

Raising the Veil on Harems

An inside look at these private spaces inhabited by women in the 16th, 19th and 20th centuries, through art.

By Preeti Philip



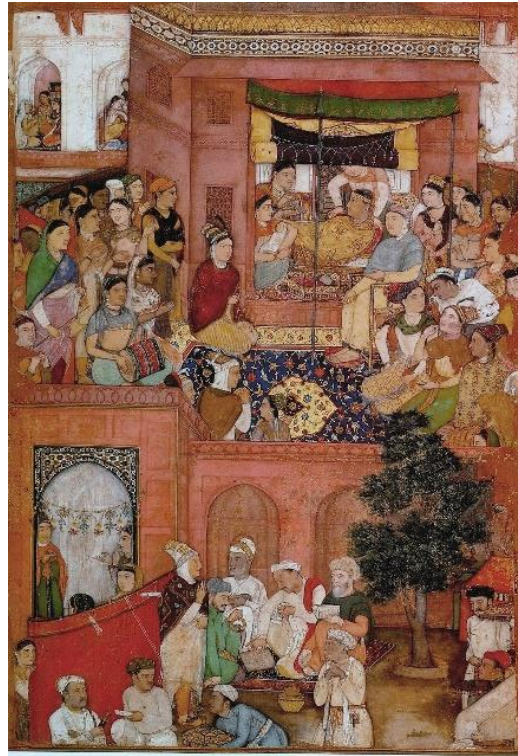
Odalisque in Red Trousers- Henri Matisse, 1924-25. Oil on canvas, 50 x 61 cms. Musee de l' Orangerie, Paris

The richest empire in the world, Mughal India- said to be blessed by the divine light of the sun, was home to some of the most powerful women who resided in the royal harems of the empire, called the *Zenana*. During the Mughal era (16th-18th century) accomplished and cultured women were highly prized and held a high status in these royal harems. Reputed as being extremely well educated and refined, they were astute businesswomen who owned trading ships, had a keen eye for architecture, commissioned buildings, wrote biographies and poetry, travelled and were personally wealthy beyond compare.

The walls of the harem housed generations of women, elderly matrons, young wives, children, servants, widowed or divorced relatives and unmarried sisters. Not only were they responsible for the smooth running of the royal household, they also participated in matters concerning the empire and when the need arose these strong women accompanied their husbands and male relatives on horseback travelling great distances and facing many hardships.

However, life within the harem was also political. Rivalries and jealousies between the women could sometimes lead to stressful living conditions, and although they did live in extremely well-guarded parts of the palace cut off from male interaction it is a far cry from the oppressed, neglected mistresses and concubines living unfulfilled lives in suffocating spaces that have fired our imaginations for centuries. The Europeans, on their arrival in India were not familiar with the

concept of these private spaces for women, neither were they familiar with the local languages or the subtle nuances of the culture. Their sources of information were mainly through interpreters, their own lens of Victorian morality and cheap *bazaar* gossip. Most accounts pandered to the European public's need for gossip on the exotic east or a patronizing orientalism which considered the eastern cultures inferior and less civilized.



The Birth of a Prince, Painting by Bishan Das, Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Folio from the Jahangirnama, 1610-1615. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. (Image source: Wikimedia Commons). [View in detail](#)

Let's travel back in time, to 16th century Mughal India. It is the auspicious day of the 30th of August 1569, in Fatehpur Sikri, (Agra), When Emperor Akbar's first son, the future Jahangir is born. No son of the *Padshah* (sovereign) had survived more than a few months until then, and finally with the blessings of Sheikh Salim Chisti, Salim Mirza was born on that warm August day. Let us enter the royal zenana and join the celebrations.



Sitting on a chair is the queen mother Hamida Begum. Notice her flat topped Turkish *Chagtai* hat, studded with pearls and precious stones. To the left and right we see a mixed group of women sitting on a beautiful Persian carpet, look carefully and you'll notice dusky Rajasthani women in short cholis(blouses) fair skinned Persian women and eunuchs singing, clapping and chatting.

As we look into the inner chamber, separated by a silk curtain, the mid- wife holds the new born baby and reclining next to her, flushed with the glow of motherhood is the dusky Maryam-uz-Zamani (Mary of the world) popularly known as Jodha Bai.

Outside the palace walls a group of astrologers sit and draw up the horoscope of the future king in consultation with each other. Men carrying trays of gold coins and jewels head towards the decorated entrance of the palace, possibly carrying gifts sent by Akbar to celebrate the birth of his son.

This miniature painting (26.4 x 16.4 cms) painted by the famous portrait artist Bishan Das, is a folio from the *Jahangirnama* (Memoirs of Jahangir). Painted with opaque watercolor and gold on paper in the traditional vertical format of Persian painting, we see the influence of Indian styles and Persian styles of painting in the colors from an ariel perspective which helps us witness multiple scenes within a single frame.

Created centuries before the time of photography and selfies, these paintings provide an invaluable glimpse into the lives of these women. Rivalries and jealousies aside, they also led fulfilled lives of friendship, compassion and understanding in heavily guarded mini cities where sometimes hundreds if not thousands of women lived together.

The word *Harem* (derived from the Arabic word *Haram* meaning forbidden), usually conjures up the image of an exotic, opulent quarter in the Islamic world, where beautiful concubines languidly lay around waiting for their sultan to visit, as servants, slaves and eunuchs waited in attendance. At other times it was portrayed as a prison where women were subjugated to their husband's absolute control and power. As I have mentioned earlier in the post, these images of 'Orientalism' (a term coined by the prominent scholar Edward Said) stemmed from a divide between the West and the East, where the Western world portrayed the image of the East as primitive, exotic and savage, while the West occupied the superior position of the moral Christian, and superior world. This aided the West to justify its domination over the East. View an Orientalist painting [here](#)

In 1830 France invaded Algiers, which was largely due to Charles X's attempt to win over his people amidst British encroachment in the Mediterranean that threatened France's position internationally. Two years later, as part of a diplomatic mission the famous Romantic (period) French artist Eugène

Delacroix visited Algiers and managed to gain access into a Muslim harem through his contacts in high places. Although his Painting, *'Women of Algiers in their Apartment'* is believed to be a more authentic representation of a harem, it was catering to a European audience and in essence is still an Orientalist painting. The harems of Algeria, like the ones in Mughal India (royal or otherwise) were private spaces for all the women of the household, not dens of debauchery and vice as had been portrayed by artists.



Women of Algiers in their Apartment, Eugène Delacroix, 1834. 180 x 229 cms. Oil on canvas. Louvre, Paris.

As we enter the apartment, a black slave draws aside the heavy curtain, dramatically unveiling a space reserved only for the male member of the family, now becoming the subject of our gaze. We look at the three women dressed in multiple layers of clothing as they lounge around on the carpet, these women would ordinarily have been in *purdah* (veil) if they were in the presence of a man outside the household. The woman on the left looks back at us flirtatiously, her shirt buttons undone. Delacroix has however tried to bring a certain realism in the portrayal of these women, they are not as highly sensualized or objectified as some of his contemporaries' portrayals did. The other two women are busy chatting with each other and seem oblivious to the artist's presence making the scene seem mildly staged. However, we do see their bare white legs and arms adding the right amount sensuality and intrigue for the benefit of the European male gaze of the exotic 'other'. The

black servant girl looks like she could be eavesdropping on her mistress's conversation while drawing aside the drapes, adding movement to an otherwise rather still composition.

The small room has many elements of the typical oriental harem portrayed by western artists. From the motifs on the tiled walls, the ornate mirror, the patterns on the rugs and cushions, the curved lines on the wall meant to look Arabic, to the hookah possibly used to smoke opium.

Delacroix creates a painting part oriental fantasy and part realistic. Warm hues mix with cold tones, soft brushstrokes of the women's faces are painted alongside rough brush strokes of the pillow as the diagonal lines of warm light bathe the painting in a soft glow.

The painting itself is a cross fertilization of European Orientalism and the artist's own understanding and interpretation of a culture very different from his own, perceived from his six-month stay in Algiers and Morocco. You can view a typical Orientalist painting of a harem [here](#).



The Women of Algiers, Pablo Picasso. 114 x 146 cms, Oil on canvas

A hundred and twenty-four years after France invaded Algiers, on the 1st of November 1954, the first war for independence began in Algeria. While Picasso was sympathetic to the Algerian Nationalists who were fighting for an independent national identity, he was also deeply saddened by the recent passing of Henri Matisse whose work he admired greatly. Although Matisse had never visited North Africa or the east, he created a series of 'typical' Orientalist paintings of Odaliques (a French term

for a concubine in a harem) It was these events that prompted Picasso to revisit Delacroix's 'Women of Algiers in their Apartment' at the Louvre. Picasso made several trips to study Delacroix's masterpiece and between 1954 and 1955 he made as many as fifteen versions of the painting.

The above painting (version 'O') painted in Picasso's unmatched cubist style is a riot of color. The flat forms of the women's bodies are twisted into impossible contortions to allow the front and back views to be simultaneously presented to the viewer. The large bare breasted odalisque, smoking a hookah, is seated in the foreground dominating the painting.

Although Picasso used orientalist elements in his painting, his real intention was to use Delacroix's painting to inspire his own creation rather than creating an exotic painting for the west.

By the 20th century the unknown exotic East had ceased to be a major topic of interest and by then most countries had gained their independence. Artists had begun experimenting with new styles, mediums and themes. Picasso's painting thus puts a closure to this period of colonization in art.

In 2015 Picasso's Les Femmes d` Alger (version 'O') as it is known in French, sold for a record breaking 179 million USD at Christie's to a private collector, making it the most expensive painting in the world until then.

Despite the many narratives on harems, and the wives, concubines, mistresses and eunuchs who inhabited them, we must recognize these women as individuals with their own dreams and aspirations who were part of this system for a number of reasons. Our opinions are clouded by our own cultural viewpoints. It's time to see and understand these women in their contextual cultural constructs, helping us to perhaps change our perceptions and finally free them from these labels and confined spaces.



I have had a deep relationship with art for over thirty years. After spending several years in advertising, I returned to my passion for painting and art history. I studied art at the College of Art in Delhi, with a specialization in applied art. I teach art appreciation and art history to adults. I also love reading and watching off- beat films.

Website: <https://www.preetiphilip.art/>



References: *Daughters of the Sun* by Ira Mukhoty

The real and imaginary Harem- Ira Ma, University of Pennsylvania.

Historical Representations of North African Women in 19th-Century French Orientalism and Post-1950s North African Narrative- Tara Mendola, College '06 University of Pennsylvania.

Picasso's Les Femmes d'Alger series (1954-55) and the Algerian War of Independence -Amanda Beresford