

Orientalism Versus Sacred Feminism in Belly Dance

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Abstract

Belly dance is an accessible tool for modern women to experience empowerment and healing through the embodiment and expression of the sacred feminine. Despite the stereotypes and stigma that have pervaded the history of belly dance —mainly based on a perceived duality between the Orientalism and feminism frameworks of which belly dance is associated—this dance form continues to grow in popularity around the world and is enjoyed by women of all different backgrounds. This paper considers the possibility that a new movement of sacred feminism is emerging and being experienced through the art of belly dance. The following themes of this movement are examined: 1) belly dance as a means for female emancipation through sensual expression and gender reconciliation; 2) belly dance as an embodying activity that increases positive body image at all stages of womanhood; 3) belly dance as a spiritual medium for experiencing artistic leisure, ritual, and community with other women; and 4) belly dance as a healing modality integrating the power of feminine movement with numinous expression. It is the hope that the evidence provided within this paper elevates this dance form further and creates a greater appreciation for the holistic health potential belly dance offers those who dance it.

Keywords: belly dance, Orientalism, feminism, healing, empowerment, embodiment, sensual expression, positive body image, gender identity, the sacred feminine, leisure

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Introduction

Is belly dance an outdated fantasy of Orientalism or an accessible tool for modern women to experience empowerment and healing through the embodiment and expression of the sacred feminine? According to the Orientalist point-of-view, women are perceived as objects of lust that are designed for pleasing male fantasies, and the theory of the male-oriented gaze supports the Orientalist argument that sensuality-based activities like belly dancing are fundamentally constructed around fulfilling masculine desires. The feminist movements of the West, however, have appropriated belly dancing as a vehicle for women to express their empowerment and celebrate their bodies through an open display of their sensuality (Gerth, 2015). This research question highlights the duality that has existed within belly dance because of these two frameworks, and this question begs to be answered in the hope of showcasing the gifts of belly dance when it is separated from its stigmatized roots and viewed as a beneficial dance form for all women to enjoy.

Background of the Problem

The dance genre known as belly dance is a melting pot of eclectic and expressive dance styles originating from around the Middle East. In "Unveiling the Gaze," the social context of belly dance is explained by Moe (2015) as a popular recreational activity that was originated by women for women, and the uncodified and easily personalized movements of belly dance are commonly used in celebrations, religious ceremonies, and in the everyday lives of many Middle Easterners today. Belly dance is thought to be civilization's oldest dance form, and it may have played a role in early goddess worship and birthing rituals, among other celebrations (Moe, 2015).

Unfortunately, belly dance is sometimes viewed as inappropriate eroticism rather than an indigenous form of feminine expression. Moe (2015) shares that historical images often depict belly dancers as wanton objects of men's desire within the harems and slave markets, as many of

these women were sold as domestic servants or sex slaves, and those who actually danced by trade were legally and socially ostracized for doing so. In Moe's brief review of the history of belly dance, it is revealed that because of this exploitation of women in the name of trade, tourism, and colonialism over the last several hundred years, both the Middle East and belly dancing have suffered (Moe, 2015).

The United States has also played a role in shaping modern perceptions of belly dance for better and worse. This history is highlighted in Moe's examination of American belly dance entitled "Beyond the Belly" (2012), starting with the exposition of Middle Eastern dancing girls at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago which gave Americans their first glimpse of belly dance and gave rise to the term, the "hootchy kootchy." The following year, Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, which featured the infamous dance of the seven veils, further added to the stigma. Moe (2012) points out that adaptations of this historically inaccurate dance became wildly popular on vaudeville stages in the early 1900s, and negative portrayals of belly dancers as tricksters, villains, and prostitutes continued to be a popular theme in the hundreds of Western-financed films that were shot on location in Egypt in the mid-1900s. And because many of these female entertainers were underpaid and often exploited sexually against their will in order to survive, the co-mingling of belly dance with exoticism further blemished the art form (Moe, 2012).

Despite being a stigmatized genre of dance with a confusing history, belly dancing has become a modern phenomenon in many countries outside of the Middle East. It provides community and social support to both professional and amateur dancers while encouraging physical fitness, personal growth, and spiritual connection (Jorgenson, 2012; Kraus, 2104; Moe, 2012, 2014). Belly dancing has also been found to build confidence, positive body image, and self-esteem while reducing stress (Bock & Borland, 2011; Downey, Reel, SooHoob & Zerbib, 2010; Moe, 2015; Tiggemann, Coutts, & Clark, 2014). And belly dancing helps define the boundary between empowered and objectified sexuality, an unsettled debate in the ongoing discourse of feminism (Gerth, 2015; Mamsbridge, 2016; Moe, 2012).

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to evaluate whether a new and distinct movement of sacred feminism is emerging and being experienced through the art of belly dance as the gaze of Orientalism fades.

It is the hope that this exploration will also help with the following:

- to reconcile the disparity between belly dancers and their audiences globally,
- to promote the use of the belly dance for physical connection and deep healing among women,
- to bridge the worlds between cultures, genders, and dance genres through movement,
- to create more adoration and respect for the expression of the sacred feminine, and
- to empower women to deeply love and become their most powerful selves.

Literature Review

Ten references were selected for this project based on the vantage points they provide on the topic of belly dance through the lenses of Orientalism versus feminism. First, "the gaze" is defined and put in its proper place, and then several themes of sacred feminism are explored in the context of belly dance. Through this exploration, the evidence stacks up in favor of belly dance as a modern tool for experiencing a whole new level of feminism; these resources encourage the emancipation of woman through sensual expression and gender reconciliation, establish that positive body image can be embodied through belly dance, explore belly dance as a spiritual medium through the connection and artistic leisure that it provides, and elaborate on the potential that belly dance has as a healing modality.

Exposing Orientalism

The drag of belly dance's history. In "Fantasies of Exposure: Belly Dancing, the Veil, and the Drag of History," Mamsbridge (2016) evaluates the dichotomy between exploited and empowered women through belly dancing and the metaphoric veil that has come to represent a boundary between binaries such as exposure/concealment, timelessness/backwardness, truth/secret, and freedom/oppression. On either side of the veil, women's bodies are used to either imaginatively resolve (through

belly dancing) or reinforce (in covering with the veil) the political, religious, and sexual differences of these two distinct cultures. "As cultural and temporal drag—a theatrical performance and movement of history—belly dancing puts into play a collective political fantasy, in which the West wishes to expose the Middle East, while the Middle East protects itself from the political imperialism and moral debauchery of the West" (Mamsbridge, 2016, p. 40). Belly dancing enacts a longing for the experience of an uncomplicated femininity by staging a stylized, mythical sensuality to nullify the enduring legacies of imperialism, materialism, and feminism, even as it literally “drags” these histories along.

The male gaze in belly dance. This appraisal of the juxtaposition of Orientalism and feminism through the polarized images of Western and Muslim femininities sets the stage for exploring the power of the gaze. In the article entitled, “Unveiling the Gaze: Belly Dance as a Cite of Refuge, Re-Envisioning and Resistance” which can be found within a bound anthology of feminist essays, *Feminist Theory and Pop Culture*, Moe (2015) addresses a feminist theory concept known as “the gaze” which is the realization of being watched and judged by others and then altering one’s conduct in response. When applied to women specifically—as they often feel more assessed on their physical appearance than men—this analysis become “the male gaze.” This article argues that the derogative stereotypes of belly dance are bi-products of the male gaze as it relates to cultural factors around gender, women’s role in society, and the Middle East, and it illustrates how American belly dancers negotiate this gaze. According to Moe (2015), belly dancing is utilized as a means to combat the gaze in three distinct ways: as a refuge from it while within woman-dominated dance events, as a means of re-envisioning it by influencing what the audience sees, and resisting it by actively challenging the stereotypes. It also leads right into the theme of the next article’s viewpoint of letting go of the oppressive gaze of Orientalism to experience freedom.

Belly Dancing as a Means for Female Emancipation

Liberating the desires of the feminine. In the thesis, “Releasing the She Wolf: A Discourse

Analysis on Shakira's Positioning of Dance Within the Discourses on Belly Dancing, Orientalism and Feminism," Gerth (2015) explores how the feminist movements have shaped this duality between the objectifying practice of Orientalism and the feministic appropriation of belly dancing for women's empowerment: "Within the Orientalist theory belly dancing is seen as an objectifying practice that plays into the male oriented gaze. By feminist approaches belly dancing is however considered to be a liberating practice" (p. 3). By performing a qualitative data analysis of various interviews with Shakira—who was chosen as the subject of this thesis because of her popularity and worldwide influence on belly dance—Gerth seeks to apply scholarly theories in practice by analyzing how a actual belly dancer identifies with the concepts of objectification and liberation, and comes to the conclusion that Shakira's stance of the importance of satisfying your own desires through the freedom of expression available through belly dance shows that Orientalism is indeed outdated (Gerth, 2015).

The other is really the self. In "Exotic Identities: Dance, Difference, and Self-Fashioning," Bock and Borland (2011) explore embodied practices as distinct from representational practices of exotic othering through two independent ethnographic studies of belly dancers and salsa dancers in America. The dancers interviewed seek to embody rather than just represent the Other, even while performing, and it is discovered that participants in both dance scenes engage in self-fashioning through bodily movements. In belly dance, the Western women's projections of a powerful sexuality onto Middle Eastern women is a reflection of what they see as a denial of the female body in their own culture, and the "otherness" of belly dance has become a tool for these women as they try to understand the emergent meanings of the dance for them as individuals (Bock & Borland, 2011).

Reconnecting to sensuality and sexuality. According to Moe (2012) in "Beyond the Belly: An Appraisal of Middle Eastern Dance (aka Belly Dance) as Leisure," belly dance offers women self-empowerment by creating a safe outlet for reconnecting to their inherent sensual and sexual selves and the freedom to do so on their own terms. True empowerment involves women connecting

to their bodies regardless of, and often in direct contrast to, society's expectations; because belly dance can still be judged as inappropriately erotic, it may actually be relevant to women for the same reason. Seen in this context, Moe concludes that belly dance may be utilized as a feminist form of leisure for counter-balancing gender-role stereotypes through the omnipotent empowerment it offers those who dance it (Moe, 2012).

Belly Dance as an Embodying Activity

Positive body image. In research conducted by Downey, Reel, SooHoob and Zerbib (2010) and presented in the article, "Body Image in Belly Dance: Integrating Alternative Norms into Collective Identity," it is confirmed that belly dance confronts narrow body image norms and promotes healthier body image among participants. In the responses taken from a qualitative survey of 103 belly dancers from Salt Lake City, Utah, 92.1% indicated that participation in belly dance had a positive influence on how they feel about their bodies, and not one indicated that it had a negative influence. Additionally, 93% believe that belly dance has the potential to positively contribute to communities in the world at large. Overall, this data indicates that belly dance exerts a positive influence on women, and that dancers have generally high body satisfaction even when they perceive some discrepancy between their own body type and social ideals (Downey et al., 2010).

The embodiment model of positive body image. Building on the idea that freeing one's inner desires is the key to empowerment and that belly dance provides a vehicle for experiencing greater self esteem, the study "Belly Dance as an Embodying Activity?: A Test of the Embodiment Model of Positive Body Image" digs deeper into the science of embodiment activities and how they can help prevent self-objectification in practitioners. Tiggemann, Coutts, and Clark's study (2014) compare how belly dancers measured positive body image, body dissatisfaction, self-objectification, and the enjoyment of sexualization against a group of random college students, and the results proved that belly dance is indeed an embodying activity because it increases self-esteem while reducing

self-objectification. And despite belly dance being viewed as an erotic and sexually alluring activity, the belly dancers scored no differently in their enjoyment of sexualization than the college students. This is an important study because it separates belly dance from exotic dance (which scores lower on body image) by highlighting that this dance form is less about dancing for the approving gaze of others, and it establishes that the experience of self enjoyment through belly dance has tangible physical benefits that makes one feel good and sexy from within (Tiggemann, Coutts, & Clark, 2014).

Belly Dance as a Spiritual Medium

The spiritual framework of leisure. Connecting with something bigger than one's self is the experience and goal of many dancers. In the article, "Transforming Spirituality in Artistic Leisure: How the Spiritual Meaning of Belly Dance Changes Over Time," Kraus (2014), conducted a study with qualitative interviews to measure specifically how spirituality experienced through belly dance either remains stable for participants or transforms over time and found that it remained the same or declined. This article explores the different frameworks from which people attach spiritual meaning to leisure, how their understanding or relationship to spirituality may change over time, and that more exposure within a leisure pursuit does not enhance the experience of spirituality of that activity. Kraus (2014) also establishes that dancers who define spirituality from *extra-theistic* frameworks (which gives spiritual meaning to experiences outside of formal religious experiences) are the ones who experience spirituality within belly dance. The implications of these findings are that spirituality may be experienced in artistic leisure participants who have an *extra-theistic*, rather than *theistic*, belief system.

The major contribution of this study is the expansion of understanding in the spiritual embodiment of leisure activities and how this shapes the experience of belly dancers in particular.

The transformative power of numinous dancing. In "Dancing the Numinous: Sacred and Spiritual Techniques of Contemporary American Belly Dancers," Jorgenson (2012) claims that

belly dance is an expression of power—whether that power is understood or not—for it gives the dancer the ability to manipulate energy, to experience a connection with the divine, and to create a compelling performance that touches or moves people—as she dances numinously. Based on the interviews of belly dancers from around the country, Jorgenson concludes the following:

I assert that the very act of intertwining spirit and body gives dancers in a culture with oppressive mind/body and gender dualism a sense of freedom, contentment, and interconnection that is otherwise difficult to find and pursue. By performing rituals and ritualising performances, these dancers call into question another boundary – that which exists between religion and art, the sacred and the secular – and manifest their ideals and dreams in reality (p. 24).

Dancing numinously also places performers in the un-feminine position of displaying transformative power on stage in a way that challenges mind/body and gender dualism and subverts patriarchal norms. Many of the dancers interviewed believe that their experiences of numinous dancing are positive, desirable, and something to be integrated into their lives as much as possible (Jorgenson, 2012).

Belly dance as a Healing Modality

An exploration of older women’s belly dancing. In the article, “Sequins, Sass, and Sisterhood: An Exploration of Older Women’s Belly Dancing,” Moe (2014) reveals a series of qualitative interviews of 16 American women over the age of 50 who belly dance and examines the ways in which this holistic means of recreation provides empowering spaces for women to transcend negative stereotypes about being older. Moe (2014) shows how this creates the feminist gerontological framework for the unique aging experience of women by providing anecdotal stories of how participants utilize the gifts of belly dance in four themes: (re)gaining mobility, (re)claiming social space, (re)building community support, and (re)defining sensuality later in life. She concludes that despite the stigma that is attached to belly dance, the women interviewed felt good about their dancing because the positive feelings came from within themselves.

This article sheds specific light on the value of belly dance as a modern embodiment tool and through the qualitative interviews, it provides substantial evidence to support the claims made within it and in the others by reinforcing the concept of belly dance as an accessible modality for holistic healing.

Discussion and Recommendations

This research paper has presented the overwhelming evidence that belly dance is offering a distinct new movement of sacred feminism through the act of embodiment of an exotic other as an alternate expression of the self to counter-balance the unequal distribution of power between the masculine and feminine that continues in many, if not all, parts of the world.

This paper intentionally focused on belly dance as an activity for women to explore their femininity. It is plausible that not all female belly dancers might experience femininity in their dance, and further research needs to be conducted to evaluate the experience of masculine and feminine energies experienced within belly dance. Also, some men do belly dance, too. How they fit into the modern belly dance scene was not discussed within this paper for they are a minority within this rather gender-segregated free space of empowerment enjoyed by women, and what they seek in the context of belly dance is in need of its own research since most of them dance effeminately but not all of them!

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Orientalist view on belly dancing stereotypes women from Middle Eastern societies (and those who emulate them) as woefully alluring and sensual creatures who are feeding the fantasies of the male-oriented gaze, which consequently leads up to the objectification of these women. On the other hand, the Western feminist movements have promoted belly dancing as a practice of female empowerment and the celebration of the female body by transforming the provocative characteristics of belly dancing into desired experiences for knowing the self. All of the references chosen for this assignment help substantiate that the power of the gaze is fading and that a new wave of feminism—sacred femininity—is available through belly dance.

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