

*Dancing Fear and Desire:*

*Race, Sexuality, & Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance*

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Postcolonial studies of Middle Eastern dance in the West bear the imprint of the writings of Edward Lane, Gustave Flaubert, Gerard de Nerval, and many other European travelers. According to these accounts, belly dancers project the image of an Orient that is effeminate, passive and seductive. The encounter between Western travelers and 'almehs', i.e., experienced and learned belly dancers, epitomizes "carnal female temptations" that symbolize Oriental "fecundity," and "unbounded sexuality" (Said 187). The purpose of Stavrou Karayanni's *Dancing Fear and Desire* is to show how Middle Eastern dance was transformed through the European gaze and its underlying values into an art form acceptable to Western audiences as well as native élites who aligned themselves with the Western canon.

Karayanni looks closely at two important issues related to belly dance. The first issue concerns the depiction of belly dance in Western travel writings from a colonial and heterosexual perspective that establishes the belly dance as an exclusively female domain. For this reason, narratives that revolve around belly dancing men are marginalized and overlooked. The second issue is the relationship between the status of belly dance in colonial discourse, the establishment of a Westernized Greek and Greek-Cypriot national identity, and the excision of Oriental Greek and Cypriot dances such as the Rebetika from national folklore. Modern national Greek identity is presented as masculine, dignified, and refined; it is an identity that completely dissociates itself from the (homo)erotic Oriental identity.

*Dancing Fear and Desire* first outlines the anxiety that Cypriots and Greeks experience whenever the topic of belly dance and national identity surfaces. Karayanni describes how he feels at odds with the masculinity of this newly cast national identity that prohibits men from gyrating their hips and indulging in erotic dances (7). Karayanni traces the history of the Westernized Greek-Cypriot identity back to the British legislation on sodomy in 1885. The political tensions between Greek Cyprus and Turkish Cyprus are represented in accordance with British colonial standards whereby modern Greeks are portrayed as masculine – dignified, refined and self composed – while Turks are portrayed as an effeminate people who engage in belly dance and lewd acts.

Karayanni then points out that Western travelers attempt to “either ‘appease’ the intransigent dancing body of the ‘Orient’ by explicating it in terms of familiar markers of reference, such as Classical tradition and the Bible, or subdue it by conquering it sexually” (39). Karayanni’s example is Gustave Flaubert and his relationship with Kuchuk Hamen, the famous Cairene belly dancer. The male belly dancers of Cairo are a class apart. In 1805, Muhamed Ali, the Pasha of Egypt, passed an edict to exile all ghawazees – female belly dancers and courtesans – to Upper Egypt (67), in an attempt to modernize and Westernize Egypt. While religion played a role in passing this edict, Karayanni states that the decision was also motivated by Western travelers who were “disgusted by the performance” of these dancers (70). Nevertheless, the “Cairo scene became inundated with khawals, dancing boys called gink, or *çengi* and *koçek* in Turkish” (70) after the edict was issued. The depiction of male dancers is usually mentioned in passing in Western travel accounts. One explanation for this omission is that the hetero Western mind considers these boys as participants in an art that is exclusively female. Karayanni states that “constructing modern Oriental dance as a female fertility ritual silences the widespread custom of male dancers in the East” (70).

In addition, khawals and dancing boys are seen as a social embarrassment not only because they transgress into the female domain but also because they can engage in homosexual acts (78). Edward Lane describes khawals as men who dress like women, keep their hair long, and apply kohl and henna. Many of them veil their faces in public (79). The same social stigma that is associated with dancing girls and ghawazees is applied to khawals, but it has a stronger effect in the case of the latter because they are male and because sodomy is considered to be more socially transgressive and deviant than uncurbed heterosexual acts.

Travel writers who described *koçek* attributed the charm of dancing males to the fact that their gender eluded their audience. In other words, the drag of these dancers was so convincing that the audience thought they were watching women, not men (82). This point leads Karayanni to examine the significance of belly dance makeup and jewelry as a crucial part in establishing the spectacle of the dance. The artist ritually adorns himself or herself with these items to enhance “the performative potential of [his or] her body and thereby its sexualness” (89).

Karayanni’s analysis of dancing and decadence with reference to Salomé and the mystical evocation that belly dancers inspire (103) is intended to explain how the dancing femme fatale in the Western subconscious is equated with the dangerous luster of the dance of the Medusa. The movements of the female dancer have the power to decapitate the hetero male viewer and fill him with the fear of castration (105-6).

Karayanni finally deals with the crucial issue of the forging of modern Greek and Cypriot national identity through the formation of national folk dances. In accordance with Eurocentric values, Oriental dances, such as

the Tsifteteli, were excised from Greek national repertoire (122-3). As a result, the Eastern heritage of Greece was either buried or rejected as Ottoman. During the second part of the twentieth century, especially in the sixties, folklore was employed to obscure and reveal: to obscure the Oriental and decadent Greek dances, and to reveal the noble, majestic and somber dances of the ancient ancestors whose dances were equated with Western social norms (133).

According to modern and Westernized Greek values, male folk dances that engaged in shoulder shimmies or hip gyrations were part of the folk repertoire that was obscured. Karayanni traces the history of these dances to the remote areas of Greece. Also, he examines the songs and the dances of Greek Asian refugees. These refugees fled from Constantinople to Greece after the latter's failed attempt to implement "the Grand Idea" of Greek unification by landing military troops on the coast of Turkey in 1922 (140-2).

Recent attempts to market Oriental dances in the West hark back to a romanticized and nostalgic past that recreates the Orient of Flaubert, Nerval, and similar travel writers. The marketing techniques of local artists and dancers constitute a form of auto-exoticism whereby locals reshape and repackage their culture for Western consumption. This kind of repackaging obliterates the history of khawals and male dancers and highlights only elements that hetero-gazers find pleasurable. Moreover, Western choreographers and producers have been engaged in repackaging Oriental dances. In their stage productions young women who are fit, white, and slim perform well choreographed moves (170-2). The women look glamorous and dance with precision. These shows contrast sharply with the spectacle of traditional belly dancers and their voluptuous bodies. The shows also deny male dancers the chance to belly dance.

*Dancing Fear and Desire* does not detail the circumstances that allowed khawals to be tolerated in the Ottoman Middle East. By overlooking these circumstances, the examination asserts the erroneous point of view that the Orient was a place where homosexuality thrived, a viewpoint that legitimizes the romanticized Eurocentric depiction of the East. Homosexuality occurred in the Orient as it did in the Occident, but it did not thrive in either location. The practice of homosexuality and heterosexuality in the Middle East "entailed a web of legal, moral even political and economic obligations of a detailed and certainly encumbering sort" (Said 190).

Another important aspect that the book does not look at is the difference between the construction of Western and Eastern masculinities. A clearer examination of the cultural differences that define masculinity could have helped readers understand the social circumstances that allowed men to perform dances while at the same time censored the presence of khawals in the East (Andrews, El-Rouayheb).

Similarly, an interesting idea that the book does not explore fully is the connection between Oriental dances, which Western audiences view as

sexually charged, and pain. Karayanni states, “rebetika songs performed to the tsifteteli rhythm often thematize emotions of pain, heartache, and suffering” (146). It is significant that the attention of Western writers was fixated on female dancers at the expense of understanding the words of the songs to which the dancers moved. Karayanni would have perhaps done well to draw inspiration from Tony Gatlif’s 1998 film *Gadjo Dilo* (The Crazy Stranger) to delve deep into the connections between pain and eroticism.

Overall, *Dancing Fear and Desire* provides an “ambulant” contribution (188) to cultural and post-colonial studies. The book looks at the role of men in Oriental dances, an area that is traditionally prescribed to women. Although female dancers are portrayed as sexualized objects that invoke fear and desire, for which they are denigrated, male dancers fare even worse than women dancers. The second major contribution of this book is that it assesses the effect of Western colonial discourse on the relationship between Greece, Cyprus and Turkey. The breakup of Cyprus into two warring entities is rarely brought up in postcolonial studies unlike the partition of India in 1947 and the segmentation of Africa, which have traditionally attracted the attention of postcolonial researchers.

Finally, the first person voice used in writing *Dancing Fear and Desire* facilitates the reading of the book. The personal and confiding tone involves the readers and enables them to better understand the bias that male belly dancers are subjected to and the different ways in which their narratives are constantly neglected.

#### Works Cited

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