence” (Waterhouse, 2009, p. 145). *Le Femmes du Maroc* is set in Boston, a very different venue from the *Converting Territories*. Its title in French indicating to France's colonial history in Morocco (Brooks, 2014). In this series of photographs, she worked with Moroccan women residing in the West who are also acquaintances of her family. They performed as the models in her photographs. She chose them because of their experiences similar to Essaydi as Arabs within an Islamic culture. They have “chosen to engage with traditional Arab and Islamic art as part of a renegotiation of identity” (Waterhouse, 2009). In addition, those women who participate in Essaydi's artistic works also see it as an important act for women's empowerment and the liberation of Arab women. When they were performing in the series, they felt themselves to be a part of a small feminist movement (Essaydi, 2009). Essaydi points that, “They feel that they are contributing to the greater emancipation of Arab women, at the same time conveying to a Western audience their very rich traditions, often misunderstood in the West” (Essaydi, 2005, p. 26).

The most explicit things in Essaydi's photographs are henna and calligraphy. Most of the writing she does herself, and the application of henna is extremely time-consuming. Essaydi says ‘the preparations for the shoot start up to six months in advance’, when she begins to write on the fabrics that cover the walls, furniture, and the models' clothing (Carlson, 2004; Essaydi, 2009; Waterhouse, 2009). Henna and calligraphy are very important attributes of a women's identity in the Islamic world, particularly for the Arabs. Essaydi states that by using henna she can enhance the expressivity of the images (Essaydi, 2005). “Henna is a crucial element in the life of a Moroccan woman. It is associated with the major milestones in her life and it is a part of their celebration. When she is a bride it is thought to enhance her charms for her husband, and henna is again used to celebrate fertility when she has her first child- especially her child is male” (Essaydi, 2005, 2009; Waterhouse, 2009, p. 146). Essaydi uses henna so traditionally important in a Muslim woman's life in her

photographs in order to demonstrate how they are in real life, rather than producing a fantasy or interpretation.

It is quite evident that through writing, we structure and organize our thoughts and consciousness. The written word is formed by the culture and at the same time shapes the culture itself (Carlson, 2005). In many countries and cultures, especially in Islamic culture, design and writing are integrated. Though, traditionally, men have access to the knowledge and training to write, and women are responsible and given to the aspect of design, writing and design are inseparably linked. There are complicated distinctions between design and writing, as there are between women and men, and it is these distinctions that have shaped Essaydi's artistic work (Carlson, 2005).

In her artwork, Essaydi integrates photography with Islamic calligraphy in an extraordinary style. Although she has never been trained in calligraphic art, as a painter, she uses her painting skills to transcribe the calligraphic texts (Waterhouse, 2009). The texts she uses are typically associated with the meaning behind the photographs (Essaydi, 2005). She uses calligraphic text on the fabrics that cover the walls and the women's clothing. It is important to understand that in Islamic culture, calligraphy was traditionally taught only to men. Although practices have changed over time, calligraphy was practiced exclusively by men, and considered as a masculine pursuit until recent times (Carlson, 2004; Essaydi, 2005; Waterhouse, 2009). It is accurate to say that with her decision to use the art of calligraphy in her work Essaydi intended to express that the art of calligraphy, like the right to education, no longer belongs only to men and should not be withheld from women.

As Essaydi notes, she wrote the text on fabric in an abstract, poetic style, in order to obtain a universality which reaches beyond cultural borders (Waterhouse, 2009). In addition, all texts in the photographs are from Essaydi's diary. Because of the intimate nature of the subjects, setting, and even the models, her work is considered to be autobiographical. In her art, she speaks her thoughts and talks directly about her experiences as a woman and artist. In doing so, she believes the photographs yield a deeper understanding of her culture for the viewer (Waterhouse 2008). In addition to the visual beauty and poetic style of the photographs, there is a subtlety which might not be realized at first glance. The Arabic text on the walls, clothes and figures leads viewers to question their meanings. They try to suggest what was written on the fabrics that cover figures and furniture. These wondering questions about the meaning of the foreign and indecipherable writing disrupt the viewers' simple pleasure of looking at the photograph (Carlson, 2005). It is by instilling this confusion in her viewers that Essaydi prevents the female figures she portrays as being seen as sex objects, the notion so often perpetuated and criticized in Orientalist paintings (Ehrenpreis, 2014).

While Essaydi represents herself and her culture in her photographs, she also demonstrates important issues related to her culture. Architectural space can be considered as one of those issues. Essaydi states that in Islamic culture, architectural space is important. Traditionally, Muslim women are limited with the private spaces, homes. On the other hand, men present in public spaces like streets, places of work. Furthermore, men also control the women's space (Essaydi, 2005; Waterhouse, 2009). When she defines her photographs she states that "the women in my photographs are both held with an actual space and at the same time are confined to their 'proper place', a place of walls and boundaries, a space controlled by men" (Waterhouse, 2009, p. 146).

In the photograph series, some works are arranged as triptychs, that is, as three separate panels hanging side by side. Essaydi seeks to emphasize the periods of women's lives and, sometimes, the relationship of the veil to the women's age. She states that for some photographs she wants to overstate the pose of a reclining figure and she employed a triptych to extend the body (Waterhouse, 2009). She also poses several women in a single photograph. By staging the photos in this way, she aims to undermine the women's-imposed quietness. In her photographs, women 'speak' to one another through the language of femininity (Essaydi, 2005).



Although in most of the photographs Essaydi focuses on women figures, in some of her works, Essaydi does not use female subjects. Instead, she uses objects that have been written upon in her characteristic calligraphy. These objects represent the bride, and Moroccan people use them habitually for the preparation of wedding ceremonies (see Figure 4). Essaydi mentions that in wedding ceremonies, eggs symbolize fertility and are used throughout the henna ceremony; the sugar symbolizes the sweet and delightful married life for the bride. The bundles in the photographs are used to tie things together in preparation for the departure of the bride. All these objects serve as symbols and have traditional meanings and Essaydi uses them metaphorically, as a symbol of femininity (Carlson, 2004, 2005).



**Figure 4:** Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories: Apparel #1, #2, #3*, 2004

Essaydi continues to use the advantage of living in two different cultures as inspiration for her work. As an artist born and raised in Arab countries and then currently living in the West, she is aware of both cultures. Her experiences in the West have added another dimension to her perception of women in society. Each culture has had a different effect on Essaydi's artistic works. She has experienced a space of independence and mobility in the West, very different from the more restrictive Eastern culture she was brought up in. These differences have given her new perspectives on the composition of her photographs (Essaydi, 2005). She emphasizes that, "This new perspective has led me to situate my subjects in a non-specific space, one which no longer identifies itself as particular house in Morocco, but rather as the multivalent space of their own imagination and making" (Essaydi, 2005, p. 27).

Essaydi uses both women and girls as subjects in her photographs. In some photographs a young girl is sitting near the women, and in some of them she is standing next to other women (see Figure 5 and 6).



**Figure 5:** Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories #23D*, 2004



**Figure 6:** Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories #30*, 2004

In these photographs, more specifically on the above right photograph, the progression of age and veil is noticed. Women are standing next to each other in order from youngest to oldest. The youngest girl is not wearing a headscarf. However, as the figures begin to increase in age, so too does their veil increase in size and modesty, until there are no more of them to be seen. This is an illustration of the veiling process within a particular society in addition to the status and freedom of women there. A young girl does not have to wear the headscarf and she also has more freedom. When she begins to grow, she puts on the headscarf and eventually the veil. The oldest figure in the photograph covers all of her body from top to toe and wears an enveloping cloak called a burqa (Carlson, 2004). This cover from sight symbolizes Essaydi's view of women's status in a conservative Muslim society. However, Essaydi also says in one of her interviews that veiling is an abandoned practice and most Moroccan women do not wear the veil any longer (Carlson, 2004). In the photographs, the veil is a psychological symbol. In this context, the oldest woman in the photograph symbolizes her parochial life in certain space, a mainly private space, like home. Essaydi describes the change in women's status and perception of women in a society in this photograph that as women get older, their freedom becomes less and less and they are confined to specific, more private space defined and limited by their culture.

As it is seen in Essaydi's photographs, in both *Converging Territories* and *Les Femmes du Maroc*, the calligraphic text is seen as merged into each other, complex and abstruse because of the many layers. Although creating layers is a calligraphic style, in Essaydi's photographs the layers also symbolize the complexity of her life as an Arab artist living in the West (Carlson, 2004). In addition, this calligraphic design reflects women's silence, all their thoughts, and secrets. Through the use of calligraphy, the women's inner world is spilled onto fabrics and the walls which surround them. The quietness of women in their society is considered to be their fate. In these photographs, calligraphy covers their world with its wealth of words and serves as an illustration of the voice they have that is so contrary to Arab female identity, for whom voicelessness is a core principle (Buhmann, 2007).

### ORIENTALISM AND ESSAYDI'S PHOTOGRAPHS

As I mentioned previously, in her photographs Essaydi imitates the compositional structure of 19<sup>th</sup> Orientalist paintings. In other words, she uses Orientalist paintings as a template for some of her photographs. Essaydi urges viewers into new ways of considering Orientalist paintings, as well as to show the bias concerning Arab women in her photographs (Waterhouse, 2009). She states that Orientalist paintings are rife with images of the veil, the harem, and the odalisque or female concubine. She utilizes the same concept and female body in her artistic works in opposite and almost satirical ways, in order to confuse the assumptions and disturb the Orientalist theme of those kinds of paintings. She wants to make the viewers realize that Orientalism is "a projection of the sexual fantasies of Western male artists; in other words, a voyeuristic tradition, which involves peering into and distorting private space" (Waterhouse, 2009, p. 148). Orientalist painters often described Eastern women as either weak and in need of liberation, or immoral and desperate to be brought under control by men. She emphasizes that the concepts in the images of the odalisque and the harem in Orientalist paintings affect people's perceptions in the present, and in her photographs tries to remove and disrupt this tradition of objectification of women. Through the change from the perception of Muslim women given by Orientalist artists, women can be seen as powerful existences in their societies (Carlson, 2005).

One of the most powerful and commonly depicted objects in Orientalist paintings is the veil. Therefore, Essaydi also uses the veil intensively. She explains that her main reason for using the veil in photographs is that she aims to arouse the Western fascination with the apparently unapproachable interior realm, the private space which is the area of women in traditional Arab culture (Waterhouse, 2009).

Essaydi also asserts the role of Orientalism in the reappearance of the veil in society as a reason for interest in the veil. She states that Orientalist paintings influenced the attitude of Arab men toward "their" women more generally. When the Orientalist painters portrayed Eastern women as erotic objects, this situation challenged the traditional values of honor and family in Arab culture. Therefore, Arab men felt it necessary to be more protective of Arab women than before. They used the veil as a way to prevent their women from being used as a Western fantasy (Waterhouse, 2009). Although this argument is controversial, as Essaydi says, it is difficult to believe that there isn't any connection between Oriental paintings and the return of the veil in Arab society (Waterhouse, 2009). In this context, it is suitable to argue that though it is indirect, Orientalism affected society's perception in Arab/Muslim societies.

By use of the Orientalist paintings as inspiration, Essaydi aims to demonstrate the changes to female identities in Morocco and in the Muslim world at large. Essaydi says that Orientalist paintings and their styles are exquisite, and were always fascinating to her. However, she did not agree with their context or the message that they passed to viewers. She knew that most Orientalist paintings are fantasy, but those fantasies were about her, about her culture, and her country's women, and they did not give an accurate representation of women in a Muslim society. She studied Orientalist painters and decided to focus on recreating a more realistic portrayal of her people, because, she states, "the more I learned, the more it became necessary for me to do something about it. It is my heritage" (Chun, 2011; O'Sullivan, 2010).

In Orientalist paintings, the Muslim world, such as the Middle East and some parts of North Africa, were described as an exotic world. In those paintings, women were manipulated and portrayed to appeal to Western male fantasies. To rid Western viewers of this context, Essaydi has taken the Orientalist paintings and reconstructed them. She removed all the male figures from her works, though the original Orientalist paintings included them. Regarding women figures, in opposition to Orientalist paintings, Essaydi's females are completely clothed, polite and modest. All their attitudes and postures reflect modesty towards the viewer, while the Orientalist paintings make viewers see the women only as sexual objects (Brooks, 2014; Ehrenpreis, 2014).

In her works, Essaydi reinterpreted many paintings of Eugène Delacroix who was well-known for his paintings of the Orient. One example of Essaydi's reinterpretation of an Orientalist painting is a photo from the series *Les Femmes du Maroc* (see Figure 7). In this photograph Essaydi was inspired by Eugène Delacroix's *The Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1834) (see Figure 6). At this point it should be mentioned that this painting deviates from the usual style of the harem in oriental painting. Even in the title, the difference can be seen. While most titles consisted of sexually charged terms like 'odalisque' or 'slave', Delacroix used some relatively de-eroticized words instead of these words, such as women and apartments. (Ma, 2012). Meanwhile, Delacroix painted the women with sexual gazes and revealing clothes. However, in Essaydi's photo, the women are fully clothed and looking modestly.





**Figure 6:** Eugène Delacroix, Algerian Women in Their Apartment, 1834.



**Figure 7:** Lalla Essaydi, Les Femmes du Maroc #1, 2005.

Another example of Essaydi's reinterpretation is Delacroix's *Odalisque* (see Figure 8). In this painting Delacroix depicted a woman reclining on a sofa, half-clothed. This photograph can be considered as a perfect example of the misrepresentation of Muslim women as sexual figures. In Essaydi's reimagined photograph, the female figure is fully clothed, but does not wear the headscarf, a difference from Essaydi's other photographs (see Figure 9).



**Figure 8:** Eugène Delacroix, *Odalisque*, 1838, Louvre Museum, Paris, France



**Figure 9:** Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc* #28, 2005.

It is suitable to say that this difference mainly depends on a woman's status in Muslim society. According to Islamic Law, an odalisque is a female slave, or "kept woman," who do not wear the headscarf. Wearing the headscarf is an obligation for women who have freedom, not slaves. It is with this reality in mind that Essaydi's compositions feature women figures without headscarves when they are in the role of slaves, but still maintain their decency in modest clothes.

## CONCLUSION

From the 19th century until today, women have been one of the most popular subjects depicted in the Muslim world. Over time, the portrayal of Muslim women has changed, depending on people's perceptions rather than their status in society. In this context, the veil serves as a symbol of two different meanings in oriental painting and contemporary art. As mentioned earlier, in Orientalist paintings, the veil was used to symbolize the mystique and exoticism of oriental women. However, in contemporary art, the veil embodies the boundary between Muslim women and the world and is also a symbol of modesty rather than eroticism. If we look at all the symbols used in the art world about



Muslim women, we see that their meaning in art, as in life, can be changed depending on the perception of the artist.

When we look at Orientalist paintings, we see how the artists' backgrounds and attitudes towards the subjects influenced the way they depicted them. In the Orientalist paintings of the 19th century, created mainly by French painters such as Eugene Delacroix, Jean-Leon Gerome, and Auguste-Dominique Ingres, the artists' attitudes toward Muslims/Muslim women, in their works are stereotypes about Islamic culture and Muslims based on Europe and Christianity. In her unique art, Lalla Essaydi challenges Western stereotypes and the representation of Muslim women in Western/Orientalist art. She invites people to resist the stereotypes imposed on them as Muslims, especially as Muslim women. In her works, she offers a new perspective on issues of female identity in the Muslim world, particularly the Arab world.

When I compare the two styles of art, Orientalist and contemporary, it is clear that the change in the perception of female identity over the years. Whereas in Orientalist paintings women were identified as part of a mystical world, in contemporary art women are symbolized as individuals from the real world and art rather than part of a male fantasy.

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