

The Modalisque
ft. Tri Angle I, Nitocris
[Pleasure / Knowledge / Bliss]

Let's get to the heart of the matter: The Demotic Pyramid or La pirámide demótica or La pyramide démotique. The base of the Demotic Pyramid, what I refer to as the *modalisque*, we'll cover first. Consider the following:



(fig. 4 - Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres | *Odalisque with Slave* / *L'Odalisque à l'esclave* (1839).)

A question I had asked myself on viewing this painting: who has the most liberty here? It's not the easiest thing to ascertain. But let's try, as an exercise. Is it the musician? Arguably, in actuality, she may. Evidently, she's not mentioned in the title of the painting. It seems as if she is aimless in the sense of not being absorbed in post-coital fatigue like the concubine in the foreground, nor is she occupied by keeping steady watch like the guard in the background. She is seemingly drifting away in her playing of a tune unbeknownst to the viewer. One would perhaps think she was brought from outside the kingdom for hire, but the truth is that she is the most invisible person present of the three depicted. The reason why is because she's actually the *odalik* on which the term odalisque is based on:

An *odalik* was a maid that tended to the harem, but she could eventually become a concubine. She was ranked at the bottom of the social stratification of a harem, serving not the man of the household, but rather, his concubines and wives as personal chambermaids. *Odalik* were usually slaves given as gifts to the sultan by wealthy Turkish men. Generally, an *odalik* was never seen by the sultan but instead remained under the direct supervision of his

mother, the Valide Sultan. If an odalık was of extraordinary beauty *or had exceptional talents in dancing or singing*, she would be trained as a possible concubine. If selected, an odalık trained as a court lady would serve the sultan sexually and only after such sexual contact would she change in status, becoming thenceforth one of the consorts of the sultan.

Note that the musician's left nipple is exposed, a telltale sign that her person is framed in a similar way as the concubine in the foreground. She is effectively the maid for the chambermaid.

The chambermaid, the concubine, the embodiment of the odalisque as a genre is framed in the foreground in purported classic style: you view the woman from the side exclusively, head poised in flirtation or ecstasy or exhaustion or both of either two you choose or maybe all three. If it was up to me, it would be the last one: she's sleeping. In theory, she has the most liberty because she's not really present in the same plane of consciousness as the other two in this scenario. She is lost in her little death. In a way, she enjoys the most luxury by being on break via sleep, & perhaps the sex was good in some way. She is inanimate, she is to say it bluntly, on the pedestal, marble-like skin & all. Even the gossamer sheet her lower half is sheathed in seems to match. As far as sexual objectification goes, she's at the very top:

The harem was the ultimate symbol of the Sultan's power. His ownership of women, mostly slaves, was a sign of wealth, power, and sexual prowess. The institution was introduced in the Turkish society with adoption of Islam, under the influence of the Arab Caliphate, which the Ottomans emulated. To ensure the obedience of the women, many of them were bought and kept into slavery. However, not all members of the Harem were slaves. The main wives, especially those taken into marriage to consolidate personal and dynastic alliances were free women. This was the exception, not the rule. The relationship between slavery and polygamy/harems in the Turkish Harem continued until 1908, at the very least.

But in Ottoman Turk society where the official religion is Islam, she is still a woman: graded a second-class citizen by all systemic metrics. Though she receives a marginal amount of structurally substantial privilege that the musician can only hope to attain, being reified isn't freedom, it's actually the opposite. Also, if you are deemed a 'free woman' solely to secure personal & dynastic alliances via the institution of marriage, you basically aren't currency, but stock, which is an even worse grade of reification, something concrete made abstract. She dreams, (of what we don't know, it's a private pleasure, which in this configuration is hard to come by) but when she wakes up, she will still exist as what she's been molded & acculturated to be, which she must more or less come to expect & accept. The entire thing about seraglios for harems were that they were separate living quarters for women constructed specifically for the jealous, paranoid fact that they could not be seen by other men outside of the sultan...&...someone who's manhood is up for debate by design: The Eunuch, the sexually abject.

The Eunuch, on paper, has the most liberty in this equation. It's interesting that he isn't called that, but a slave. Okay, so he was sold & torn from his homeland of Nubia along the Nile at a very young age, castrated at the end of that process, given a flower name & was taught in a palace school to basically fulfill any aspect of harem service where the highest you could aspire to position wise from being untrained was being a seasoned senior *hasilli*, which derives from an Arabic word meaning "product." Look at the bigger picture, alright?

The wealth thus amassed, the proximity to the sultan, and the role the harem ladies played in court intrigues ("Sultanate of Women") meant that its occupant had considerable political influence; several kizlar aghas were responsible for the downfall of grand viziers and the accession of sultans...

The post of the kizlar agha was created in the reign of Murad III (r. 1574–1595) in 1574, with the Habeshi Mehmed Agha as its first occupant. Until then, the Ottoman palace had been dominated by the white eunuchs, chiefly drawn from the Christian populations of the Balkans or the Caucasus. The 16th century, however, saw a rapid rise of the population of the Topkapi Palace, including among eunuchs, whose numbers rose from 40 under

Selim I (r. 1512–1520) to over a thousand under Murad III. While black eunuchs had served alongside white eunuchs in the palace, by 1592, for reasons that are unclear, both a separation of roles as well as the ascendancy of the black eunuchs over the white ones had become established: white eunuchs were restricted to the supervision of the male pages (içoğlan), while black eunuchs took over the far more prestigious supervision of the private apartments of the sultan and the palace women (harem). Consequently, the "chief black eunuch" quickly eclipsed the "chief white eunuch" or kapi agha (kapi ağası, "agha of the gate"), who had hitherto been the head of the palace personnel, and rose to become, in the words of the Orientalist C. E. Bosworth, "in practice the principal officer of the whole palace".

The bigger picture is: though the eunuch is the most occupied by his job, he enjoys the largest amount of privilege deferred to him by the sultan. Privilege, & even luxury in any world configuration you can heretofore fathom are misnomers for true liberty. But privilege is only bestowed by a degree of trauma & sacrifice in any case, be it for the playing musician, the sleeping concubine, or the alert eunuch who has traded his entire reproductive faculty & capacity for pleasure for a *chance* to *maybe* gain major political influence. Does that sound like liberty to you?

I bring up this painting, again, to delineate the modalisque base of The Demotic Pyramid. We have three sectors of the base, which are the characters of the painting, & then there's me, the secret fourth corner, who just gave an extremely generous reading to an Orientalist piece of tripe. Because it's through me that all the colors of the light & dark of this painting pass. I am the conduit, the vessel, l'tresor interdit, I am the corner the shine grasps. I am the anti-prism's lass of molten glass. This painting is anti-capitalist because it imagines a world without a king, vizier, sultan in anything but synecdoche only: the crown. But the crown, like the painting, can be repurposed: it can be torn apart, looted, & the materials recommissioned for different objective means. The man in the picture that determines the relations of the characters in the picture, which isn't photo-realist, but symbolic in the way that figurative painting is, it doesn't exist, even in a scenario where every character was scripted, people were posed piecemeal, costume was given, elements embellished. There's a different version where everyone (in exactly the same positions) is outside in a royal garden that was made years later.

The scene is a total imaginary afterthought of a bygone time that was arguably worse when compared to today, & the only real liberty is realizing that it is *just that*, just like these times will be. No one in this picture is free until everyone is. It doesn't matter what sect of non-male you are. Everyone in this picture doesn't understand how everyone else struggles, or how they can work for each others pleasure instead of being accessories for someone who hordes all of the power. But in this place, this palace, without the patriarch, the possibility to figure that out is extant. Though it is orientalist tripe, there are elements that look good to me. Cruising is about locating that hole in the locus, that hook in the look & having a mind primed to take advantage. The interplay between these three figures into the discrete demotic triangles.

So, one face of the pyramid is the Tri Angle of [*Pleasure / Knowledge / Bliss*]. Who corresponds to what from the modalisque base? What do these terms have in consequence as to my writing practice, & what I hold dear about this means of expression? When I talk about a demotic angle, remember: the Demotic is vocabulary & a manner of speaking that seems natural. This term derives from the Greek word for 'popular.' The Demotic is an ancient Egyptian script derived from the northern forms of Hieratic used in the Nile Delta. Vulgar, in the Latinate, is a more common, an 'of the people' means to say demotic: a more exalted, yet obscure way. The demotic is a different angle to vulgarity that suggests something else between the sacred & the profane, the known & unknown.

Pleasure is the realm of the Musician. It's clear she is the most consciously enjoying in the picture. To sum up Barthean textual pleasure is, in his words: "the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading." For me

it denotes an ease of access & semiotic literary familiarity via something that reminds you of language's prime function, which is to communicate, stimulate thought, & even entertain through individual expression of long given codes & tropes. You can see, again her face as she's occupied in her savvy & skill, which lubes the coarse course of work to make her daily labor, dare I say, enjoyable. She is the example that perhaps a perfect job means being able to do what you love, even if that job is enveloped in layers of total servitude. When she plays the music, a song she's really good at playing, or one she just really loves, one that influences the dream of The Concubine, whether The Musician knows it or not, she is actively take care of herself by daring to find any pleasure in life. Pleasure is a means to an end, because without the given codes that make reading pleasurable, there would be no Beginning & no End, two fundamental bookmarked tropes to the Story as an archetype.

You can also, if you are given to really looking at the painting & enjoying the display, get a flash of breast from the Musician. Barthes asks:

"Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no "erogenous zones" (a foolish expression, beside): it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces or rather: stages appearance-as-disappearance."

Moving on.

Bliss is the realm of The Concubine. Like I said earlier, she's lost in her little death. To sum up Barthean textual pleasure is, in his words: "the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts, unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language." Bliss is *jouissance*. In my words: textual bliss consists of lexical formations that complicate, rupture, expand on language's prime function (which is to communicate) past the visible horizon into the unknown & figurative with the mission to progress in virtually any direction. It is the energy to innovate or renovate with the spirit of novelty. The voluptuous Concubine is excessively naked sans a gossamer sheet that covers her sex (which, if we are being honest is unknown), & though she is in a pose that has been contrived, in a lot of ways she makes it seem as if it isn't, or that it doesn't matter.

She is sleeping, dreaming past the dimensions of her quotidian life, where familiar arrangements can take exciting, strange new connections, private pleasures, even if they go against the common sense & standard causalities of that life, even if she is riding on an illogical night mare. She is on the same wavelength as Severo Sarduy's Cobra, & in her dreams, like Lilith, she wears that serpent as a boa. Barthes says:

"Language reconstructs itself elsewhere under the teeming flux of every kind of linguistic pleasure. Where is this elsewhere? In the paradise of words, Cobra is in fact a paradisiac text, utopian (without site), a heterology by plenitude, all the signifiers are here and each scores a bull's-eye; the author (the reader) seems to say to them: / love you all (words, phrases, sentences, adjectives, discontinuities: pell-mell: signs and mirages of objects which they represent); a kind of Franciscanism invites all words to perch, to flock, to fly off again: a marbled, iridescent text; we are gorged with language, like children who are never refused anything or scolded for anything or, even worse, "permitted" anything."

Have you seen her life? Maybe she wants to escape it somehow. Are you going to be the asshole who tells her she shouldn't? Her dream is influenced by the Musician's song, & modulated by whatever pleasure she was able to garner in her time with the Sultan. Moving on!

Knowledge is the realm of The Eunuch. Placid, yet alert, The Eunuch combines & annuls opposites.. The Eunuch complicates Difference in one's own unique way that elides the borders between given expectations of status. Between pleasure & bliss is the Barthean theory of *tnesis*: "source or figure of pleasure, here confronts two prosaic edges with one another; it sets what is useful to a knowledge of the secret against what is useless to such knowledge; *tnesis* is a seam or flaw resulting from a simple principle of functionality." It is a cutting that turns purportedly unbridgeable gaps between absolute categories into relative gradient fields between them. The Eunuch is a floating point number characterized by a radix point, which turns certain integers into exact approximations that are somehow less certain & to some degrees totally unfathomable.

Though The Eunuch has been cast out & away as sexually abject, again this does not mean said Eunuch is displaced from eroticism or the spectrum of pleasure. Because it was Audre Lorde who defined what the erotic truly is:

The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need - the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfilment. Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love. But this is tantamount to blinding a painter and then telling her to improve her work, and to enjoy the act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel.

Lorde reclaims the erotic as a extradimensional somatic locus in a world that has suppressed, torn away, hyper-reduced & abnegated what desire & sexuality means for women, posited as the other to malehood. Since the erotic is a plane that everyone can access, Lorde does well to underscore the fact that femininity isn't the essential, exclusionary premium many are used to thinking it is, & nor is gender for that matter. But we knew that already. The point is that once men access a greater interface with the other in themselves that they suppress, they will live fuller lives & break their dependence on abuse. But it's not just a problem with men, though it speaks for the overriding kyriarchy we should still get rid of. I disagree with her total eradication of the pornographic from the erotic, though I know the acuteness & target of her critique is extremely valid. I think she speaks more about the hyperreductive casteforms of capitalism, which has even drained the blood from her concept of self-care.

Like the man on the song Juicy said: if you don't know, now you know.

More to the point, knowledge fleshes out the dyad of pleasure & bliss, because if any absolutes exist, they only do as marginal bastions of hyper-excess. The field between pleasure & bliss is much richer than that, which is to say the ways pleasure & bliss can intersect are actually limitless & unique to where the point lands. The radix point, a bundle of shifting coordinates, is the Barthesian axes of castration

collapsed into a matte black hole, a drifting singularity who holds court & keeps watch for new coordinates of desire by becoming an unsure, a substantial beauty mark. The increased range of motion the Eunuch is afforded in society is a side-effect of that. Your knowledge of a word or of a concept or of a sentence or of anything a line provides determines your relationship to pleasure / bliss in a given text. If you want to feel more, have a better range of motion, & enjoy more fully what life has to offer, you would do better to learn more. Ignorance is indifference. Did you really enter this life just to stay exactly the same?

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