

# The Politics of Representation as a Projection of Identity

## The Female Body in its Oriental Construction in Serbian Art

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**ABSTRACT** This article deals with questions concerning the nature of representation of the female body within the so-called 'oriental' discourse in Serbian art: Who is the painter? For whom is the work painted? With whom is the work identified? With what other possibilities of identification does the work leave us? In the context of the historical codes, a stance towards a body is seen as a projection of the social, cultural and power impulses. In the first case studied, the artist (Djordje Krstic) was a male commissioned by the Serbian court to paint a series of paintings for the indigenous population and foreigners. In the second case, the artist (Paja Jovanovic) was also male, a Serb working in Vienna, who painted for the audience of the 'real Europe' from the position of an identity alteration. The third case focuses on a female artist, Babett Bachmayer Vukanovic, who was born in Germany but after marrying a Serb moved to her husband's homeland. Visual constructions of female bodies are used as the starting point for the deconstruction of ignored gender-related questions in analysing époque.

**KEY WORDS** cultural discourse ♦ female body ♦ identity ♦ 'Orientalism' ♦ representation

Art is not a mirror. It mediates and re-presents social relations in schema of signs which require a receptive and preconditioned reader in order to be meaningful. And it is at the level of what those signs connote, often unconsciously, that patriarchal ideology is reproduced. (Parker and Pollock, 1981: 119)

In the 19th century, the social climate and conditions that resulted from the political turmoil that divided the *great* powers and their *minions* into

separate power blocs plotted the coordinates of an artistic phenomenon, stereotypically referred to as 'Orientalism'. This term's generally accepted and laic meaning, which was defined by the discourse of the moment of its creation, is today provoking the need for a different definition, one established within a new arrangement of political, economic, cultural and social circumstances. The term Orientalism has mainly been criticized as indistinct, imprecise and unclassified. I am suggesting that all of these criticisms together point to an essential problem that the term engenders: the problem of accepting/rejecting the imposed identity positions. The initial definitions exhibited a limited character, which went hand in hand with an exclusive model of cultural domination. This model was a projection of West European colonial powers that were often quick to make pejorative qualifications based on perceptible differences. In accordance with the law of inertia, these qualifications took the political, social, cultural and economic orders of the states from which they emanated as the basis according to which all other orders were to be judged.

In the manner of a 'fluctuation of taste' and according to particular political interests, 'the Orient' has been changing its geographic, material and cultural bounds, being more and more buried by myths that have been latently accepted, even in the regions whose images they have distorted. Even recent works on the topic have, in most cases, only highlighted the past inconsistencies and stereotypes, but, unfortunately, they have not been well grounded on parallel practical experience that shows precisely how new readings are supposed to look. They are rather 'a step towards an understanding of not so much the political culture of the West as much of the strength of the West's cultural discourse, the strength which we so often take to be purely decorative or substructural' (Said, 2000: 39). They also point to 'an amazing structure of cultural domination and, especially to those nations that were once colonial subjects, the perils and challenges of the application of such a structure upon themselves or others' (Said, 2000: 40).<sup>1</sup>

For European puritans, the Balkans have always been a part of the Orient. The region's character stemmed from unhidden sympathies, akin to those of an infant, and from a population of exotic, simultaneously kind and brutal barbarians, who, like a 'live ethnographic museum', possessed an authentic but at the same time distant past. In time, the Balkan nations have quietly adopted this imposed role, and in that way, have not managed to establish their individual stance in between the tensions and contradictions of an irrational idea of a unified European identity. This lack of orientation is a direct consequence of a crisis status that came about due to an ambiguous positioning, which in the years of cultural, social and economic change was mirrored in the following dilemma: are we 'just' a marginalized part of Europe or a colony outside it?

It is because of this that a discussion on Orientalism in Serbian art is

preconditioned by the subject matter's permanent attempts at identifying its own position in the realm of power politics and its interest spheres, as well as on the subject matter's simultaneous tendency towards appropriating a clearly defined national identity.

With the formation of nation-states at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the manufacture of a new past and its consequential forgetfulness reached a state of frenzy: the new states had to invent new narratives so as to transfer the Turkish culture from their nations' recent past to the one which had reached a definite conclusion. (Slapsak, 2000: 55)

In the cultural discourse, especially the one related to Turkish heritage, the consequence of this often proved to be the abhorrence that precedes 'a description of the residues of an enemy's culture and way of life, that is those parts of the two which are most inherent, stable and omnipresent in everyday life' (Slapsak, 2000: 51). Incorporated foreign elements that were not eradicated have programmed an inner belief of 'being second'. They have imposed the frustration of never being able to reach an idealized and generally unattainable image of 'Europe'.

Up until now, Europe has been a symbol for progress, order, prosperity and radical ideas, with Europe being a picture, an ideal, a time category (if time can be taken to mean progress), rather than a geographical entity. (Todorova, 1999: 81)

The aforementioned historical, political and emotional difference defines the way in which West European and Serbian fine arts would represent 'the Orient', and demonstrates the impossibility of a single, unified and hegemonic conception, for how can that which stands for an exotic fascination in one place (Western Europe) be the same as that which forms a harsh reality in the other (the Balkan part of the Ottoman Empire). 'The Orient' (in 19th-century European terms) and 'the West' (seen as Western Europe) have been connected by the colonization and decolonization of the former by the latter, while 'the Orient' (in 19th-century Balkan terms seen as the Ottoman Empire) and 'the Balkans' (seen as a former part of that empire) have been bound the other way around. The works of artists from the West have been paintings of others, while the works of the artists from the Balkans have been self-portraits. Consequently, the viewpoints of the two groups have been slightly different: those in the first group have been closing their eyes to the true nature of colonialism, which, in part, was a product of their own nation-states, while the second group has been doing a similar thing, but out of fear of assimilation. And even though in the Balkans everything that was Turkish has been characterized as an opus of backwardness, 'the line of nostalgic remembrance of oriental satisfactions is still clearly present: this line is not the same as the

one of the West, since it possesses the unforged quality of domestication and since it places Orientalism in the distant past and not in the geographically distant present' (Slapsak, 2000: 55).

With this we have finally reached the question of the visual identity of the female body in 'oriental' painting. It is an already articulated fact in feminist art theories that the social and cultural practices in which a piece of art is being created are reflected in the latter visual representation, particularly visible in the discourse of gender differences.

Cultural practices were defined as signifying systems, as practices of *representation*, sites not for the production of beautiful things evoking beautiful feelings. They produced meanings and positions from which those meanings are consumed. Representation needs to be defined in several ways. As Representation the term stresses that images and texts are no mirrors of the world, merely reflecting their sources. Representation stresses something refashioned, coded in rhetorical, textual or pictorial terms, quite distinct from its social existence. Representation can also be understood as 'articulating' in a visible or socially palpable form social processes which determine the representation but then are actually affected and altered by the forms, practices and effects of representation. (Pollock, 1988: 6)

In the context of the aforementioned historical codes, a stance towards a (female) body represents a projection of the social, cultural and power impulses. More precisely, this principle dictates that the person who is portrayed is primarily portrayed as a body, which, in fact, is not even that person's body, but a social and gender-related construction of the man who is observing it (Brooks, 1993: 95). The issue here is the body concept for which Judith Butler uses the term 'body as historical situation' and maps it using a concept according to which 'sex' is not something that is physically given, imposed artificially by a gender construction, but in fact a cultural norm that governs the materialization of a body (Butler, 2001: 15). Following transformations in politics of representation in art over the centuries, a link between historical, classic and aesthetic ideals of an epoch and their visualization may clearly be observed. Changes of social circumstances and their effective span fully transform the representation system and the meaning but are also observed through the already mentioned representational travesty. The artist of the West has painted the woman of the Orient as the one whom he could, through his social position of a colonizer, possess. On the other hand, a Serbian artist could not do the same, since his social standing would not allow it. Thus, the counterpart to the western exotica of odalisque, harem and Turkish bath is the ethnographic, which is not even perceived with 'oriental' eyes in Serbia.

In the early 1880s, the Serbian king commissioned a series of paintings by Djordje Krstic portraying life in 'the southern provinces of the fatherland'. Their surroundings, which lacked the typical bourgeois comfort

and manners, and had a palpable, sedate and non-western cast of mind, would place them in the wide oriental spectre. The commissioner's and the painter's nationality (Serbian) as well as the aim of the entire undertaking had determined the manner in which the motif was painted. The women were represented in accordance with the preferred canon of the moment, which stood in sharp contrast to the oriental stereotype. Dressed in traditional, multilayered clothing, their bodies were entirely hidden to prevent any disturbing thoughts. Their fez and kerchief, both of which were decorated with ducats, and their embroidered vests and long-sleeved blouses represented the attributes of womanhood. As symbols of gender belonging, they turned the observer's attention away from the physical distinctions of the body. Public nudity was completely inconceivable in this particular discourse. The dogmatic model of the Orient, according to which a woman of the East spends her life in rest or leisure as she waits to realize her bodily function of sexually pleasing her men, was replaced in these paintings by active physical labour. Carrying either a load of grain, a hoe, a jug, or a distaff in her hands or over her shoulder, she was not given a time for rest. The painted models were positioned in a particular kind of antagonism to passive, prolonged expectation. At the same time, those who were not working according to the rules would have children, which would in a similar manner show that they were morally in the right. In the role of a mother, their bodies would reveal their basic function. In these paintings, the Serbian patriarchal mentality proudly triumphed.

In my further analysis I approach the subject matter via the appreciation of a number of different methods of art interpretation, each of which is based on a particular position of identification which is tantamount to the following questions: Who is the painter? Is it a male or a female? For whom is the work painted? With whom is the work identified? With what other possibilities of identification does the work leave us?

In the first case, the artist was a male commissioned by the Serbian court to paint a series of paintings for the indigenous population and foreigners with the intent that each find the work likeable. In turn, we can perceive a tendency to make the paintings universally identifiable. It is precisely because of this that the women were portrayed as modest, moral and diligent, that is in the manner in which both groups expected them to be. In the given framework, there was no place for indecent and potentially offensive content. Simultaneously, one can clearly perceive the lack of authenticity in the painted images. This is a consequence of the aforementioned intention to make what is painted likeable. Even though the chosen theme is precise and simple (the hardship of everyday work), the costumes of the actresses are entirely inadequate. The formal dresses make them seem more like participants in a wedding procession than women in their daily toil. Although Krstic's paintings belong to a broad

**FIGURE 1**  
**At the Well**



The National Museum, Belgrade.

discourse of the 'peasant idyll', his intervention on the reality is what makes him distinctive. Instead of the voyeuristic painter's position, which allows authenticity in a genre depiction, he used an acted out reality. The said examples may also be viewed through a prism of model, present in

art history for centuries, and according to which a female body is used as an allegorical connotation (Justice, Freedom, etc.). Having in mind that Krstic's representations are not equivalent to the objective reality, in the above context these idealized 'folk women' may be interpreted as the People themselves.

If we now take a different example, the one in which the answers to some of the previous questions would change, the final result would change as well. Paja Jovanovic received his artistic and business stimulus from a famous Vienna *orientmaler*, Leopold Karl Müller, who could understand that artistic expression, 'from afar and through its method of transposing, [art] is closely following the tendencies of politics, in the same manner as it follows the development of social and religious understanding' (Celebonovic, 1974: 112). In a skilful manner, playing on the curiosity that the Eastern Question and the Berlin Congress had raised about the Balkans, he managed to promote his art in Westcentric Europe, where his motifs found their oriental context. Doing his research, he travelled throughout the Balkans, making sketches and purchasing costumes, all of which he would take, together with the impressions he obtained, back to Vienna. His paintings were dominated by empty description and as such, had no serious social connotations. He made illusions that the public expected to see. So, the artist was a male who painted for the audience of the 'real Europe' from the position of an identity alteration. In accordance with the social surrounding in which he made his works, he is forcing us to identify ourselves with those for whom the art was made, marking a clear distance from the ones whom it was meant to portray.

Even a hasty look at *A Women in the Oriental* (c.1884) can clearly confirm that the iconography of the emphasized and exposed female bodies was the sole preoccupation of the artist's interest, while those bodies that were covered and as such, most characteristic of the Islamic and the post-Islamic world, were entirely ignored. Before us stands an obvious odalisque-interpretation of an imaginary and erotic Orient, which selectively emphasizes the satisfaction of the needs of the body, while, at the same time, is marginalizing the martyrdom of the social prison to which the portrayed women were confined due to the incarceration of their bodies. Even though he is absent in these paintings, the male is implicitly present as an observer, a position of domination which is reviving the 'nostalgic' order. Bearing a glazed look, in a pose akin to that of a model, attired in the clothing which emphasizes her bosoms and gently resting her head on an uplifted hand, the woman is made to be passively seductive and as such, is simply luring the observer. Ignoring the moral boundaries, she is offering a different type of sexuality, one that is unrestrained by the feeling of guilt. If we look deeper we can see that the painting is actually a product of the Vienna salon society. Paja Jovanovic, who was bound by

**FIGURE 2**  
**A Woman in the Oriental**



The National Museum, Belgrade.

social limitations, could hardly be a part of such a scene in such surroundings. In time 'oriental sex became a standard of comfort, like all the others which were made accessible with the emergence of mass culture, and it possessed the advantage of being accessible to both the

novelist and the reader alike, without them having to visit the Orient' (Said, 2000: 258). The logic of the costume ball's self-sufficiency was all that the haughty middle-class society consumed together with biscuits and tea, living with the belief that it could possess everything that came from the 'primitive' world.

The aforementioned surroundings in the painting are demonstrating an obvious censorship of the content of the matter at hand. It makes the formula of non-authenticity the parameter of thought. No insight into the reality of everyday life of the region is offered: how these women were of poor health, rarely went out for fresh air, smoked excessively, were rarely exposed to sunshine and were susceptible to long periods of depression which stemmed from their life of isolation. In 1897, Jelena Dimitrijevic, a feminist writer, wrote the following:

Their bedrooms are damp because of the steam baths that never dry out. Is it not because of this that their faces lack freshness? Is it not because of the dampness of their social imprisonment and their early marriage that harems are plagued by tuberculosis? Tuberculosis kills them all. I don't recall during the time I have known them, any young Muslim women dying from anything but tuberculosis. (Dimitrijevic, 1986: 92)

Moreover, she recorded: 'not in one of them did I see white and healthy teeth' (Dimitrijevic, 1986: 103). Such a perception of these paintings of young, healthy, firm female bodies, with their pearly white teeth, was unwelcome.

That these paintings are nothing more than a purely folkloric phrase is confirmed by the lack of inventiveness of compositional models. In the same manner as the colonized peoples were photographed in accordance with the classical western iconography, but wearing their traditional, indigenous clothing, the painted women of the Orient could become Europeans by simply changing their costumes. Let us turn our attention to John Henry Bacon's *The Morning Before the Wedding* (1892) and Paja Jovanovic's *The Decoration of the Bride* (c.1886). In both cases, we can see the genre scene, a group of women in the interior and several objects that define the surroundings. Both paintings are comprised of two segments, the left and the right portion of the canvas. In the left portion, we can recognize the bride, who is encircled by a girl, a middle-aged female and an old woman, personifications of 'the three stages of life', a composition that for centuries has been used to symbolize the cycle of life. In this manner, the painters placed an emphasis on the ceremony of marriage as a turning point in female existence. The biological function of her body is conditioned through the embodiment of the possibility to give birth, which, in turn, is positioned in the figures of the elderly women and the youthful girl. The only way for a woman to satisfy her social role is to bear children. It is because of this that the moment of wedding is, in traditional

**FIGURE 3**  
**The Decoration of the Bride**



The National Museum, Belgrade.

symbolism, represented as the key one. In the right portion the artists painted the female guests of differing ages, who held either flowers or parts of the bride's outfit in their hands. They represent the surroundings in which the main actress would spend the rest of her life. Public places, oriental or not, were structurally created on inequalities. The ideological order of the civil society had imposed regulations upon separate territories on the basis of gender.

For bourgeois women, going into town mingling with crowds of mixed social composition was not only frightening because it became increasingly unfamiliar, but because it was morally dangerous. It has been argued that to maintain one's respectability, closely identified with femininity, meant *not* exposing oneself in public. (Pollock, 1988: 69)

Even though 'pure European ladies' would have been scandalized by this comparison, the fact of the matter is that their lives evolved in a magical circle which was not all that different from the scornfully observed oriental models.

Immediately after the harem door had been closed and locked, all of them suddenly felt free, and quickly started to climb on the sofas and take off

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their clothes. In due course the harem became a blaze of colour from the dresses that had been taken off, and permeated with conversations, laughter and shouts of joy. (Stankovic, 1996: 186)

It was only in closed places that the social practice shaped the paradoxical contradiction of female freedom.

The aforementioned examples were the works of artists of a coherent gender identity. What would happen if we again changed the positions of art identification and considered a female artist? Babett Bachmayer Vukanovic was born in Germany. She studied painting in Munich and Paris. After marrying a Serb, Rista Vukanovic, who was also a painter, she moved to her husband's homeland. So, here we have a case that is different from the previous ones not only on the basis of gender, but also on the basis of nationality. In contrast to the paintings of Krstic, which were created on the model of basic identification, and those of Jovanovic, which were made on the principle of identity alteration, Vukanovic fits mostly in a model of bipolarity. In her works, one can notice the western concept of observation of the environment, personified in the above all conspicuous, romantic interest in the remnants of the Orient, the very thing that at the time, the beginning of the 20th century, had become less popular among the Serbian artists, who were more fascinated with the decadent bourgeoisie of the West. Her genre scene, filled with unhidden sympathies, selectively represents reality, with an obvious intention to pleasantly favour these 'sweet folk motifs'. On the represented female bodies there are no signs of tiredness or hard impoverished lives, but there are also no signs that these bodies are just sexual objects in the expectation of a sexual act. Her paintings are dominated by the timeless atmosphere of imaginary, exotic, fairytale-like beauties from an unrealistic, kitsch romance, who are, according to the rules, always saved in a fantastical manner from an awkward situation and with an unblemished moral reputation. Her gender belonging had definitely made her abandon the lascivious perception of the Orient, which, like a typical male cliché, had dominated the understanding of this phenomenon. And so, the overemphasized sexuality was replaced by overemphasized idleness.

Innocence, purity and naiveté came to dominate the many representations of mothers with children or of children on their own. I consider her decision to paint a young woman breast-feeding her baby as especially indicative in the context of her gender belonging. This is so because it is hard to imagine that a male artist would have done the same thing. Naked female bodies could have been represented only in the context of a clearly expressed sexual allusion which was, at the same time, positioning the moral laxness of the portrayed woman: an imaginary odalisque or any other woman who was not a mother, a wife, or a sister. Here, it would be indicative to point out the fact that the iconographic cannon of the Serbian

**FIGURE 4**  
**Mother with a Child**



Legacy of Beta Vukanovic,  
Belgrade City Museum.

Orthodox Church, as well as of other Orthodox churches, forbids the representation of the Virgin Mary and Christ in the moment of lactation, which is present in the sacred paintings of non-Orthodox confessions. This I especially emphasize because of the obvious correspondence of Vukanovic's painting and the typical composition used in the portrayal of Madonna: the semi-arched golden frame that underscores the sacredness of the image. It seems as if, having chosen this model, Vukanovic is underlining the dual nature of her identity as well as offering solid proof of the extent to which to paint such a scene was unwelcome. Through the Madonna iconography, she was actually looking for an alibi for the revelation of the personality portrayed in the painting – the mother breast-feeding her baby – and to give a timeless and limitless legitimacy to the very act that was painted. This returns us to the aforementioned problems of the lack of inventiveness as far as the solution of the composition is concerned and the theatrical nature of the costumes used. The western artistic discourse, as well as its formal, canonized models, had dictated the manner in which the people thought. Everything else was just a backdrop.

The alleged respect for female intimacy was, in actuality, based on the

perceived hideousness of female biological differences. Lactation, menstruation and pregnancy were only whispered about. In public, they often caused shame. For the sake of precision we should notice that this freedom of expression was not solely based on the artist's gender. Some of it was made possible by her class belonging as well. The women portrayed were of an inferior social standing and as such, were easily accessible to the artist. Vukanovic could offer the naked privacy of the lower social classes, while she could not do the same in relation to her own class. 'Nineteenth-century bodies were classed as well as gendered' (Pollock, 1999: 47).

I think it is obvious that these selectively chosen examples should be used only as a framework in the deconstruction of Orientalism, in the same manner that it could serve as a guideline in any other artistic phenomenon. In situations where 'hierarchy becomes a natural order, and what appears to survive from the past because of its inherent significance determines the values of the present' (Pollock, 1999: 10), the traditional discipline of art history has to be expanded and challenged by new insights and by alternative perspectives. The complexity of the term 'artistic' should not be reduced to exhausting biographical research and other similarly formal analyses. Without any pretence to present this analysis of Orientalism in Serbian art as conclusive, my intention is to demonstrate how through a pragmatic approach, this and other artistic phenomena can be explained, even without the aforementioned, canonized system of meanings. The suggested strategy is not based on a negation of the facts from traditional corpus, which are de facto analytically reliable. It is rather based on sophisticated nuance and some other modes of perception, during which the traditional becomes the anticipated but not canonic at the same time. The anomalies of conservatism, which are all the consequences of phallo-, class-, and racial-centricity, have all come to the surface with the use of different theoretical discourses, pointing to the extent of the complexity of the phenomenon of art and its interpretation. The deconstruction of the lately ignored, age-old taboo terms, like the many different visual constructions of a female body, should only be taken as the starting point.

## NOTES

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1. Even though Said made an attempt at pointing out the inconsistencies and imprecision of the terms themselves, he failed to distance himself completely from the clichés mentioned. His decision to take the Anglo-French model of

observation as the principal objective of most theoretical discourses has not justified the exclusion of entire regions which have, quite often, been incorporated into the context of the Orient in the period that is the subject of his analysis. With this I basically mean the utter exclusion of the Turkish Empire, especially its European segment.

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