

C A R A F B O O K S



WOMEN *of* ALGIERS  
IN THEIR APARTMENT

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## *Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound*

### I

On 25 June 1832, Delacroix disembarks in Algiers for a short stopover. He has just spent a month in Morocco, immersed in a universe of extreme, visual richness (the splendor of the costumes, reckless frenzy of *fantasias*, the pomp of a royal court, the rapture of Jewish weddings or of street musicians, the nobility of royal felines: lions, tigers, and so forth).

This Orient, so near and of his own time, offers itself to him as a total and excessive novelty. An Orient as he had dreamed it for *The Death of Sardanapalus*—but here washed clean of any association with sin. An Orient that, in addition, and only in Morocco, escapes from the authority of the Turks, loathed ever since *The Massacre at Chios*.

Thus, Morocco is revealed as the place where dream and its incarnation of an aesthetic ideal meet, the place of a visual revolution. In fact, Delacroix can write a little later: “Ever since my journey, men and things appear to me in a new light.”

Delacroix spends only three days in Algiers. This brief stay in an only recently conquered capital city directs him, thanks to a felicitous combination of circumstances, toward a world that had remained foreign to him during his Moroccan trip. For the first time, he penetrates into a world that is off-limits: that of the Algerian women.

The world he had discovered in Morocco and that he freezes in his sketches is essentially a masculine and warrior world, in a word, a virile one. What his eyes saw was the permanent spectacle of an exteriority made up entirely of pomp, noise, cavalcades, and rapid motion. But, as he passes from Morocco to Algeria, Delacroix crosses, at the same time, a subtle frontier



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that is going to invert every sign and will be at the root of what posterity shall retain as this singular "journey to the Orient."

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The adventure is well-known: the chief engineer of the harbor of Algiers, Monsieur Poirel, a lover of painting, has in his employ a *chaouch*, the former owner of a privateer—the sort who used to be called a *rais* before the 1830 conquest—who, after long discussions, agrees to allow Delacroix entry into his own home.

A friend of the friend, Cournault, reports the details of this intrusion to us. The house was situated in what used to be the rue Duquesne. Delacroix, in the company of the husband and undoubtedly of Poirel as well, crosses "a dark hallway" at the end of which, unexpectedly and bathed in an almost unreal light, the actual harem opens up. There, women and children are waiting for him "surrounded by mounds of silk and gold." The wife of the former *rais*, young and pretty, is sitting in front of a hookah. Delacroix, Poirel reports to Cournault, who writes it down for us, "was as if intoxicated by the spectacle he had before his eyes."

With the husband as intermediary and impromptu translator, he begins a conversation and wants to know everything about "this new and to him mysterious life." On the many sketches that he draws—women seated in various positions—he writes what seems to him to be the most important and not to be forgotten: specification of colors ("black with lines of gold, lacquered violet, dark India red," etc.) with details of costumes, multiple and strange references that baffle his eyes.

In these brief and graphic or written annotations, there is an almost feverish hand at work, an intoxicated gaze: a fugitive moment of evanescent revelation standing on that borderline in motion where dream and reality converge. Cournault notes: "that fever that the sherbets and fruits could barely appease."

The completely new vision was perceived as pure image. And as if this all-too-new splendor might blur the image's reality,

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Delacroix forces himself to note down, on his sketches, the name of every woman. Like a coat of arms, watercolors bear names like Bayah, Mouni and Zora ben Soltane, Zora and Kadoudja Tarboridji. Penciled bodies coming out of the anonymity of exoticism.

This abundance of rare colors, these new-sounding names, is that what arouses and thrills the painter? Is that what causes him to write: "It is beautiful! It is straight out of Homer!"

There, during that visit of a few hours with women in seclusion, by what shock, or at least by what vague stirrings was the painter seized? This heart of the half-open harem, is it really the way he sees it?

From this place through which he had passed, Delacroix brings back some objects: some slippers, a shawl, a shirt, a pair of trousers. Not just trivial tourist trophies but tangible proof of a unique, ephemeral experience. Traces of a dream.

He feels the need to touch his dream, to prolong its life beyond the memory, to complete what is enclosed as sketches and drawings in his notebooks. It's the equivalent of a fetishist compulsion augmented by the certainty that this moment lived is irrevocable in its uniqueness and will never be repeated.

Upon his return to Paris, the painter will work for two years on the image of a memory that teeters with a muted and unformulated uncertainty, although well-documented and supported by authentic objects. What he comes out with is a masterpiece that still stirs questions deep within us.

*Women of Algiers in Their Apartment*: three women, two of whom are seated in front of a hookah. The third one, in the foreground, leans her elbow on some cushions. A female servant, seen three quarters from the back, raises her arm as if to move the heavy tapestry aside that masks this closed universe; she is an almost minor character, all she does is move along the edge of the iridescence of colors that bathes the other three women. The whole meaning of the painting is played out in the relationship these three have with their bodies, as well as with the place of their enclosure. Resigned prisoners in a closed



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place that is lit by a kind of dreamlike light coming from nowhere—a hothouse light or that of an aquarium—Delacroix's genius makes them both near and distant to us at the same time, enigmatic to the highest degree.

Fifteen years after these few days in Algiers, Delacroix remembers again, reworks it, and gives the 1849 Salon a second version of *Women of Algiers*.

The composition is almost identical, but the recurrence of several changes has rendered more obvious the latent meaning of the painting.

In this second canvas—in which the features of the characters are less precise, the elements of the setting less elaborate—the vision's angle has been widened. This centering effect has a triple result: to make the three women, who now penetrate more deeply into their retreat, more distant from us; to uncover and entirely bare one of the room's walls, having it weigh down more heavily on the solitude of these women; and finally to accentuate the unreal quality of the light. The latter brings out more clearly what the shadow conceals as an invisible, omnipresent threat, through the intermediary of the woman servant whom we hardly see any longer, but who is there, and attentive.

Women always waiting. Suddenly less sultanas than prisoners. They have no relationship with us, the spectators. They neither abandon nor refuse themselves to our gaze. Foreign but terribly present in this rarified atmosphere of confinement.

Elie Faure tells us that the aging Renoir, when he used to refer to this light in *Women of Algiers*, could not prevent large tears from streaming down his cheeks.

Should we be weeping like the aged Renoir, but then for reasons other than artistic ones? Evoke, one and a half centuries later, these Bayas, Zoras, Mounis, and Khadoudjas. Since then, these women, whom Delacroix—perhaps in spite of himself<sup>1</sup>—knew how to observe as no one had done before him, have not stopped telling us something that is unbearably painful and still very much with us today.

Delacroix's painting has been perceived as one approach to a feminine version of the Orient—undoubtedly the first one

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in European painting, which usually treated the theme of the odalisk as literature or evoked only the cruelty and the nudity of the seraglio.

The distant and familiar dream in the faraway eyes of the three Algerian women, if we make an attempt to grasp its nature, makes us in turn dream of sensuality: a nostalgia or vague softness, triggered by their so obvious absence. As if behind those bodies, and before the servant lets the curtain fall once more, a universe is displayed in which they might still live continuously, before they take their pose in front of us, who look on.

For that is exactly it, we look on. In reality, that look is forbidden to us. If Delacroix's painting unconsciously fascinates us, it is not actually because it suggests that superficial Orient within a luxurious and silent semidarkness, but because, by placing us in the position of onlookers in front of these women, it reminds us that ordinarily we have no right to be there. This painting is itself a stolen glance.

And I tell myself that, more than fifteen years later, Delacroix remembered especially that "dark hallway" at the end of which, in a space without exit, the hieratic prisoners of the secret keep to themselves. Those women whose distant drama cannot be guessed at except for this unexpected backstage scene that the painting becomes.

Is it because these women are dreaming that they do not look at us, or is it that they can no longer even glimpse us because they are enclosed without recourse? Nothing can be guessed about the soul of these doleful figures, seated as if drowning in all that surrounds them. They remain absent to themselves, to their body, to their sensuality, to their happiness.

Between them and us, the spectators, there has been the instant of unveiling, the step that crossed the vestibule of intimacy, the unexpected slight touch of the thief, the spy, the voyeur. Only two years earlier, the French painter would have been there at the risk of his life. . . .

What floats between these Algerian women and ourselves, then, is the forbidden. Neutral, anonymous, omnipresent.



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That particular gaze had long been believed to be a stolen one because it was the stranger's, the one from outside the harem and outside the city.

For a few decades—as each nationalism triumphs here and there—we have been able to realize that within this Orient that has been delivered unto itself, the image of woman is still perceived no differently, be it by the father, by the husband, and, more troublesome still, by the brother and the son.

In principle, they alone may look at the woman. To the other male members of the tribe (and any cousin who may have shared her childhood play becomes potentially a voyeur-thief) the woman shows—in the early days of an easing of the customary rigors—if not her entire body, at least her face and hands.

The second period of this easing turns out, paradoxically, to be dependent upon the veil.<sup>2</sup> Since the veil completely covers the body and its extremities, it allows the one who wears it and who circulates outside underneath its cover, to be in turn a potential thief within the masculine space. She appears there above all as a fugitive outline, half blinded when she can only look with one eye. The generosity of “liberalism” has restored to her, in some cases and certain places, her other eye and at the same time the integrity of her gaze: thanks to the veil, both her eyes are now wide open to the exterior.

Thus, there is another eye there, the female gaze. But that liberated eye, which could become the sign of a conquest toward the light shared by other people, outside of the enclosure, is now in turn perceived as a threat; and the vicious circle closes itself back up again.

Yesterday, the master made his authority felt in the closed, feminine spaces through the single presence of his gaze alone, annihilating those of other people. In turn, the feminine eye when it moves around is now, it seems, feared by the men immobilized in the Moorish cafés of today's medinas, while the white phantom, unreal but enigmatic, passes through.

In these lawful glances (that is to say, those of the father, the brother, the son, or the husband) that are raised to the female eye and body—for the eye of the dominator first seeks out the other's eye, the eye of the dominated, before it takes possession of the body—one runs a risk that is all the more unforeseeable since its causes may be accidental.

It takes very little—a sudden effusiveness, an unexpected, unusual motion, a space torn open by a curtain raised over a secret corner<sup>3</sup>—for the other eyes of the body (breasts, sex, navel) to run the risk in turn of being fully exposed and stared at. It is all over for the men, vulnerable guardians: it is their night, their misfortune, their dishonor.

Forbidden gaze: for it is surely forbidden to look at the female body one keeps incarcerated, from the age of ten until forty or forty-five, within walls, or better within veils. But there's also the danger that the feminine glance, liberated to circulation outside, runs the risk at any moment of exposing the other glances of the moving body. As if all of a sudden the whole body were to begin to look around, to “defy,” or so men translate it. . . . Is a woman—who moves around and therefore is “naked”—who looks, not also a new threat to their exclusive right to stare, to that male prerogative?

The most visible evolution of Arabic women, at least in the cities, has therefore been the casting off of the veil. Many a woman, often after an adolescence or her entire youth spent cloistered, has concretely lived the experience of the unveiling.

The body moves forward out of the house and is, for the first time, felt as being “exposed” to every look: the gait becomes stiff, the step hasty, the facial expression tightens.

Colloquial Arabic describes the experience in a significant way: “I no longer go out *protected* (that is to say, veiled, covered up)” the woman who casts off her sheet will say, “I go out *undressed*, or even *denuded*.” The veil that shielded her from the looks of strangers is in fact experienced as a “piece of clothing in itself,” and to no longer have it means to be totally exposed.

As for the man who agrees to share in this, his sisters' or his wife's most timid of evolutions, the slowest possible one, he is



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thereby condemned to live ill at ease and sick with worry. He imagines that no sooner will the lacy face veil, then the long body veil, be lifted, than the woman will (she can't help it) move on to the stage of fatal risk, that of uncovering the other eye, the eye-that-is-sex. Halfway down this slippery path, he glimpses the only stopping point of the "belly dance," the one that makes the other eye, the navel-eye, grimace in the cabarets.

Thus the woman's body, as soon as she leaves her seated waiting in the cloistered interior, conceals dangers because of its very nature. Does it move around in an open space? All that is suddenly perceived is that straying multiplicity of eyes in and on that body.

Around this feminine drifting away, the dispossessed man's haunting feeling of paranoia crystallizes. (After all, the only man in Algiers who, in 1832, permits a foreign painter to penetrate into the harem, is precisely a former little pirate, now a conquered *chaouch* who is henceforth accountable to a French civil servant.)

In Algeria, it was precisely when the foreign intrusion began in 1830—an intrusion contained at all costs at the doorways of impoverished seraglios—that a gradual freezing up of indoor communication accompanied the parallel progressive French conquest of exterior space, an indoor communication becoming more and more deeply submerged: between the generations, and even more, between the sexes.

These women of Algiers—those who have remained motionless in Delacroix's painting since 1832—if it was possible yesterday to see in their frozen stare the nostalgic expression of happiness or of the softness of submission, today their desperate bitterness is what must strike our most sensitive nerve.

At the time of the heroic battles, woman was watching, woman was crying out: the gaze-that-was-witness throughout the battle, which ululations would prolong in order to encourage the warrior (a cry, extended, piercing the horizon like an infinite abdominal gurgling, a sexual call in full flight).

But, throughout the nineteenth century, the battles were lost

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one after the other, further and further to the south of the Algerian territories. The heroes have not yet stopped biting the dust. In that epic, women's looks and voices continue to be perceived from a distance, from the other side of the frontier that should separate us from death, if not from victory.

But for those born in the age of submission, feudals or proletarians, sons or lovers, the scene remains, the watching women haven't moved, and it is with a retrospective fear that the men began to dream of that look.

Thus, while outside an entire society partitions itself into the duality of the vanquished and the victorious, the autochthons and the invaders, in the harem, reduced to a shack or a cave, the dialogue has become almost definitively blocked. If only one could force that single spectator body that remains, encircle it more and more tightly in order to forget the defeat! . . . But every movement that might recall the fury of the ancestors is irremediably solidified, redoubling the immobility that makes of woman a prisoner.

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In the oral culture of Algeria, primarily in the thoroughly occupied small towns, there develops the almost unique theme of the wound, which comes to replace the lively unpredictability of the expression of ironic desire, in poetry, in song, and even in the patterns of the slow or frenzied dances.

The fact that the first encounter of the sexes is not possible except through the marriage ritual and its ceremonies sheds light on the nature of an obsession that profoundly puts its mark on our social and cultural being. An open wound is etched into the woman's body through the assumption of a virginity that is furiously deflowered and the martyrdom of which is consecrated by the marriage in a most trivial manner. The wedding night essentially becomes a night of blood. Not because the partners become better acquainted or, even less, because of pleasure, but a night of blood that is also a night of the gaze and of silence. Hence the razor-sharp chorus of long cries uttered

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by the other women (a sisterhood of spasms that tries to take flight in the blind night), hence also the din of the gunpowder in order to better envelop that same silence.<sup>4</sup>

Now, this look of the sex steeped in blood sends us back to the first look, that of the mother at term, ready to give birth. The image of her rises up, ambivalent and flooded with tears, completely veiled and at the same time delivered naked, her legs streaked with blood in spasms of pain.

The Koran says, and this has been often repeated: "Paradise is found at the feet of mothers." If Christianity is the adoration of the Virgin Mother, Islam, more harshly, understands the term *mother* to mean woman without pleasure, even before seeing her as the source of all tenderness. Thereby obscurely hoping that the eye-that-is-sex, the one who has given birth, is no longer a threat. Only the birthing mother has the right to look.

## II

During the time of the Emir Abdelkader, nomadic tribes loyal to him, the Arbaa and the Harazeli, found themselves besieged in 1839 in Fort Ksar el Hayran by their traditional enemy, the Tedjini. On the fourth day of the siege, the assailants are already scaling the walls, when a young Harazeli girl, named Messaouda ("the happy one"), seeing that her men are ready to turn their backs, calls out:

"Where are you running like that? The enemies are on this side! Must a young girl show you how men are supposed to behave? Well then, take a look!"

She climbs onto the ramparts, lets herself slide down the other side, facing the enemy. Thus exposing herself willingly, she speaks these words at the same time:

"Where are the men of my tribe?  
Where are my brothers?  
Where are those who used to sing songs of love  
to me?"

Thereupon the Harazeli came running to her aid and tradition reports they did so while clamoring this war cry that was also a cry of love:

"Be happy, here are your brothers, here are your  
lovers!"

Electrified by the young girl's call, they pushed back the enemy.

Messaouda was brought back in triumph, and ever since, the "Song of Messaouda" has been sung by the tribes in the Algerian south, recalling these facts and ending with this exact exaltation of the heroic wound:

"Messaouda, you shall always be a wrench for  
pulling teeth!"

In the history of Algerian resistance struggles during the last century, numerous episodes, indeed, show women warriors



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who left the traditional role of spectator. Their formidable look would prod the men's courage, but suddenly also, right where the ultimate despair dawns, their very presence in the boiling movement of battle decides the outcome.

Other accounts of feminine heroism illustrate the tradition of the feudal queen-mother (intelligent, a tactician of "virile" courage), for example, the distant Berber woman Kahina.

The story of Messaouda, more modest, seems to me to present a newer aspect: surely a variant on heroism and tribal solidarity, but above all it is here connected with a body in danger (in completely spontaneous motion), with a voice that calls, challenges, and abrades. In short, it heals the temptation of cowardice and allows a victorious outcome.

"Be happy, here are your brothers, here are your lovers!" Are these brothers-lovers more upset to see the completely exposed body, or are they more "electrified" by the feminine voice that runs off? This sound at last comes forth from the entrails, brushing past the blood of death and of love. And this is the revelation: "Be happy!" The song of Messaouda is the only one that consecrates this happiness of women, completely inside a mobility that is improvised and dangerous at the same time: in short, that is creative.

Very few Messaoudas, alas, in our recent past of anti-colonial resistance. Before the war of liberation, the search for a national identity, if it did include a feminine participation, delighted in erasing the body and illuminating these women as "mothers," even for those exceptional figures who were recognized as women warriors. But when, in the course of the seven years of the national war, the theme of the heroine becomes exalted, it is exactly around the bodies of young girls, whom I call the "fire carriers" and whom the enemy incarcerates. Harems melted for a while into so many Barberousse prisons, the Messaoudas of the Battle of Algiers were called Djamila.

Since that call by Messaouda and the antiphonal response of the "brothers-lovers," since that race forward of woman's pride set free, what do we have as a "story" of our women, as feminine speech?

Delacroix's painting shows us two of the women as if sur-

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prised in their conversation, but their silence has not stopped reaching us. The halting words of those who have half-lowered their eyelids or who look away in the distance in order to communicate. As if it concerned some secret, the enlightenment of which the servant is watching for, and we cannot quite tell whether she is spying on them or is an accomplice to them.

From childhood on, the little girl is taught "the cult of silence, which is one of the greatest powers of Arabic society."<sup>5</sup> What a French general, "friend to the Arabs," calls "power," is something we feel as a second mutilation.

Even the yes that is supposed to follow the fatiha of the marriage ceremony and that the father must ask of his daughter—the Koran requires this of him—is ingeniously squelched almost everywhere (in Moslem regions). The fact that the young girl may not be seen uncovered in order to utter her acquiescence (or her nonacquiescence), obliges her to go through the intermediary of a male representative who speaks in "her place." A terrible substitution for the word of one by another, which, moreover, opens the way to the illegal practice of the forced marriage. Her word deflowered, violated, before the other deflowering, the other violation intervenes.

Besides, even without the *ouali*, it has been agreed that this yes, which they are waiting for directly from her, may be expressed, because of her "modesty" in front of her father and the man of the law, through her silence or through her tears. It is true that in ancient Persia, an even more characteristic practice has been noted<sup>6</sup>: to consecrate the marriage, the boy makes his agreement heard loudly and clearly; the fiancée, the girl, is put in the next room amid other women, near the door over which a curtain falls. In order to make the necessary yes audible, the women hit the young girl's head against the door, causing her to moan.

Thus, the only word the woman must pronounce, this yes to submission under the pretense of propriety, she breathes out with discomfort, either under the duress of physical pain or through the ambiguity of silent tears.

It is told that in 1911, during various Algerian campaigns, the women (mothers and sisters) would come and roam around the



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camps where the so-called indigenous conscripts were penned in, would come to weep and tear at their faces. The image of the tearful woman, lacerating her cheeks to the point of hysteria, becomes for the ethnologists of the time the only image "in motion": no more women warriors, no more women poets. If it doesn't concern invisible and mute women, if they're still an integral part of their tribe, they can only appear as powerless furies. Silence even of the dancer-prostitutes of the Ouled Nails, their bodies covered down to their feet, their idol-like faces weighed down by jewels, their only sound the rhythmic one of their ankle bands.

Thus, from 1900 to 1954 in Algeria, there is a closing down of an indigenous society, more and more dispossessed of its vital space and its tribal structures. The orientaling look—first with its military interpreters and then with its photographers and filmmakers—turns in circles around this closed society, stressing its "feminine mystery" even more in order thus to hide the hostility of an entire Algerian community in danger.

However, this has not prevented the spatial tightening from leading to a tightening of family relationships during the first half of the twentieth century: between cousins, brothers, etc. And in the relationships between brothers and sisters, the latter have been most often—always thanks to the "yes-silence of the tears"—disinherited to the advantage of the males in the family: here is another face of that immemorial abuse of trust, of that alienation of material goods and bed and board.

Thus, doubly imprisoned in that immense jail, the woman has the right to no more than a space that is doomed to become ever smaller. Only the mother-son relationship has grown stronger to the point of obstructing all other exchanges. As if the attachment to the roots, which grows more and more difficult for these new proletarians without any land and soon without a culture, should again pass through the umbilical cord.

But beyond this tightening within the families, by which only the males benefit, there is the attachment to the oral roots of history.

The sound of the mother who, woman without a body and

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without an individual voice, finds once again the sound of the collective and obscure voice, which is necessarily asexual. For in the spinning around of the defeat that ended in tragic immobility, the models for finding a second wind and oxygen have been sought elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> in places other than this kind of immense nourishing womb in which the long chain of mothers and grandmothers, shaded by patios and shacks, nurtured the emotional memory. . . .

The echoes of the battles lost in the last century, details of color very much worthy of a Delacroix, reside among the illiterate storytellers: the whispered voices of those forgotten women have developed irreplaceable frescoes from these, and have thus woven our sense of history.

In this way, the enlarged presence of the mother (woman without body or, conversely, of multiple bodies) finds itself to be the most solid knot in the almost complete incommunicability between the sexes. But at the same time, in the realm of the word, the mother seems, in fact, to have monopolized the only authentic expression of a cultural identity—admittedly limited to the land, to the village, to the popular local saint, sometimes to the "clan," but in any case, concrete and passionate with affectivity.

As if the mother, recoiling on this side of procreation, were masking her body from us, in order to return as the voice of the unknown ancestress, timeless chorus in which history is retold. But a history from which the archetypal image of the feminine body has been expelled.

A hesitant sketch in stipples floats on the surface, all that's left of a culture of women, now slowly suffocating: songs once sung by young girls on their verandas,<sup>8</sup> quatrains of love from the women of Tlemcen,<sup>9</sup> magnificent funereal threnodies from the women of Laghouat, an entire literature that, unfortunately, is becoming further and further removed, only to end up by resembling those mouthless wadis that get lost in the sands. . . .

Ritual lament of the Jewish and Arabic women folksingers who sing at Algerian weddings, this outdated tenderness, this delicately loving nostalgia, barely allusive, is transmitted little



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by little from the women to the adolescent girls, future sacrificial victims, as if the song were closing in upon itself.

We, children in the patios where our mothers still seem young, serene, wearing jewelry that doesn't crush them—not yet—that often adorns them in inoffensive vanity, we, in the faint murmuring of those lost feminine voices, we still feel its old warmth . . . but rarely its withering. These islets of peace, this intermission to which our memory clings, are these not a small part of that plant life autonomy of the Algerian women in the painting, the totally separate world of women?

A world from which the growing boy removes himself, but from which today's young, self-emancipating girl distances herself as well. For her in particular, the distancing amounts to shifting the location of her muteness: she exchanges the women's quarters and the old community for an often deceptive one-on-one with the man.

Thus, this world of women, when it no longer hums with the whisperings of an ancillary tenderness, of lost ballads—in short, with a romanticism of vanished enchantments—that world suddenly, barrenly, becomes the world of autism.

And just as suddenly, the reality of the present shows itself without camouflage, without any addiction to the past: sound has truly been severed.

## III

As the war of liberation in Algeria was just barely getting started, Picasso, from December 1954 to February 1955, goes to live every day in the world of Delacroix's "Women of Algiers." There he comes face-to-face with himself and erects around the three women, and with them, a completely transformed universe: fifteen canvases and two lithographs carrying the same title.

It moves me to think that the Spanish genius presides in this manner over a changing in the times.

As we entered our "colonial night," the French painter offered us his vision that, the admiring Baudelaire notes, "breathes I don't know what heady perfume of evil haunts that leads us rather quickly toward the unplumbed limbo of sadness." That perfume of evil haunts came from quite far off and will have become even more concentrated.

Picasso reverses the malediction, causes misfortune to burst loose, inscribes in audacious lines a totally new happiness. A foreknowledge that should guide us in our everyday life.

Pierre Daix remarks: "Picasso has always liked to set the beauties of the harem free." Glorious liberation of space, the bodies awakening in dance, in a flowing outward, the movement freely offered. But also the preservation of one of the women, who remains hermetic, Olympian, suddenly immense. Like a suggested moral, here, of a relationship to be found again between the old, adorned serenity (the lady, formerly fixed in her sullen sadness, is motionless from now on, but like a rock of inner power) and the improvised bursting out into an open space.

For there is no harem any more, its door is wide open and the light is streaming in; there isn't even a spying servant any longer, simply another woman, mischievous and dancing. Finally, the heroines—with the exception of the queen, whose breasts, however, are bursting out—are totally nude, as if Picasso was recovering the truth of the vernacular language that, in Arabic, designates the "unveiled" as "denuded" women. Also, as if he were making that denuding not only into a sign of an



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“emancipation,” but rather of these women’s rebirth to their own bodies.

Two years after this intuition of the artist, there appeared the descendants, the carriers of the bombs, in the Battle of Algiers. Are these women merely the sisters-companions of the nationalist heroes? Certainly not, for everything takes place as if the latter, in isolation, outside of the clan, had made a long trek back, from the 1920s to almost 1960, in order to find their “sisters-lovers” again, and that in the shadow of the prisons and the brutal treatment by the legionnaires.

As if the guillotine and those first sacrificed in the coldness of the dawn were needed for young girls to tremble for their blood brothers and to say so.<sup>10</sup> The ancestral accompaniment had, until then, been the ululation of triumph and of death.

It is a question of wondering whether the carriers of the bombs, as they left the harem, chose their most direct manner of expression purely by accident: their bodies exposed outside and they themselves attacking other bodies? In fact, they took those bombs out as if they were taking out their own breasts, and those grenades exploded against them, right against them.

Some of them came back later with their sex electrocuted, flayed through torture.

If rape, as a fact and a “tradition” of war, is in itself horribly banal ever since wars have existed, it became—when our heroines were its victims of expiation—the cause of painful upheaval, experienced as trauma by the whole of the Algerian collective. The public condemnation of it through newspapers and legal intervention certainly contributed to the spread of scandalous repercussions: the words that named it became, where rape was concerned, an explicit and unanimous condemnation. A barrier of words came down in transgression, a veil was shredded in front of a threatened reality, but one whose repression was too strong not to return. Such repression submerged a solidarity in misery that for a moment had been effective. What words had uncovered in time of war is now being concealed again underneath a thick covering of taboo subjects, and in that way, the meaning of a revelation is re-

*Forbidden Gaze, Severed Sound*

versed. Then the heavy silence returns that puts an end to the momentary restoration of sound. Sound is severed once again. As if the fathers, brothers, or cousins were saying: “We have paid plenty for that unveiling of words!” Undoubtedly forgetting that the women have inscribed that statement into their martyred flesh, a statement that is, however, penalized by a silence that extends all around.

Sound severed once again, the gaze once again forbidden, these are what reconstruct the ancestral barriers. “A perfume of evil haunts,” Baudelaire said. There is no seraglio any more. But the “structure of the seraglio”<sup>11</sup> attempts to impose its laws in the new wasteland: the law of invisibility, the law of silence.

Only in the fragments of ancient murmuring do I see how we must look for a restoration of the conversation between women, the very one that Delacroix froze in his painting. Only in the door open to the full sun, the one Picasso later imposed, do I hope for a concrete and daily liberation of women.

February 1979



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*Women of Algiers in*

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*Their Apartment*

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By ASSIA DJEBAR

Translated by Marjolijn de Jager

Afterword by Clarisse Zimra

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