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Common Culture and Particular Identities: Christians, Jews and Muslims in the Ottoman Balkans

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Table of Contents

Imaging the Forbidden: Representations of the Harem and Serbian Orientalism

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Unquestionable is the influence of Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism*,[1] which profoundly changed perspective on Western representation of the East. In spite of all the limitations of his totalizing narrative, Said's critical thought on a discourse in the service of European political and cultural interests, opened the possibility for further analysis and discussions. The numerous subsequent studies extended and exceeded early criticism of Orientalism, as well as of the cultural production which constructed the Orient as the "ideological fiction". In that matter, the representations of the harem and the Islamic women became an important subject of analysis, as one of the main topoi around which Western fantasies were constructed.

Woman hidden behind a veil and in the forbidden space of the harem was one of the Western obsessions, indicated among other by her overrepresentation. The numerous visual and literary works created visions of the harem, established in an iconic image which reflected Western orientalist fantasy. Primarily based on misconceptions and imagination, it was constructed with notions of sexuality, eroticism, barbarity, and submission, invested into the harems as the Westerners' own desires. In a broader sense, the harems were represented as everything that Western culture was not, contributing to the notion of its "otherness". Closely associated with the Orient itself, image of the harem was created as an ideologically potent cultural description, profoundly inscribed into the politic and strategy of power.

1 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1978.

This paper is conceived as part of such understanding of cultural and political context of harem representations, elaborated by many scholars from various fields.[2] Analysis is narrowed to the harem images created in the nineteenth century Serbian cultural production. Increasingly towards the end of the century, the harem theme had started to appear within the repertoire of Serbian painters, articulated in typical European orientalist formulas. Creating in these patterns originated from the education of the artists, which, at the time, had been connected to the large European centers, where they became familiar with this established academic genre. The works of Serbian artists circulated the domestic scene side by side with the European, both through public exhibitions and reproductions in popular periodicals, gradually establishing a cultural image of the harem as a typical orientalist construction.

The review of harem images in Serbian culture is intended to indicate an occurrence which was not a mere reproduction of the popular Western genre, but an embracement of the essential orientalist logic in its entirety. The aim is, therefore, to examine the appearance and the operation of orientalist discourse in Serbian culture by the analysis of harem representations. The complexity of the problem comes from the fact that it was situated basically within the alleged "Orient" itself. For a long time, Serbia itself had been a subject of the European ideological constructions of "otherness" in which

2 A host of scholars have worked on the subject, among the most relevant to the present study are: Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, translated by Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich, introduction by Barbara Harlow, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1986; Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule,* Macmillan, London 1986; Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: the Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950*, Columbia University Press, New York 1988; Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*, Harper and Row, New York 1989, "The Imaginary Orient", pp. 33-59; Lynne Thornton*, Women as portrayed in orientalist paintings*, ACR Poche Couleur, Paris 1994; Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*, Routledge, London 1996; Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998; Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Harems of the Mind: Passages of Western Art and Literature*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2000; Joan DelPlato, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem, 1800–1875*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison 2002; Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature*, Duke University Press, Durham 2008; Joanna de Groot, "'Sex' and 'Race': The Construction of Language and Image in the Nineteenth Century", in Susan Mendus and Jane Rendall (eds.), *Sexuality and Subordination: Interdisciplinary Studies of Gender in the Nineteenth Century*, London 1989.

the Ottoman Balkans were seen, especially during the nineteenth-century decay of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of Balkan nation-states accompanied by wars.[3] The cultural region burdened by this heritage nevertheless was an equally fertile ground for the development of the orientalist discourse after the emancipation from the Ottoman Empire.[4] At the time of nation-state building of Serbia, oriented primarily to the European models, the logic of Orientalism had found a multiple function. In the ideology of an emerging nation, it represented an important complement in the construction of self-identity, at the same time widening the distance from its Ottoman heritage.[5] As defined by Maria Todorova, this was the operating principle characteristic for the entire Balkan region:

> […] the construction of an idiosyncratic Balkan self-identity, or rather of several Balkan self-identities, constitutes a significant distinction: they were invariably erected against an 'oriental' other. This could be anything from a geographic neighbour and opponent (most often the Ottoman Empire and Turkey but also within the region itself as with the nesting of orientalisms in the former Yugoslavia) to the 'orientalising' of portions of one's own historical past (usually the Ottoman period and the Ottoman legacy).[6]

3 Marija Todorova emphasized the difference between orientalism and the Western representations of the Balkans, launching the term 'balkanism' as an alternative: Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press, New York 2009. A different viewpoint is given by Milica Bakic-Hayden and Robert Hayden, who considered Western ways of viewing the Balkans as an orientalist variation: Milica Bakic-Hayden & Robert Hayden, "Orientalist Variations on the Theme 'Balkans': Symbolic Geography in Recent Yugoslav Cultural Politics", *Slavic Review* 51, no. 1 (1992), pp. 1-15. For the subject matter, see also: Katherine E. Fleming, "Orientalism, the Balkans, and Balkan Historiography", *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 (2000), pp. 1218-1233.

4 The image of the oriental "other" in nineteenth-century Serbian visual culture is discussed in Nenad Makuljević, "Slika drugog u srpskoj vizuelnoj kulturi XIX veka", in Olga Manojlović Pintar (ed.), *Istorija i sećanje: studija istorijske svesti*, Institut za noviju istoriju Srbije, Beograd 2006, pp. 141-156.

5 Svetlana Slapšak, "Haremi, nomadi – Jelena Dimitrijević", *ProFemina: časopis za žensku književnost i kulturu* 15/16 (1998), pp. 140-141. Ellie Scopetea sees the Balkans' relation to its "Ottoman heritage" as deeply connected to its relationship to the West: Ellie Scopetea, "The Balkans and the Notion of the 'Crossroads between East and West'", in Demetres Tziovas (ed.), *Greece and the Balkans: Identities, Perceptions and Cultural Encounters since the Enlightenment*, Ashgate Publishing, Burlington 2003, pp. 171-178.

6 Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, p. 20.

Exactly in this mechanism, the representations of the orientalized "other" were tied up with the Serbian cultural identity, at the time of its creation and national constitution.

With all of that in mind, more effort is required to explore orientalist discourse in Serbian culture outside the system of relations where it was fundamentally seen. Therefore, the anchor of this paper will be in the conceptions which go beyond the limitations such as discourse association with the systems of colonialism and imperialism or the strict West/East binary. In order to understand its operating principle within a different set of circumstances, the starting point will be an extended apprehension of Orientalism as heterogeneous and adaptable, whose discursive power is transferable onto different social and geopolitical locations.[7] Such an understanding will enable analysis of harem representations and their place in the Serbian cultural ideology of the nineteenth century.

The Harem Woman on Display

The European orientalist production constructed a cultural representation of the harem in the form of a multiple mythology. Mostly driven by male fantasies about the forbidden female world, hidden behind the veils and in prohibited spaces, its representations were created with notions which were conceived primarily in erotic and sexual terms. So the orientalist cultural production featured the harem in an iconic formulation, which centered the concept of sexually provocative and desirable beauties, hidden within the forbidden harem realm. The role of the women was accordingly reduced to a purely sexual aspect, especially stressing submission and obedience to their masters. And what is more, the very nature and character of the harem women were imagined in accordance with their presumed role of sexual slaves.

European artists, with their prolific production, provided infinite possibilities for the interaction of the viewers with this imagined forbidden world. At the

7 An exemplary concept is "nesting orientalism" by Milica Bakić-Hayden, in which she explained its reproduction within the Balkans, where "the designation of 'other' has been appropriated and manipulated by those who have themselves been designated as such in orientalist discourse": Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia", *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995), pp. 917-931. Also interesting is an example of internalization of orientalist discourse by Ottomans: Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism", *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002), pp. 768-796.

same time, giving figural representation to the harem woman produced a set of meanings embedded into the cultural and political repertory. As a titillating act of transgression, the image of the Eastern woman exposed to the gaze described on a metaphorical level appropriation and domination—the terms of power desirable in Western political projects.[8] It fixed notions of the sexualized "other", but also as the inferior and the powerless, which had a central role in the Western construction of the Orient.

The representation of the harem woman in nineteenth-century Serbian art appears with the same orientalist logic, in correspondence with national and cultural interests. In the variety of harem images created during this period, one of the versions was the representation of a single woman, as an emblem of the whole set of orientalist meanings. One such example can be found in the opus of Vladislav Titelbah, a prominent Serbian artist of Czech origins.[9] His representation, named *Fatima*, *the Beauty of Tsargrad*, was made popular among the Serbian audience through its reproductions in the periodicals *Bosanska vila* (1888) and *Iskra* (1898).[10] It is an image formulated as a portrait of a beauty, shrouded in a veil transparent enough to reveal her figure. The emphasis is placed on revealed eyes and the mysterious look, while the hints of a soft, if not inviting smile, occur from behind the veil. Its transparency also reveals the outline of the woman's luxurious costume and her pearl-adorned headdress.

Titelbah constructed the representation according to the stereotypes about the oriental woman, as elaborated in Western visual production. It is an idealized figure of femininity, with the lascivious and exotic content elaborated through the oriental accessories. The appearance of the woman is intended to provoke a sense of the

8 As Yegenoglu argues about the colonial discourse, unveiling Muslim women is linked "to the scopic regime of modernity which is characterized by a desire to master, control, and reshape the body of the subjects by making them visible. Since the veil prevents the colonial gaze from attaining such a visibility and hence mastery, its lifting becomes essential", in *Colonial Fantasies*, p. 12.

9 Petar Ž. Petrović, "Život i rad Vladislava Titelbaha", in Vladislav Titelbah, *Akvarele i crteži*, Etnografski muzej, Beograd 1931, pp. 1–3; Biljana Golubović, *Vladislav Titelbah : 1847–1925*, Galerija Matice srpske, Novi Sad 1989; Jasmina Trajkov, "Rad Vladislava Titelbaha na istraživanju i predstavljanju srpskog kulturno-istorijskog i etnografskog nasledja", *Koreni: časopis za istoriografiju i arhivistiku* 7 (2009), pp. 23–28.

10 *Bosanska vila*, No. 14, Yr. III (Sarajevo, July 16, 1888), p. 213; *Iskra*, No. 13, Yr. I (Belgrade, July 1, 1898), p. 205.

mysterious, while still available and provocative. The main role is assigned to the transparent veil, as the instrument for deeper erotization. Allowing the viewer to see what is behind it, emphasized the titillating aspect of transgression of the imposed barrier. Titelbah conforms to the corpus of oriental stereotypes also by naming the woman Fatima, as an act of intensifying the portrait's "reality". This common Muslim name and its derivations were transformed by orientalist usage into the synonym for an oriental woman, created in the popular motif of the "Beautiful Fatima".[11] This stereotypical construction was exactly what Titelbah had based his representation on. Additionally, with the image title he located the origin of the depicted Fatima in Istanbul, the seat of the Ottoman Empire. This type of distinction had a reinforcing effect of orientalization, transferred onto the entire city and the country of which she was a symbolic representation. In that sense, Titelbah's painting fits right into the discourse that used to be desirable within the national program and the ideological relation of Serbia to the Ottoman Empire.

Beside the Ottomans, other communities whose ethnic and religious difference was perceived as "otherness" were also subjects of an orientalizing discourse in Serbian culture. Within the harem imagery, it is shown by a painting by Paja Jovanović, today known as *Woman in the Oriental Dress* (mid-1880s). It is a representation of a female figure, given in the typical eroticizing concept of harem fantasy. Her body is completely exposed to the observer, in an expression of availability and openness for sexual excess. She is facing the viewer directly, arranged in a pose of an explicit sexual charge, intensified by arms provocatively raised above her head. The costume she is wearing as well as the accessories of the interior are designed to be associated with the domain of the exotic and oriental.

In the critical review of Paja Jovanović's 1893 Belgrade exhibition, this painting was mentioned as *Albanian Woman in a Harem*.[12] Even though the association with the Albanian has very little foundation in the painting itself, it could be perceived

11 The popularity of this motif can be seen in products such as French post cards with erotic images of oriental women. See: Malek Alloula*, The Colonial Harem*. It was also present in the labelling of products of mass consumption, such as cigarettes or cosmetics, as an association with the oriental riches: Dana S. Hale*, Races on Display. French Representations of Colonized Peoples 1886-1940*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2008, pp. 119-120.

12 The exhibition was organized for the occasion of announcing Paja Jovanović as the member of the Serbian Royal Academy.

with this ethnic attribution only within Jovanović's opus as a whole. This prominent Serbian artist spent most of his work creating Balkan scenes in an oriental manner, which brought him international fame.[13] After obtaining an education in Vienna, where he became familiar with orientalist painting, he focused on the scenes from the Balkans. Constructed as the imaginary exotic world,[14] his representations were created with a mix of various ethnographic elements, predominantly Albanian and Montenegrin. Intended primarily for a Western audience, scenes arranged thusly gave the sense of authenticity, even though they had very little in common with actual reality. In this fashion, Jovanović presented harem woman in the specific costume which he frequently applied in his Balkans sceneries but which had no clear origin in a single ethnic group. In addition, for the harem interior he used a segment of an abandoned house which he had previously painted during his travels through Georgia, while gathering ethnographic *features* for future works.[15] This space with features of Ottoman architecture he carefully filled with accessories, such as a small table, a rug and some cushions, aiming to the "effect of realism" of this harem realm.

All the accessories, on and around the posed woman, provided a sense of sufficient, but not excessive authenticity, in which this harem fantasy could work for the Serbian audience as an image of an Albanian woman. This effect was intensified in other of Jovanović's art works presented in the Belgrade exhibition, where Albanian attributes dominated the content. More to the point, this canvas was even regarded as a pair to the painting called *The Albanian Watchman*, which it matched in format and single-figure composition.[16] With its orientalist connotations, this perception of the Jovanović's harem corresponded to the overall cultural projection of the Albanians, discursively inscribed in Serbian thought at the time. It is shown in the critical commentary of the Belgrade exhibition, where Jovanović's works were regarded as

13 On Paja Jovanović, see: Radmila Antić, *Paja Jovanović*, Muzej grada Beograda, Beograd 1970; Miroslav Timotijević, *Paja Jovanović*, Narodni muzej Beograd, Beograd 2009; Nikola Kusovac, *Paja Jovanović*, Muzej grada Beograda, Beograd 2010.

14 Dejan Sretenović, "Sve ove zemlje gotovo se i ne razlikuju u mojim očima", in: *Izmedju estetike i života: predstava žene u slikarstvu Paje Jovanovića*,Galerija Matice srpske 2010, pp. 181-201.

15 Petar Petrović, *Paja Jovanović: sistemski katalog dela*, Narodni muzej Beograd, Beograd 2012, p. 99.

16 Dragutin S. Milutinović, *Slike Paje Jovanovića*, Beograd 1893, reprinted in Miodrag Kolarić (ed.), *Izložbe u Beogradu 1880-1904*, Narodni muzej Beograd, Beograd 1958, p. 54.

scenes of the "wild life" of the Albanians, marked as exotic, as well as uneducated.[17] Put like that, it was a manifestation of one of the dominant discourses about Albanian "otherness", intertwined with the existing complex ideological relation towards them in national thought.[18] And the orientalist features of Jovanović's work enabled this very perception, articulated by the culturally desirable context.

Waiting for the Master

The European representations of the harem through the various clichés kept reproducing several main concepts, inscribed in the Western imagination of the Orient. Based on the stereotypes, which originated mainly from the visions of the sultan's imperial household, they insisted on the notion of the harem as a sexual prison of a multitude of women, wrapped in luxury, splendor, and eroticism. Women of the harem were imagined as sexual prisoners owned by a despot, reduced to mere subservience and passivity, and without the indication of any social activities. Left to idleness and waiting for their master, they are largely represented in rituals such as smoking a narghile, drinking coffee, dabbling in magic, or having lavish harem entertainments. For the Western audience, all these rituals carried the context of backward and uncivilized, while at the same time emphasizing the very nature of the harem as a place of fulfillment of bodily passions.

This predominant representation of the harem created a set of attributes, which were suitable, not only for the fulfillment of erotic fantasies, but also for cultural activities in producing the "otherness". The characteristics such as backwardness and barbarism, together with irrationality, created an image of the Orient as an atemporal and frozen world, the world which was left outside the course of Western progress and modernity.[19] Constructed within such concepts, the dominant image

17 Ibid., pp. 49-58.

18 On Serbian-Albanian relations, see: Andrej Mitrović (ed.), *Srbi i Albanci u XX veku*, SANU, Beograd 1991.

19 In the definition of Linda Nochlin, this kind of orientalist representation is constructed with an "absence of history". Discussing the work of Jean-Léon Gérôme, she notes that Orient world "is a world without change, a world of timeless, atemporal customs and rituals, untouched by the historical processes that were 'afflicting' or 'improving' but, at any rate, drastically altering Western societies at the time": Linda Nochlin, "The Imaginary Orient", pp. 35-36.

of the harem had a significant effect on increasing the difference of the Orient, as well as on the ideas about its inferiority, thus legitimizing political and the cultural pretensions to it.

Stereotypical projections of the harem were also the main determinant of representations created by Serbian artists. One such typical scene can be found within the opus of Paja Jovanović. It is an image of a group of women having a musical entertainment in a harem, which is taking place in honor of the master's favorite.[20] Standing out in white clothes and with naked breasts, she is represented in the form of an odalisque lying on cushions. Her higher hierarchical status in the harem is expressed by a dark-skinned slave-woman who is serving her, while she is watching another woman dancing. The overall scene of a licentious party is placed into a richly decorated space, which refers to orientalist iconography in its architecture and details.

In presenting the entertainment, Paja Jovanović utilized basic thematic cliché of harem imagery, reproducing its main orientalist features. At the same time, he used a sequence of elements which he had previously developed in the scenes from the Balkans, thus manifesting the ability of their transformation according to the desired context. He repeatedly used the identical types of female characters and their clothes, as well as the poses—such as the woman carried away by dance—in this case, removing them from the Balkan context into the realm of the imaginary oriental harem.

The reduced role of the harem women in oriental imagery also appears in the representations of the exotic beauties playing instruments in solitude.[21] One such painting can be found within the opus of Svetislav Jovanović, brother of Paja Jovanović.[22] This painter received his education in Vienna and St. Petersburg, as well as Paris, where he continued living for the most of his life. He spent a part of his career working in Munich, in his brother's studio, with whose art he shared many similarities. Svetislav Jovanović's artistic opus also included scenes from the Balkans, as well as typically orientalist representations. Among his work, which had become popular in Serbia with the help of illustrated periodicals, there is also a painting with the characteristic theme of a harem musician. Titled *On the balcony*, it presents an

20 The painting was published in: Martina Haja & Günther Wimmer, *Les orientalistes des écoles allemande et autrichienne*, ACR Edition, Paris 2000, p. 275.

21 For examples, see: Joan DelPlato, *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures*, pp. 134-137.

22 For Svetislav Jovanović: Emilija V. Cerović, "Svetislav Jovanović—slikar", *Sveske: časopis za književnost, umetnost i kulturu* 65-66 (2002), pp. 190-198.

image of an oriental beauty sitting on a balcony, completely immersed in playing an Eastern string instrument.[23] The scene is filled out with the typical accessories of harem imagery, such as a narghile, a kilim, or slippers, while in the background are the hints of a city skyline, and the minaret of a mosque—a detail which provides a symbolic geographic settlement. The sentiment of an imprisoned beauty who is passing time by playing music is intensified by the very space of the balcony where she is located. In harem imagery, the balcony appears often as a symbolic zone, the only space outside the harem where the women can be unveiled. It is a limited zone from where they can observe the outside world, and still remain unseen, separated, and left to loneliness.

Formulated in this manner, the image of a harem woman was constructed as a stereotype, widely accepted in Serbian culture. In time, it was incorporated into the mass culture as an image with easily recognizable meaning. It was, therefore, often seen as an illustration which brought a commercial visual stamp to literary publications. One such example is the collection of poems called *Dahire* (1891) by a well-known Serbian author and politician, Jovan Ilić, which made him famous as a poet of Eastern lyrics.[24] On the front page of its first edition, there was a portrait of a oriental woman dancing with a tambourine, used as an illustration with an emblematic function. Another example is an oriental music player which appeared as an accompanying illustration of the poem *Ašik-Ajše* by Jelena Dimitrijević, published in the popular Serbian magazine *Nova iskra*, where it alluded to its Eastern-themed content.[25]

Women Producers and the Male Gaze

Filled with fantasies about the forbidden, harem imagery is dominated by the principles of male desires as the main driving force behind it. Thus, in the very core of the harem imagery lay the voyeuristic concept which presumed men as the observers and women as displayed. In the orientalist discourse, such a structure had wider sexual references in the overall vision of the Orient, connoted with the power relations. This concept of the masculinity of Orientalism is exactly what brings into focus the question of

23 The painting is known through the reproduction published in the Serbian magazine *Nova Iskra*, No. 12, yr. 4 (Belgrade, December 1902), p. 363.

24 Jovan Ilić, *Dahire*, Štamparija Kraljevine Srbije, Beograd 1891.

25 *Nova iskra*, No. 3, Yr. II (Belgrade, March 16, 1900), p. 70.

women's position and participation in its production.[26] From this standpoint, it is interesting to note that in Serbian visual art one also finds creations produced by women. They are suitable examples for analyzing the gender position and dynamics within the orientalist production.

One of the harem paintings, maybe even the earliest one in nineteenth-century Serbian art, was created by Katarina Ivanović, a female artist whose work is currently re-evaluated with the epithet of the first Serbian woman painter.[27] Originally from Stoni Beograd, she received her education in Pest, Vienna, and Munich. Her opus includes mostly historical and national themes, portraits, and genre scenes. Among her works is also a painting called *Fortune-Telling* (1865-70). It was exhibited in the Serbian capital Belgrade in 1882, together with pieces that were gifted to the National Museum's permanent display.[28] The painting represents a group of women being entertained by an old lady who is reading destiny from the cards. As harem slaves, they are created in expected mode of attractiveness and beauty, dressed in the finest garments, with gold and jewellery which completes the impression of oriental splendor and luxury. The repetition of the typical details—such as leisurely poses, unbridled hair, smoking chibouk—serves to evoke the lasciviousness of dreamlike harem world. In the background, this world is being protected by a dark-skinned eunuch, serving as a figure intensifying the excitement of observing the forbidden. The very act of fortune-telling which occupies the women in the scene also appears as another common theme of the harem imagery. Within the context of the primitive beliefs into the otherworldly, it repeated the concepts immanent in the Western constructions about the Orient, as the opposite to the modern and rational.

26 About the position of women in relation to orientalism, see: Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998; Sara Mills, *Discourses of Differences: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*, Routledge, London 1991; Billie Melman, *Women's Orients. English Women and the Middle East, 1718-191: Sexuality, Religion and Work*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 1992; Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation*, Routledge, London 1996; Mary Roberts, *Intimate Outsiders: The Harem in Ottoman and Orientalist Art and Travel Literature*, Duke University Press, Durham 2008.

27 Miroslav Timotijević & Radmila Mihailović, *Katarina Ivanović*, Vojnoizdavački zavod & Narodni muzej u Beogradu, Beograd 2004.

28 Ibid., pp. 49-50, 170-171.

It is obvious that in this creation, Katarina Ivanović used a cliché found in European paintings. Perusing her interest in this popular genre, Katarina Ivanović found a basis in the fundamental harem stereotypes that was articulated by predominant male fantasy, at the same time reproducing its entire orientalist logic. This kind of female creation within the characteristic models of harem imagery leads to the notion that gender position in orientalist productions did not necessarily arise as challenges. On the contrary, it could confirm the power that predominantly male concepts had in Orientalism. The driving motive for this kind of female production should primarily be sought in the popularity of the harem themes and its desirability within the cultural system. In that matter, one of the determining factors in the case of Katarina Ivanović was a striving to establish herself as a painter, in difficult conditions, at a time when being a female artist was in opposition to the social norms.

An even more explicit example of the harem fantasma created primarily for men can be found in the work of Beta Vukanović. This artist of German descent came to Serbia after marrying a Serbian painter, Rista Vukanović; there she spent the rest of her life actively involving in the artistic and cultural scene.[29] Among the work created during her first few years in Serbia is the painting *After the Bath* (1906).[30] Referring by its title to the typical paintings of harem bathing, Beta Vukanović staged a scene where women are entertaining themselves with fortune-telling after the supposed bath. In such a narrative, the painting is dominated by a naked female body, exposed to the viewer in the manner of an odalisque. With a cigarette in hand, which intensifies the tone of lasciviousness, this naked female character is immersed in conversation with her friend who is telling her fortune. All the accessories of the interior, with an oriental rug and the hamam slippers, serve to place the event into the realm of the harem. On the side of the scene is a parrot, also a frequent detail of harem paintings, which implicates the exoticness of the harem space, at the same time alluding to the women's captivity and enslavement.

It can be said that Beta Vukanović's painting is also an example of female creation that was articulated in accordance with the dominant male fantasy. Through the

29 Vera Ristić, *Beta Vukanović*, Vojnoizdavački zavod & Muzej grada Beograda, Beograd 2004.

30 The painting was exibited for the first time at the Exibition of the"Lada" Society of Serbian Artists in 1906, and in the following year at the Balkan States Exhibition in London: Ibid., pp. 32, 35. Presently, it is in the collection of the National Museum in Belgrade, officially named *Fortune telling*.

visualization of harem eroticism, based on the male viewer and the female body displayed, she reproduced the main sexualized aspect of the dominant orientalist concepts. However, the complexity comes not only from the aspect of the female creation, but from the fact that the nude as a traditional practice of high art was not entirely accepted in Serbian culture of the time. This was the period of its early immersion into the Serbian art, just beginning to be accepted by the conservative public. Therefore, the very situation where a woman appeared as the creator of a visual erotic object bore multiple meanings, especially at a time when society was asking for sexual abstinence as a norm, particularly from women. So it seems that in dealing with a female nude, Beta Vukanović reduced its problematic aspect significantly, by placing it into the domain of the oriental harem. In that manner, potential for positive reception by the domestic public was secured, both in the context of the realm which allowed erotic fantasies to men as well as from the standpoint of the female creation.

Inside the Forbidden Zone

The orientalistic discourse in Serbia was significantly reinforced by historic events. One of those was the Serbian-Turkish wars (1876-1878), as a situation which imposed the need for strengthening state authority and its control, especially in the conquered territories that were integrated into the Serbian state. War conflicts and direct encounters with the Muslim population in these areas provided an opportunity for the implementation of orientalist stereotypes into the actually present Ottoman culture. It was a mechanism that consolidated and secured dominance in the new division of power.

In these specific dynamics of Orientalism, the harem re-appears as a trope with even more intense meaning. As can be noticed from several examples, these harem narratives are created within a slightly different concept. The situation of war and direct contact with the Muslim community led to the appearance of representations created as a personal testimony of one who actually entered the forbidden harem domain. Confrontation with reality, however, did not disturb existing harem fantasy. It was, in fact, an extension of the established orientalistic vision, now even more consolidated by the argumentation of the "true witness".

In this ideological framework, one of the images by Vladislav Titelbah was created. It is a representation of a Mohammedan woman from Niš, the town where the artist was staying immediately after it had been recaptured by the Serbian army. The image

was presented to the general public through an illustration in the newspaper *Srpske ilustrovane novine*, published together with a written citation by the artist himself.[31] In his text, Titelbah informs the readers how the image was created while he was staying in Niš, when he had been invited by a Turkish gentleman to make a portrait of his wife. Accepted by the artist with an open excitement, his entrance into the harem did not disappoint the author's expectations in the act of revealing the hidden secret. Thus he brings a portrait representation of a girl, a young beauty, adorned in a costume with distinct ethnographic features. Seen in profile, she is holding a cigarette in a raised hand, as a detail that marks her whole appearance. Just as in the portrait, the author also gave an elaborate description of the girl in the written text, paying special attention to her clothes and hairstyle as an ethnographic alibi.

Functioning as a whole, Titelbah's visual and literal representations carried a complex set of meanings embedded in the political context. The display of harem woman was metaphorically transmitted to the conquering of the city of Niš, the symbol of national victory. As an object of a visual representation, she was brought before the public gaze, becoming explicit and known, thereby controlled, as an ottoman element over which nation claimed authority. Moreover, the portrait was published in the magazine under the title *Image from Serbia: Mohammedan Woman from Niš*, which additionally placed it into the context of national sovereignty, as the main intent for its publishing.

At the very end of Titelbah's text there is a section which yields much more complexity than the exotization of the "other" as a way of gaining control. While relaying his impressions from the harem, the author notes the "fire in the girl's eyes", and some sort of "secret sorrow", a sentiment which he explains later with a revelation that the woman is in a fact a Serbian girl who had been bought as a slave for the harem. This creates a strong shift in the storytelling which puts the Turk, the owner of the harem, into the focus, with the metaphorical meaning of a national enemy whose viciousness is confirmed in the abduction of the Serbian woman. Titelbah's representation thus was constructed as an act of revealing the harem secret, in which the Serbian audience could have participated, both in word and in image, but in a

31 *Srpske ilustrovane novine*, No. 27, Yr. II (Novi Sad, August 15, 1882), pp. 229, 240. The original is in the Ethnographic Museum in Belgrade, within the Titelbah'collection. It is filed under the title *Jewish Girl from Niš*, according to the inscription much later added on the backside.

liminal state between the fascination with the harem and a warning about the enemy who appropriates women.

The narrative of a witness who has gained access into the forbidden harem world can also be found in the memoirs of Dimitrije-Mita Petrović, a comprehensive school art teacher, who had been involved in the wars noted as a war illustrator. Among his descriptions of war events, there is also an adventure that took place in a harem, a narrative, which unlike Titelbah's, is created with the notions of explicit eroticism.[32] On one occasion he met a rich Turkish man from Niš, who was stationed at the same place as the Serbian army while traveling with his entire harem. By using drawing skills as the argument, Petrović succeeded in talking the Turk into allowing him to enter the strictly guarded harem in order to draw one of his women. The descriptions of the subsequent events are given as the fulfillment of all the expectations contained in the orientalistic fantasies about the harem. Thus, the girl being exposed by the author is described within the concepts of the exceptional ravishing beauty and eroticism, amplified by the descriptions of the transparent costume exposing the forbidden female body to the man's eye. But the whole event did not remain at this level of an exciting transgression. In spite of the Turk's reluctance, the woman is represented as the one willingly exposing herself and actively interacting with the stranger. The following situation is described as a sexual game, an erotic flirtation between the artist and the one who is posing for him:

> With Mehmet's permission I approached to pose Zoraida. I lightly grabbed both of her arms and moved her to sit down. But she clenched her elbows gently and my hand touched her body. A secret smile appeared on her lips. Once she sat down, I took her face in both hands, touching her round cheeks, which were as pink as a ruby. I felt under my hands that she was also trembling, both of us feeling the same. But—alas! The Turk would not move away, keeping her as the brightest treasure he would have died for.[33]

The seduction game at the end of the text finishes with the woman secretly appealing to the stranger and asking him to save her from the harem. The desire for escape will

32 Dimitrije-Mita Petrović, *Borbe u Toplici 1877-1878*, Arhiv Srbije, Beograd 1979, pp. 230-235. This section of the memoirs was also indicated in: Nenad Makuljević, "Slika drugog u srpskoj vizuelnoj kulturi XIX veka", p. 147.

33 Dimitrije-Mita Petrović, *Borbe u Toplici 1877-1878*, pp. 235-236.

be confirmed once more in the text, in a story told by a Serbian soldier, to whom she also offered and exposed herself in exchange for rescuing her from the harem. Thus portrayed, the character of the beautiful Zoraida was created in Petrović's memoirs in the typical orientalist narrative about a harem beauty who is looking for salvation. She even shares the name Zoraida with the heroine from "The Captive's Tale" of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, who is the literary embodiment of a Muslim maiden in need of rescue by the Western male.[34] In Petrović's notes, the harem beauty Zoraida will even repeat the motif from Cervantes's tale, where the heroine offers money to her potential savior as the means for her own liberation.

With all these attributes, Petrović's harem narrative constructs a character of a woman in need, a woman seeking for her righteous savior on the road to religious and cultural conversion. Created within these concepts, it projected a much wider spectrum of references suitable for the political and cultural requirements. Placed in the historic specificity of the conflict between Serbia and the Ottoman Empire, her character provided a fitting metaphor laced with notions of power and superiority. Representing the Ottoman "otherness", she was formulated in a manner honoring the superior one, the one to whom she made sexual offers while asking for salvation.

These kinds of harem representations were especially intensified by the effect of reality. Projected as a truthful account, they were carrying the reinforced meaning of masculine dominance over the sexualized oriental female, inscribed within the structure of political power relations. Regarding this, it is important to mention another written account of the harem, created in contrast to this male dominant discourse. The literary work *Letters from Niš about Harems* (1897) by Jelena Dimitrijević, was one of the central literary works about harems at the end of the nineteenth century.[35] It is also based on experiences from Niš, the town where the writer moved soon after its liberation. This text gave her the status of an expert about harems, whose authority was based on the fact that, as a woman, she was legitimately allowed to visit them.[36] In respect of this matter, the work of Jelena Dimitrijević seemed to readers as a veritable

34 Mohja Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1999, pp. 80–90.

35 Jelena Dimitrijević, *Pisma iz Niša o haremima*, Parna radikalna štamparija, Beograd 1897.

36 The veracity with which work of Jelena Dimitrijević was accepted is evident in rumors of that time that she was in fact an escapee from the harem: *Bosanska vila*, br. 5. i 6, god. XIV (Sarajevo, 15. i 30. mart 1899), p. 58.

revelation of Turkish harems. At the same time, it came up as a particular counter-discourse that challenged dominant Orientalist fantasy.[37] Consisting of depictions of the harem women as active participants in social and family life, it deconstructed the sole roots of the iconic sexualized representations. Even though it was not without descriptions of exotic female beauty or scenes of lascivious harem parties, the main foundation of the text was the narration about family life, social customs, and mutual relations. The female point of view even invoked some observations regarding the bad and unhealthy conditions under which the harem women were living, as well as regarding the customs which deprived the readers from experiencing any kind of feminine sexuality. Furthermore, the traditional family system and the woman's position were sometimes criticized from a feminist standpoint. But equally emphasized were the positive aspects in the lives of Muslim women, as a challenge to the established notions about the harem, and, to an even greater extent, to the idea about the Turks.

The work of Jelena Dimitrijević can be characterized as female agency, which opposed the dominant harem fantasy but without the essential subversion of the orientalist discourse itself.[38] The female approach which insisted on the reality of a harem life in this case represents more an orientalist variation, also intertwined with national ideology and cultural differentiation from the Ottoman. The image of the harem and the author's self-identity as a representative of the nation were constructed against each other throughout the entire work, by utilizing the opposite notions of uncivilized/civilized, primitive/enlightened, Turkish/Serbian (which equaled European). Projected within these differences, the image of the harem was constructed as "otherness" placed in the service of Serbian national and cultural superiority. This power relation is especially expressed by allusions to the Serbian victorious nation, placed in opposition to the Turks who are doomed to be ruined. In that the centralized trope is the town of Niš, a sacralized place and a symbol of national victory, in which harems are the ones admitting defeat by more powerful force. In this relation, Turkish women even appeared in the statement to the author: "Under the burden of heavy sins we all shall fall soon, while you will be rewarded for your nobility and justice by the

37 Svetlana Slapšak, "Haremi, nomadi – Jelena Dimitrijević", pp. 137-149.

38 Scholars who critically examined women's harem literature pointed out various ways in which women contested masculine fantasies, while also investing their own in the harem narrative: see above note 24.

all-mighty Allah".[39] The work also ends in the same manner—with a symbolic lament of the harem women for the loss of Niš, from which they slowly disappear. On the whole, it is an argument noticeably analogous to the colonial discourse, where the defeated admit their own mistakes, for which they are condemned to doom.[40]

This very relation, which comprises the framework of the Jelena Dimitrijević's narration, projected the harem in the concept that was desirable in Serbian national and cultural ideology. As much as it was opposed to the harem fantasies, it was also inscribed into the power structure, in which the Ottomans can only exist as oriental and inferior other, the one who is disappearing and who will traverse into fiction. The same principle can be designated as the main characteristic of the entire harem imagery in Serbian culture of this period. It was a cultural production of Orientalism, as a discourse desirable within the political and the cultural projects of the Serbian nation.

39 Jelena Dimitrijević, *Pisma iz Niša o haremima*, pp. 9-10.

40 Svetlana Slapšak, "Haremi, nomadi – Jelena Dimitrijević", p. 139.

Irena Ćirović Illustrations

1. Vladislav Titelbah: *Fatima, the beauty of Tsargrad*, reproduction in *Iskra*, No. 13, Yr.1 (Belgrade, July 1, 1898)

2. Paja Jovanović: *Woman in the oriental dress*, mid 1880s, oil on board, 36x24, National Museum in Belgrade

3. Paja Jovanović: *In the harem*, oil on canvas, 76x61 cm, private collection

4. Svetislav Jovanović: *On the balcony*, reproduction in Nova Iskra, No.12, Yr. IV (Belgrade, December 1902)

Irena Ćirović Illustrations

5. Katarina Ivanović: *Fortune-telling*, 1865-70, oil on canvas, 75x89 cm, National Museum in Belgrade

6. Beta Vukanović: *After the bath (fortune-telling)*, 1906, oil on canvas, 105x176 cm, National Museum in Belgrade

7. Vladislav Titelbah: *Mohammedan Woman from Niš*, reproduction in *Sprske ilustrovane novine*, No.27, Yr II (Novi Sad, August 15, 1882)