

# The Role of Gender in American-Middle Eastern Dance

by (Amara) L. Osweiler

In this essay, I will look at American-Middle Eastern dance practitioners and feminist social constructionist discourse in order to raise some questions about each. These two areas seem to present contradictory approaches to gender. Many Middle Eastern dance practitioners presume an essentialist idea about femininity that social constructionists challenge. Yet, debates within the American-Middle Eastern dance community show the limits of feminist academic discourse. This becomes particularly apparent if we explore debates over male practitioners' identities within American-Middle Eastern dance.

**Part 3:** There is precedence in the Middle East of both genders performing in drag.<sup>1</sup> In areas where the mixing of gender, especially non-related kin mixing is strongly discouraged, both men and women have performed as the other gender in front of their respective genders. But this aspect did not greatly impact Middle Eastern dance in the United States.

The acceptance of drag, fully or partial, within the American-Middle Eastern dance community depends upon which gender is performing. Women are accepted on occasion as cross dressers because they are viewed by other community members as making fun of male domination and are taking on masculine characteristics as their own. Men in drag, who are almost never in full drag but maintain partial masculine traits like beards and mustaches or wearing slightly different costumes, are a different issue.

These types of dancers are punished and result in few performance opportunities and hence little money or recognition. But it also reflects the structuring of a system, which hinders their expression. American-Middle Eastern dance has been a safe area for American women, especially for those amateur dancers who stay in the female community and do not venture in the male-controlled professional arena. This gender separation protects the female dance from intrusion and domination by men. Thus, men in drag are perceived as making fun of women.<sup>2</sup> For women who feel they are not taken seriously and are looking for respectability, men in drag are making this process harder. More substantial is the issue of men entering the arena as a "female," representing women and taking over opportunities



for women to represent themselves. These ideas are used as a defense mechanism with which women practitioners protect their women's space by maintaining and reiterating rules from the heterosexual gender binary system. It is acceptable to dance as a woman by females and as a man by males, but not a woman by males.

Nevertheless, if the dance depicts or reaches an authentic femininity, then why are feminine men a threat and consequently punished? They are only a threat if femininity is not authentic and essential, but performed. [Judith] Butler would recognize this femininity on a male body in how the transvestite is able to play with gender expectations<sup>3</sup> as a tacit subversion. The drag persona disrupts not only concepts of masculinity and femininity but also the whole heterosexual matrix as it demonstrates the fluidity in which gender roles can be transposed to the other. Butler writes: "What is 'performed' in drag is, of course, the *sign* of gender, a sign that is not the same as the body that it figures, but that cannot be read without it."<sup>4</sup> In her writing, Butler calls for not only the examination of essential gender but also fixed sex. Incorporating Monique Wittig's ideas, she writes that, "there is no distinction between sex and gender; the category of "sex" is itself a *gendered* category, fully politically invested, naturalized but not natural."<sup>5</sup> For Butler, sex is also constructed and becomes materialized in the body (which is also imbued and layered with cultural and historical meanings and representations) through reiteration of the norms and is reinforced by its usage. There is no true gender or sex except for the ones constructed by society.

As already noted, Butler does not explain when subversion is necessary or desirable. Moreover, it is not even clear that it is always successful. From her perspective, male drag performers succeed in demonstrating that this dance does not connect femininity with the female body. She writes: "[I]t gives us a clue to the way in which the relationship between primary identification - that is, the original meanings accorded to gender - and subsequent gender experience might be framed."<sup>6</sup> But from another perspective, this subversion is not complete since these practitioners are not accepted within the American-Middle Eastern dance community or

within the larger society. The community does not read these performances "as imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself."<sup>7</sup> Rather, they are understood within the same heterosexual matrix Butler wants to displace. The goals Butler sets for us are clear: men in the dance should subvert the assumption of it as an essential feminine dance. What would happen if women in drag were more frequent, visible in different venues, and accepted? What would happen if men in drag were not seen as deviating from the norm but allowed to question the originality of two genders? Still, how do we get there? As Gayatri Spivak says, "we have to look at where the group - person, the persons, or the movement - is situated when we make claims for or against essentialism. A strategy suits a situation, a strategy is not a theory."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Shay, 127-128; And, 1976 20; And 1959 24-30; Saleh 82-83.

<sup>2</sup> Aradon, 173.

<sup>3</sup> Meyer, 72. Meyer writes an interesting account of a transsexual (one who has undergone a sex change), Jeannie and her persona of Jeannie from *I Dream of Jeannie*. The context of her stripping routine is critical to the way she is perceived. In a non-gay club, her transsexuality is never revealed, but in a "drag show, it is the transsexual body, not the female body, that becomes the object of the gaze."


<sup>4</sup> Butler 1993, 237.

<sup>5</sup> Butler 1990b, 112.

<sup>6</sup> Butler 1990b, 137.

<sup>7</sup> Butler 1990b, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Spivak, 154.



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