

The embodied “Otherness” Bellydance beyond Orientalism and Male Gaze

Una Shamaa

Supervisor: Annie McCourt

Assessor: Sandra Coffin

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Introduction

The Egyptian Dancer Amie Sultan started a campaign in 2021 to have Raqs Sharqi (in Arabic „Eastern Dance“, also known as Bellydance) recognized by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage. One of her reasons was to protect it from being made invisible by authorities, stigmatized and pushed into unsafe environments of night clubs in Egypt (Sultan 2022). It is not my intention to analyse social aspects in the Middle-East, but to explore the perception and the impacts of Raqs in the west. Having passed from exotic entertainment with clear political agendas up to the 20th Century though an empowerment tool by women, then, post 9/11, either rejected as a sign of “islamization of the west” or generalized by intellectuals as nothing but a product of Orientalism, Bellydance may have a bigger cultural, social and even economic impact in the west as it has been recognized. This is not so surprising, since it is mostly practiced by women (or some men, who if not queer, at least are not concerned to be identified as such), who also control a significant part of its means of production – from events management, artistic direction to ownership of education venues, and a considerable part of the costume design.

As the question of denomination is tricky, I will use mostly the word “Raqs”, following the dancer and researcher Tümay Kılınçel's recommendation, for it takes away the imagined “orient”, is a word in Arabic and Turkish internationally understood by practitioners, and above all, it focuses on the DANCE, leading it to a more equal position with recognized artistic dances (Kılınçel 2022).

My analysis covers its current forms in the west and I will explore it from the gender perspective and as a deviation from the hegemonic culture, as well as the political use of the “otherness” embodied in Raqs. Historical aspects and considerations about Raqs in the Middle-East just target the comprehension of some points presented.

The dancer's body and meanings printed into it

Feminist movements struggle to place Raqs, therefore the reactions to it are rarely neutral: either it is praised (not always critically) as super-tool for female empowerment or despised as a form of sexualized representation of the the female body. The empowerment aspect comes partly from affirming and less restrictive beauty patterns, the the feeling of

sovereignty upon one's own body and the permission to the enjoyment. Authors like Qualls-Colbert (1990), who has influenced the practice of western Raqs, speak even of a sacred femininity. Although these claims may lack scientific rigour and present essentialist notions of gender, their therapeutic aspect for societies in which female sexuality is perceived as merely serving reproduction purposes or satisfying male needs, deserves credit. Whereas such views of an imagined natural state of humanity has been overcome by less essentialising approaches, they represented a step towards a more emancipatory relationship to the own body.

In the documentary about her own career, Sadie Marquardt explains that one of the reasons why she found a “home” in Raqs is the acceptance of her figure, which did not happen in other forms of dance and athletics in the USA in the 1990s. The total absence of body-shaming in the Raqs scene though is illusory: the ideals are more body-friendly than in e.g. Classic Ballet and embrace a much bigger part of the female population, including a wider range of age and body shapes and colours. Nonetheless, when we look at the most famous dancers, they have some common attributes: all meet physical capacitism, are over 30 (but not much over 50), long haired, curvy (but not “overweighted”) cis-women. If the Raqs scene might be in a good direction, it is just one step to a not yet achieved inclusiveness and deconstruction of mainstream body ideals.

Raqs acquired nevertheless a persistent reputation of over-sexualized entertainment for the male audience that outlived the context in which it appeared. The 19th Century Orientalist agenda of representation of the uncivilized impulses, partly connected to the image of Bellydancers, reinforced the idea of the feminised “Oriental” needing to be controlled by the masculinised “western”, as pointed by Said (1979). The author though, focusing on the question of representation, ignores any self determination of dancers, who might have different views on their role. The connection of Raqs with titillation, amplified by the contrast with the Victorian image of the “modest” woman in constraining corsets, seems to have taken such deep roots in the imaginary that even in times of intensive exposure to nudity, it is still hard for the mainstream discourse to unlink the dance from this connotation.

Even the Orientalist discourse has changed: from the need of the lascivious (feminised) people to be controlled by the civilized white men to the oppressed women having to be protected from barbarism (by the civilized white). While it's not my intention to relativise any human rights violation, it is interesting to observe the instrumentalisation of those violations to dismiss feminist claims in west while reinforcing anti-islamic feelings. These posters of the German right-wing Party Alternative for Germany (AfD) illustrate this discourse, that has found hearing – even if in a less striking version – by larger part of the

population. Left-wing members as well reject Raqs' as “post-colonial execration” (Wenzel 2021) and dismiss dancers automatically as non-emancipated who rely on “sex sells” principle (Aust 2021). This could be a symptom of a resistant form of “westcentrism” disguised as fight against racism and sexism, in which what is not created inside and for the left (western) circles is not perceived as valid.

“Islam doesn't belong to Germany. The women's freedom is not negotiable!”

(Author's translation)



“Burkas?
We fancy bikinis.

Dare it, Germany!”

(Author's translation)

A direct causality between the Post 9/11 and the decreasing interest in Bellydance cannot be assumed, but a correlation can be observed. Exceptions are in the Arabic and Turkish communities, who book dancers for family parties and as an attraction for their bars and restaurants, mostly frequented by customers with those backgrounds. From my experience, this represents ca. 90% of the bookings for Raqs (not Fusion) shows. Most professional dancers in East Germany do not have Arabic or Turkish background. That could possibly be explained by one of the factors that led Sultan to her initiative: Raqs is a beloved part of the culture, but performers have a low status, according to Gahr (2022) in his openly denunciative article.

The process of overcoming Orientalism

Raqs-influenced dances, generically called Fusion Bellydance, have grown since 2000 in popularity, partly substituting “conventional” Bellydance. While so called Tribal Fusion works with a pot-pourri of many non-western and western pre-industrial elements – be they accurately researched or based on an imagined traditions - other forms adapt the foundation of the Raqs vocabulary, but distance themselves from the Orientalistic aesthetics, forgoing elements considered “exotic”. Part of the Fusion scene rejects “conventional” Bellydance due to a reflection on Orientalism, colonialism and cultural appropriation, but

recognizes the deep influence of Arabian and Turkish dancers had on their formation. Another part though is unconcerned with such questions, but takes distance from the “Orientals”, for not approving “their mentality”. Such affirmation comes from my personal observation of internet forums and conversations in festivals over two decades, but has not been thoroughly researched. An analysis of social media concerning this issue could be the object of a further investigation

The number of dancers engaged with the development of new patterns increases visibly both by dancers with and without roots in countries where Raqs is a social dance. In Germany we could mention Tümay Kiliñçel, a dancer with Turkish origin who had a Contemporary Dance education in Germany and researched Raqs in Egypt and Turkey. She declares her interest of promoting Raqs to an accepted performance art, not only in its own right but also as a political issue of decolonization and feminism. She speaks of the fear of reproducing cliches and the need to overcome this fear by “detoxing” the dance of Orientalist dehumanising patterns (Kiliñçel 2020). In her second choreography on this topic, “We Love 2 Raqs”, she shows artists from different contexts of Raqs, from more commercial to experimental approaches. These were some of the few Raqs productions financed with public cultural funds (except festivals of “multi-cultural” arts, which explicitly focus on the Otherness of the productions), which reflects the slow process of Raqs starting to be seen beyond the cliches. Kiliñçel herself questions if she would have received these fundings without her degree in Contemporary Dance and Choreography and Performance in Germany. Raqs is for instance not recognized as Performing Art by the Künstlersozialkasse, an agency that provides health and social insurance for freelancer artists (KSK 2022). As pointed out by Kiliñçel in the discussion “The Other Body” (2020), Raqs dancers hardly have a chance of survival outside a commercial circuit, so the question of recognition is also important as a matter of resources distribution. She also claims that, while the commercial circuit of night clubs allowed the dance to survive, it also restricts its possibilities of development and puts the artist in a position of “serving” the expectation of paying clients.

Interestingly, one of the main aspects that has changed from “conventional” Bellydance is the costume: the decorated belts and tops (*bedlah*), usually associated with the dance, are substituted by plainer closed dresses. In the attempt to transform the perception of the dance, dancers adopt the strategy to cover the body, instead of claiming its right to remain uncovered. While one could argue that the *bedalh* reinforces Orientalist patterns and was never a traditional costume in the first place, banishing it does not address the sexism of the viewer, who potentially associates showing skin with sexual availability. Instead, it reproduces an attitude of “modesty”, in which covering the stomach is the only

way to be taken seriously. Thus, an interesting contribution of Egyptian Couture to the costume design is rejected – which does not necessarily mean decolonization of the eye, but reflects another western imposition, since the “contemporary” Raqs has to be one with approval of western high arts (if no longer Classic Ballet, then conceptual Contemporary Dance - still a western academic artistic manifestation).

In all contexts, Raqs dancers struggle to justify their art, yet its influences on early Modern Dance – and therefore in Contemporary Dance – are hard to oversee. With some dancers like Ruth St. Denis, Louis Fuller and Isadora Duncan the reference is visible in the costume or stylization of movements (Burnam 2012). Laban, despite his political position and support to a racist ideology, praised the movement of the “primitive people” (Laban 1981). Can we really imagine the rupture with the rigidity of Classic Ballet without the contrast that Bellydancers in the 19th and early 20th Century offered? Is Contemporary Dance imaginable without pelvis movements or undulating explorations? What about the principles of Dervish spinning? So although Orientalism re-shaped Raqs to a certain point, Raqs left its marks much beyond Orientalism. Moreover it keeps re-inventing itself in its own right all over the world in professional and amateur context.

While our perception of "high art" dances in general tends to be more differentiated, the same does not occur to Raqs: we can tell conservative approaches of Ballet from contemporary ones, Modern/Contemporary Dance used for MTV video clips and Broadway productions from fringe experimental performances and so on. Yet, the comprehension that Raqs can be found in varied contexts and interpreted in even opposite ways escapes most, and maybe as a leftover of colonialism, remains a representation of “the Other”.

Conclusion

A set of “rules” for a decolonized feminist Raqs is not the solution. A change of names, costumes, the use of certain types of music or choreographic approaches that follow the trends accepted as artistic contemporary dance by western self-claimed authorities do not consistently address the asymmetry of power relations in the environments in which Raqs is practiced and, above all, NOT practiced. Instead, some questions should follow us daily: Are we giving the due credits to our influences and giving space for contributions from outside our own (white) ethnicity, without stressing the "Otherness"? What are our strategies for gender balanced relationships to the audience/clients? Do we accept sharing resources and give up the self-proclaimed status of “expert of the other”? Can just see ourselves as a micro-part of a never-ending interaction of influences from different backgrounds?

The transformation does not necessarily have to happen in the DANCE but in the connotations put into Raqs and the sociopolitical relations that it – albeit partly unintentionally – mercilessly exposes.

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