

The Role of Gender in American-Middle Eastern Dance

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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.

In the American-Middle Eastern dance community, the dance is about looking for and finding authentic femininity. Female participants frequently complain that before beginning American-Middle Eastern dance, there was a lack of femininity in their lives. Halimeda, a professional dancer in Florida for over twenty years, comments: "[The dance required a] confidence level in your own femininity that was certainly something that was lacking in the rest of my life. I am a computer programmer [and] I worked almost totally with men... at the naval air station.... Here was something that was feminine and strong." Halimeda demonstrates which many women have come to realize (learn), that there is a gender imbalance in their lives. As a response, she looks towards Middle Eastern dance's feminine agency for balance. Halimeda's statement also expresses a longing for a feminine role that American society expects women to fulfill but which she cannot find in the public/man's world. Elizabeth Buck in her thesis on Rakkasah, also makes this observation: "Autonomous career women who compete in male dominated environments may feel stripped of their femininity and chose danse orientale as a means of redefining their sexuality and femininity." These participants contend that the Western, patriarchy society in which they live, has denied femininity to them and that it needs to be re-newed. This idea of a denial or suppression makes the essentialist supposition that feminine qualities exist naturally in women prior to their denial. Donnalee Dox writes: "[W]estern dancers also describe the movements of belly dance as expressing an 'essence of femininity' which needs no audience, and which is separate from historical or cultural aspects of the dance." This essence is thus rendered ahistorical, never changing, and something which all women possess.

The community makes a distinction between femininity and sexuality in the dance's practice. A woman cannot be too feminine but she can be too sexy or too trappy. Examples of this would include hip circles and shoulder shimmies close to an audience member and the wearing of costumes that do not cover the breast or buttocks in what counts as a "respectable" manner. Perhaps this sexiness could be seen as ultra feminine? Or perhaps as an excess of femininity? The definition and restriction of sexually explicit moves and styles in the American-Middle Eastern dance community not only demonstrates cultural variation about gender but also emphasizes the underlying class structure. There is a commitment by American professionals to make this dance more respectable in terms of middle-class aesthetics: dancers must not be viewed as sex objects but as artists. This sense of "respectability" as Marta Savigliano has

pointed out in Tango, comes from middle class participants, who as colonizers, desire the Other's passion but also need to maintain a discrete, class distance. Those who do act in a sexy manner are seen as low class (poverty = loose morality). They are certainly not perceived as using these low class actions for their own strategic purposes and struggles against dominant middle class powers and aesthetics.

The American-Middle Eastern dance community has been set up so that the main means to make a living through the dance is to perform in clubs, restaurants, and parties. A professional dancer is hired at these events to perform some notion of femininity. If she does not conform to the expectations of what the dancer is suppose to be, then she will not be hired or able to make a living. Because there seems to be different ideas of femininity, it is not clear whether a dancer is expressing an inner femininity or acting out the audiences' expectations of a culturally and historically produced femininity. Yet, before exploring further gender problems with America-Middle Eastern dance, I will look at with the perspective that anti-essentialism makes available.

Judith Butler sees gender as something created through repetitious acts, which solidify over time into inner essences, naturalness, and identities and creates an illusion of fixity and stability. The Gender system is maintained by participants, through teachings and practices, which lead to its embodiment and performance. Participants may or may not be willing to continue specific gender practices. By congealing, gender hides its construction. Butler writes: "Consider that a sedimentation of gender norms produces the peculiar phenomenon of a 'natural sex' or a 'real woman' or any number of prevalent and compelling social fictions, and that this is a sedimentation that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which, in reified form, appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another." Those who do not agree to perform gender expectations, like the overly sexual belly dancer, are punished by society. Still, Butler writes: "Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of doing one's gender, but that one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter." Although gender construction is a continual practice, it is not easy to change one's gender, nor does Butler think one chooses her or his gender. At the same time, repetition and citation bring in room for deviation, mutation, and instability into the Gender system. Since there is no true or ideal gender to reach, Butler hopes there will be many concepts of gender: too many for one to hold power over the others. Yet, this friction between individual choices and social restrictions brings up the question of where one gets the power or the notion to deviate from a certain practice.

Femininity in American-Middle Eastern dance is created through the practice of the dance. Gender is a performance to which Middle Eastern dancers contribute. For many American-Middle Eastern practitioners, the performative creation of femininity (which they see as an expression of an inner essential femininity) is good and beneficial to their every day lives. But Butler gives us no tools for assessing this at all. She does not outline or define how or when actions are subversive enough to cause changes in society. What does she want these dancers to subvert or redeploy? Who is to say a deviation is good or bad? Successful or not?

Though the two discourses may debate about how women are formed or become realized, they each end with a plural and flexible femininity. Within both structures, participants are continually trying to fulfill expectations and citing social ideals that can never be reached which leaves room for variations and degrees of femininity. For American-Middle Eastern dancers, there is a negotiation between non- and essential femininity while for Butler, the construction allows for all types of negotiations, including a production of essentialism.

Up until this point, the femininity I have been discussing has resided within and performed by females. What happens to femininity in American-Middle Eastern dance when men practice the dance? Do practitioners who equate the dance with the expression of an authentic femininity claim that men discover an essential femininity too? Or do they discover a masculine version of femininity? I shall argue that the debate surrounding male performance of American-Middle Eastern dance provides some corroboration for Butler's position but, in addition, points to its deficiencies.

In certain contexts, male bodies perform as men. For example, in Staged-Folk dance, though there may be overlapping in costuming and movements between men and women, the genre tends to maintain strong gender distinctions and barriers. Generally, men perform with erect postures, using more space (especially the vertical plane), and angular movements, while women tend to use more hip work and their feet rarely leave the floor. There are at least two influences on Staged-Folk's gender distinctions. One comes from the Middle Eastern culture where gender differences in local dances reflect, continue, and signify various degrees of gender separation in a particular area. Another is Ballet's aesthetics impact, which also embodies strong distinctions between masculine and feminine roles on stage. Since the beginning of Staged-Folk dance in the late 1950s/early 1960s, Ballet has been an integral part of its character; Staged-Folk dancers are often trained first in Ballet. Susan Foster has pointed out that while viewers today see the male Ballet dancer as effeminate, "a man in tights," it is in the role as displaying his object, the female dancer, that he is considered a man. "She is, in a word, the phallus, and he embodies the forces that pursue, guide, and manipulate it." In this position, the male dancer is allowed to maintain and identify with a masculine role for the audience. There is another alternative for men. Some male practitioners are perceived as outside the binary gender matrix and sex expectations. They are described as being able to escape their bodies. Michelle Forner writes in her thesis: "In terms of communicating movement, many informants do not see [Ibrahim Farrah's] gender as a factor. One student said that he is genderless and transcends sexual boundaries." In this context, the American-Middle Eastern dance community, men become less threatening. Forner continues: "In terms of Farrah's relationship with his students, informants report that being a man makes him an authority figure to some, enables him to act in ways that might be unacceptable for a female teacher, and creates a less-threatening atmosphere because he is not a source of competition." This phenomenon may continue the patriarchal assignment of man as a universal who can escape his body and therefore can situate himself in a position higher than women.

Yet, men in American-Middle Eastern dance are also depicted as exploring their femininity through the dance. Men who do so are often accused of displaying an excess of femininity.

Some spectators find male dancers in this context disturbing. Others who are proficient at watching and performing American-Middle Eastern dance see subtle differences between non- and effeminate male dancers. Tarik abd el Malik, a professional dancer in New York, describes one male dancer as "very flamboyant [and] effeminately gay." el Malik also describes inappropriate costuming, movements, and mannerisms: "His vest is shaped so that both his nipples show, his pants are really sheer, and he wears a ton of pink eye shadow. He dance style [is with a] limp wrist...." el Malik, continues to give reasons why men dance in this manner: "I've met men who danced this way because they (A) wanted to get in touch with their feminine side; (B) were gay and wanted to make sure everyone knows they were 'PROUD GAY MEN;' [and] (C) They believed that this IS a woman's dance and feel they have to dance 'like' a woman.... They didn't understand that (A) their feminine side is always there; (B) Their sexuality what every it is, is a sacred integral part of their being and does not need to be broadcast for other peoples' approval.... [and] (C) This is a folk dance which is done by both sexes in its natural environment..." Though el Tarik's comments are directly about criticizing how people, in particular gay men, expressing their sex orientation in this dance, they are also direct correlations to the class judgment of some women as being too sexy made previously. There is precedence in the Middle East of both genders performing in drag. 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. 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. Butler would recognize this femininity on a male body in how the transvestite is able to play with gender expectations 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." 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." 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." 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." 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."

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