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Women pride through belly dance. Feminist empowerment and cultural debates in western oriental dance

Orgullo de mujeres a través de la belly dance. Empoderamiento femenino y debates culturales en la danza oriental en Occidente

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Abstract

The professional and amateur practice of oriental dance and Fusion Belly dance has known a significant boom in the West during the last decades. More than just a choreographic practice, these dance disciplines are the focus of important debates in cultural studies, related to feminism and postcolonialism. The historical evolution of oriental dance is closely related to colonial influence and cultural Orientalism, as aesthetics have evolved during the 20th century mixing traditional Egyptian folklore and western dance influences, which resulted in a growing popularity among Western audiences. However, nowadays, an awareness among oriental dance professionals regarding cultural debates has emerged. For practitioners, oriental dance and Fusion Belly dance offer the possibility of creating bonds between women, promoting self-confidence, pride and acceptance of all non-normative bodies, and even spreading oriental culture. In this article we propose to study, through the methodology of danced interviews, how dance teachers in France (Toulouse), Spain (Valencia and Barcelona) and the United States (Portland) communicate these debates and values through an aesthetic expressing the pride of the female body and the respect for oriental cultures.

Keywords: Belly dance; Feminism; Orientalism; Empowerment; Social Bond; Pride.

Resumen

La práctica profesional y amateur de la danza oriental y la Fusion Belly dance ha atravesado un auge significativo en Occidente durante las últimas décadas. Más que una práctica coreográfica, estas disciplinas de danza son el foco de importantes debates en estudios culturales, relacionados particularmente con el feminismo y el poscolonialismo. La evolución histórica de la danza oriental está muy vinculada con la influencia colonial y el orientalismo cultural, como una estética que ha evolucionado a lo largo del siglo XX mezclando el folklore tradicional egipcio y las influencias de la danza occidental, lo que resultó en una creciente popularidad entre el público occidental. Para los practicantes, la danza oriental y la Fusion Belly dance ofrecen la posibilidad de crear vínculos entre mujeres, promover la autoconfianza, el orgullo y la aceptación de todos los cuerpos no normativos, e incluso difundir la cultura oriental. En este artículo proponemos estudiar, a través de la metodología de la entrevista bailada, cómo los profesores de danza en Francia (Toulouse), España (Valencia y Barcelona) y los Estados Unidos (Portland) comunican estos debates y valores a través de una estética que expresa el orgullo del cuerpo femenino y el respeto por las culturas orientales.

Palabras Clave: danza oriental; feminismo; orientalismo; empoderamiento; vinculo social; orgullo.

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Introduction

In the last decades of the 20th century, the reception of oriental dance and its derived disciplines - such as Fusion Belly dance¹ or the Fat Chance Belly dance©-, has evolved from a folkloric spectacle for tourists, to an international artistic practice with a high popularity outside the strictly Arab sphere, although intrinsically linked to its roots. While in the Arab countries oriental dance has undergone a complicated evolution, the popularity of amateur training in France and Spain is associated with a pedagogy underlining feminist and imaginary orientalist values, not exempt of internal and external controversies.

The evolution of oriental dance shows its own debates, regarding the role of women, the representation of oriental culture and the possibility of innovating the traditional technique. The creation of the Fat Chance Belly dance© on the west coast of the United States during the 1970s was conceived as a feminist style, in which women dance and improvise in the form of a tribe [sic] and without interacting with the public, which is one of the foundations of oriental dance. The opening towards influences, not only from North Africa and the Middle East but also from Spanish flamenco or Indian dances, has started the debate on the aesthetic influences of the genre. The fact of becoming a collective dance with no solo motivated secure bonds between women, producing solidarity and sisterhood, and motivating pride and self-esteem (Scheff, 1990).

The evolving of the Fat Chance Belly dance© towards the Fusion Belly dance, an even more hybrid genre open to the breakdown of tradition, has generated new interpretations of the practice of dance, more focused on aesthetic innovation

and technical excellence. It should be noted that the practice of western dancers and the success of the hybridization of aesthetics - especially related to music or costumes, but also relating to some technical aspects that approach contemporary dance - have led to the existence of debates around cultural appropriation.

Despite the fact that the learning of oriental dance and its derived disciplines has more and more followers in the West, today the general audience still perceives oriental dance as a practice related to the domination and objectification of women, starting from the 'male gaze'. This social monitoring of the self-causes feelings of shame in women that may be attracted by its feminine aesthetics and body technique. Pride and shame being primary social emotions, Scheff asks how rare is to see manifestations of either emotion in adult life (Scheff, 1988).

On the other side, practitioners claim an important development of pride and self-esteem, in opposition to the social shame of emphasizing feminine movement and showing female body (specially non mainstream ones). Faced with this dichotomy between the reifying perception of the external public and the emancipatory experience of amateur practitioners, this article studies the speeches and positions of teachers and dancers in the West. The reflexion of the dancers about the debates around oriental dance influences their choreographic pedagogy, in a discipline with a highly emotional expressiveness, related to the valorisation of the female body, and with a staging that accentuates the social bond of the practitioners.

The double reflection of oriental dance in East and West

The imprecise origin and the multiple cultural influences throughout the history of oriental dance (Buonaventura, 1989; Henni-Chebra, Poché, 1996) have probably contributed to its success in Europe and America. Although among its original expressions,

1 Terminology of the discipline itself is in the midst of debate, particularly in the United States, where several dancers and teachers have eliminated the word "tribal" after debates around cultural appropriation. Some references of the discipline have also eliminated the word "sister" in order to include all genres. Tribal Fusion Belly Dance is now called Fusion Belly dance, and American Tribal Style is now Fat Chance Belly dance©.

among the different styles of oriental dance, the one that is exported and taught in the West is the so-called *Raqs el sharqi* (Oriental dance), a melting pot of mixed aesthetics that has its maximum expression in the Cairo cabarets of the early twentieth century and in the golden age of Egyptian cinema (Henni-Chebra, 1996).

In Egypt and in the countries where dance was born, it is today ascribed to certain social protocols, of a domestic and family scope among the locals, or in the form of a tourist attraction (Adra, 2005). However, women who learn it in the West are drawn to a choreography that highlights the female body and appeals to a timeless exoticism,² emphasizing the own experience of valuing the female body outside the normative canons, above the reception of it, which sometimes leads to female reification: "While Western belly dance reproduces an aestheticized, imaginary vision of the East and its women, its popular practice warps the Orientalist frame by making the dancer the subject of experience rather than the object of a gaze" (Dox, 2006: 54).

In fact, in the United States, the practice of oriental dance promoted personal and sexual liberation:³ "was given new meaning in the late 1960s and 1970s when American adherents of the form allied themselves with the second phase of the feminist movement, in which the personal was political. One goal of this phase of the movement was to negate and displace prior Western conceptions of the female body as negative" (Shay & Sellers-young, 2012: 16). Through a choreographic technique focused on the isolation of the different parts of the body, specially the mastery of the pelvis and torso, during the last decades the myth has spread that this form of dance comes from a cult of the Mother Goddess (as a *new age* concept) associated with fertility. Although this discourse is not currently shared by the majority, in any case, the eroticism of the stage performance makes its practice a liberating experience and a form of vindication of the female body (Shay & Sellers-young, 2012). The Western practice of oriental dance carries a series of values centred on the identity of women seeking to respond to social monitoring, even

2 Throughout the twentieth century major film stars Theda Bara, Dolores Gray, Hedy Lamarr, and Rita Hayworth performed Broadway and Hollywood versions of this dance in biblical sagas, "Arabian Nights" films, and "Kismet" musicals from the earliest periods of the film industry (Shay & Sellers-young, 2012, p. 17).

3 The twin movements of feminism and sexual liberation that many women felt were manifested in this genre spurred the revival of interest in belly dance in the 1970s. In the beginnings of the "belly dance movement", this once unacceptable presentation of the female body became a powerful means of transcendence as a group of women decided to redefine belly dance as a symbol of personal and sexual liberation (Shay & Sellers-young, 2012, p. 17).

if it is through an orientalist idealization:

Western belly dance is clearly not "just dance". Its affirming narratives of the body and self are deeply invested in the imperialist images and tropes that construct the Middle East's alterity to Western culture. For many practitioners, belly dance gives women's bodies an expressive identity not available elsewhere. The aesthetics of the dance become a form of resistance against the alienation from the body perceived to be a function of Western modernization. Out of Orientalism's frustrations with backward societies, belly dancing recoups notions of ancient spiritualities, woman-centered environments, access to hidden knowledge, and the universality of women's experience (Dox, 2006: 66).

Fat Chance Belly dance© (FCBD©), a descendant style of oriental dance (mixed with Indian dances and flamenco), maintains and explicitly develops the will to empower women through dance. It is the subject of similar debates despite the evolution in some discourses and aesthetics. Its founder Caroleena Nericcio stated that the FCBD© is a form of resistance to the normative standards of the female body and that the dancers perform for themselves and their own tribe, avoiding all interaction with the public. In the case of the FCBD©, the performance in streets and squares accentuates the vindication of the public space, in addition to sharing with the original dance an almost therapeutic function of building an alternative feminine identity:

For the women in this community, participation in dance is not a source of income, but about sharing an experience that may also fulfil individual, therapeutic needs. Participants collectively construct alternative identities, and level implicit critiques about standardized femininity and the dominant consumer culture present within the contemporary United States. These women work to build inclusive, female centred communities within ordinary, suburban landscapes and create a lifestyle-based community of like-minded individuals (Kenny, 2007: 305).

This choreographic style born among the American counterculture is nourished by discourses directly opposed to violence, patriarchal policies and puritanical interpretations of the Christian religion about the female body as promoter of sin (Kenny, 2007), values shared with feminist currents since then to date. Finally, the importance of sorority and the construction of a community of women is key in the

pedagogical discourse of the FCBD© (Kenny, 2007; Maira, 2008).

Thus, the transnationalism of the evolution of *raqs al sharqi* itself, which reaches its derived disciplines, the so-called tribal dances (especially, FCBD© and Fusion Belly dance), the contact between East and West puts cultural studies debates on the table. Feminism is major topic of debate, depending on whether oriental dance can be practiced as a form of feminine emancipation from patriarchy and vindication of the freedom of women from their bodies.

As mentioned above, an essential feature of the reception of oriental dance is that, while for the general public it represents a basically erotic performance, for Western practitioners, it refers to a discourse of female empowerment and an imagined sorority among women.

The phenomenon of recreational belly dance in America (and increasingly elsewhere in the non-Arab parts of the developed world) is predicated on Orientalizing one variety of the feminism of the 1970s in which Western women adopted an imaginary "Orient" as a safe place in which to try on alternate identities, indulge into fantasies of transgression, and enact independence and freedom from domestic, social, sexual restraint (Deagon, 2013).

From the perspective of postcolonial studies, the practice of oriental dance in the West has been qualified as another form of cultural imperialism, in which under the aspect of the liberation of the female body, only a middle-class sorority and a consumerist culture were cultivated (Maira, 2008). The orientalist perception (Said, 1978) of dance would also integrate an idealization of an East considered as alterity to the West, with a knowledge generated during the colonial period, which would survive today avoiding a deep and realistic knowledge of the countries of origin.

Beyond the objective knowledge of the East, postcolonial studies also question whether the cultural expressions of the Arab countries have been respected once adopted by Western artists. Certain practices of Western performers create tensions, such as the adoption of Arabic or exotic names - often appealing to the myth of the oriental *femme fatale* or the pagan goddess -, or the fact that in the artistic world the professionalization of artists is allowed with weak technical preparation if they are attractive enough (Shay & Sellers-young, 2012).

Being a dance highly represented in restaurants, in terms of reception, it has been debated whether the consolidation of the orientalist cliché imposes a series of paradoxes in the interpretation of dance. The reinvention of the image of the

harem, for example, which in the West has been considered as a form of feminine repression and cultural backwardness, is reinterpreted as being considered by some discourses of oriental dance as a home of ancient wisdom and a refuge for corporeality. "Western belly dancing challenges the Orientalist frame in that it criticizes Western culture by giving positive value to Orientalism's critiques of the East, but at the same time validates the Western ideologies and aesthetics at the very core of Orientalism" (Dox, 2006:53).

Fusion Belly dance has long represented less of a harem in favour of new age discourses:

The danger, of course, is that this kind of appropriation suggests that this movement of feminist energy becomes a kind of individuation, rather than any kind of political movement that is concerned with ethics. Many critics suggest that New Age and Neo-Pagan social movements fall prey to "postmodern neocolonialism" in their quest for personalized authenticity and romanticized experiences of the Other (Kenny, 2007:320).

However, in recent years in which the new age aesthetic has declined, especially in Europe, the discourses of feminism and sorority are much more present in the formations of the FCBD©.

Regarding the revaluation of the female body, it has been proposed that the evolutions of Fusion belly dance, specifically in its most gothic version -following a Victorian horror aesthetic-, defend a less standardized image of female beauty, and its disconnection with oriental aesthetics would suppose an autonomy with respect to the masculine gaze, despite the fact that it does not preserve any cultural form typical of the origins of dance (Frühau, 2009).

In conclusion, the western practice of oriental dance and the Fusion belly dance constantly has a double interpretation, a double reflection, according to the external or internal reception of the practitioners. On the one hand, the reification or enhancement of women on stage by feminism, the legitimacy of western practice by postcolonial studies. On the other hand, the ability to challenge social impositions on the female body and the ability to build a community of women. As the dancer April Rose states: "belly dance serves as a site for practitioners to transform their sense of self, transgress social boundaries, and build community, but that this transformative potential is compromised when the Orientalist assumptions that have historically been embedded in the practice are not recognized or challenged" (Burnam, 2012:2). To find out the state of these debates in the transmission of oriental dance,

as well as their importance with the emotions related to the performativity of dance, we have carried out this study among teachers and interpreters of these choreographic disciplines in the West.

The danced interview to study the emotions in dance

In order to analyze how a discourse is articulated around the debates on feminism and orientalism in the amateur teaching of oriental dance and Fusion Belly dance in the West - specifically, in France, Spain and the United States – qualitative interviews have been conducted on teachers of these disciplines, some in the form of the methodology of Sociology of Emotions of the danced interview (Scribano, 2016:63) in 2019.

The danced interview appears as an ideal methodology to interpret the mechanisms of transmission of feminist and multicultural values through dance movements and the oral discourse of the dancers, as well as the social bond between groups of amateurs and the pride about their own bodies. It works from a strategic elaboration of the interview, which condenses each thematic issue into a single main question. From this starting point, the dancer performs a dance improvisation, being able to play with elements such as music or costumes. A complementary advantage is that it places the researcher in a receiving position about the technique and aesthetics, transmitted with the fidelity that amateur practitioners obtain, and beyond oral discourse, it reinforces the purpose of the dancers through body language. The danced interview is elaborated in three parts. The dancers answer first with a performance and then with specific questions that develop the theme of each section: first, they explain their professional career; secondly, if they consider that their artistic discipline can articulate feminist values; and thirdly, how it relates to the Arab origins of oriental dance, and whether they choose to convey the classical style or to pursue technical or aesthetic innovation.

The professional profile of the five study subjects tries to be diverse in each of their careers. In France, Caroline Achouri, director of two companies of FCBD© and Fusion Belly dance, and teacher with 20 years of experience in the oriental dance disciplines, FCBD© and Datura Style (Fusion Belly dance); and Maïssane Narjis, a new young teacher of oriental dance. In France, the sociological profile of oriental dance teachers is 98% female. 63% are under 41 years old and 71% have a higher education. It is the dance of the world that has more female teachers and a higher level of studies. The teachers’ training is divided into different trajectories: 21% have been trained

abroad, 25% from stage practice, 21% in contact with other dancers and 32% have been trained in France. According to the study: “Oriental dances are part of a cultural era where European colonial history nurtures both resentment and desire for integration, while cultural ties, particularly in the musical field, are notable. From one nation to another, this heritage is changing” (Apprill, Djakouane, Nicolas-Daniel, 2013). In Spain, two international dancers have been interviewed: Mat Jacob, an internationally recognized Fusion Belly dancer and teacher based in Barcelona, and Sara Guirado, also internationally recognized, who runs her own oriental dance school in Valencia. Finally, in the United States, Rachel Brice is considered one of the most relevant figures in Fusion Belly dance and creator of the Datura Style, former artist in the Belly dance Superstars company and currently directing in her own school in Portland.

Dancing the decision to become an oriental dancer

The first part of the interview asks the dancers about their history with oriental dance and why they decided to make it their profession. Thus, the dancers express their subjective identity through movement, showing the technical elements with which they define them best and what aspects of their artistic personality are developed through dance. Caroline Achouri performs a six-minute improvisation with electronic music in which she chains the movements of oriental dance and the Fusion Belly dance with the help of two foulards, one coloured and the other one black. She begins by questioning her own reflection in front of a mirror, recognizing her body and discovering her belly. Addressing the coloured foulard, she recites words in Arabic and initiates the typical undulations of *Raqs el Sharki* style, using her hips, arms and waist, taking more and more space and looking at the camera with a smile. When she addresses the black foulard, the undulations continue with a hieratic expression, and she turns herself into introspection, to finally go to the camera without a frontal look or smile. In this performance we already find the distinctive elements of the two disciplines: an awareness of the female body, aesthetically represented by curved lines and pelvic movement, with a festive and joyous expression in the case of oriental dance, and with an attitude of pride and distance from the audience in the Fusion Belly dance. Pride is the preeminent emotion in this danced answer, starting from the discovery of their own body. In the case of Egyptian belly dance, the enhancement of parts such as the hips or the belly stands out, challenging the audience. In the Tribal Fusion, pride manifests itself through strength in posture and a haughty attitude, with an almost

introspective expressiveness.

The search for femininity is at the base of the professional decision of all the dancers. In parallel, the fascination observing oriental dance has served as a catalyst to begin their training, in the discourses of Caroline Achouri, Maïssane Narjis and Mat Jacob, and the idealization of the Orientalist imagery fostered the practice in the early days of the artists. An outstanding aspect is how, while the masculine gaze is considered to objectify the oriental dancers, in the case of the feminine gaze, pride of the feminine body and powerful expressiveness are recognized in the dance. Sara Guirado, as a teenager was fascinated by exotic cultures and attended a workshop by chance, as she practiced other types of dance. Maïssane Narjis shows in the first question of the danced interview some wavy movements with accents on the waist to emphasize the technical importance, choosing the music of *The Thousand and One Nights* as the iconic motive of discipline. Rachel Brice explains how she discovered dance at a Renaissance fair where a dancer generously displayed her curvy body. In all the cases, the interviewed subjects emphasize that the oriental dancers exude pride in their female bodies and that they seem strong and independent women. This is achieved through the explicit exhibition of the body, provoking patriarchal codes that hide the feminine forms or that demand that they respond to certain aesthetic canons.

A feminist dance?

Given the importance of pride in the female body as a central emotion in oriental dance, it seems logical to uncover the question of the transmission of feminist values or the artists' commitment to feminist movements. The question to carry out the performance of the second part is: "Do you think you teach a feminist dance?", either referring to oriental dance or Fusion Belly dance. When the dancers speak about feminism, they refer mainly to empowerment based on a strong and independent self-perception of women, achieved through the self-acceptance of the body itself, vindicating her feminine peculiarities. This autonomy from the social view (of patriarchy and the media) is translated into pride, a powerful emotion that in turn generates a social bond with other women, in a sort of feminist sisterhood. This perspective is not historically present in oriental dance in Egypt, as it is basically a western construction from the practice of oriental dance.

The oriental and Fusion belly dance teachers interviewed are very aware of the feminist debate that hangs over this choreographic discipline: their conception of the feminine or their potential

reification from the masculine perspective are elements that interfere with the external reception of dance. However, oriental dance has a very different reception among the practitioners, and for this reason is analyzed the discourse of the teachers and the pedagogical strategies that allow transmitting feminist values of an imaginary dance linked to harems or cabarets.

The conception of feminism is different in the case of each of the study subjects, but in all of them oriental dance is conceived as that which puts women and the feminine at the center, and for this reason, it is highly empowering. Self-love, an acceptance and autonomy from their own body, allow the practitioners to develop tools against patriarchy in its different forms.

Caroline Achouri responds to the dance question by improvising on Portishead music, emphasizing that any musical style can be interpreted with the movements of Fusion belly dance. The performance consists of gradually getting up, seeking to reinforce a proud attitude, by keeping the gaze and the chin steady, correcting the posture to create a strong image, and walking safely. "It is a dance that speaks of femininity, so it is a feminist dance in the sense that it allows you to disconnect from the gaze of patriarchy, by re-appropriating your body, the values of femininity, feeling the force that arises from a group of women. The oriental dance and the Fusion Belly dance give a backbone to the woman. They make women realize that it is important to respect themselves." (Achouri, Toulouse, 2019) It highlights the importance of reconnection with the body, which is often mistreated by the media, advertising and expectations about how a woman's body should be. This transmission is implicit and through the movements themselves. Achouri affirms that she does not give an explicit discourse in her classes, but considers that through her pedagogy she shares those feminist values.

What interests me when my students take oriental dance classes is to give them respect for themselves and for women in general. There are many women with painful stories, and in that hour and a half of class they recognize themselves in their femininity and it contributes a lot to them. I do not transmit a speech to them, but I do transmit a feminine empathy, an energy between us that aligns us in that place at the moment when we dance. (Achouri, Toulouse, 2019)

The dance class becomes a space of emotional bond between the participants based on body movement. Belly dance style emphasizes

the importance of posture both in a seductive and distant attitude. Whether dancing as a group or working out choreographic solos, practitioners learn to trust their bodies, no matter how diverse they are. The body positive effect is reinforced with the acceptance of the other dancers, in a kind of sorority. Achouri considers herself a feminist: her political and artistic participation is related with the themes of her creations, and with her training “Artist and feminist” in the La petite association.

Maïssane Narjis answers the question with the performance of a ‘drum solo’, a style in which the dancer interacts with percussion, emphasizing accents on the hips. Narjis considers that the reception of the image of the oriental dancer is that of a powerful woman, with an important technical domain of her own body. “Oriental dance is thought to be an erotic dance, intended for men. Not at all, it is a dance that was danced between women originally. The dancer does not dance to please others, but to please herself. For me it really represents the freedom to detach from the gaze of the other”. The virtuosity in the drum solo moves away from the seductive image of the dance, putting in its place an almost athletic and surprising performance. Narjis considers herself a feminist as a worker in a profession dedicated to women, to their “liberation and well-being”. Her political participation is mainly on social networks.

From Valencia, Sara Guirado sends a video without music, in which she dances with undulations of the whole body between the curved trunks of some trees near the beach. The emphasis of the undulations in the pelvic movements refers to the prominence of the female body and the importance of accentuating its particularities, as well as a link with nature. Some teachers evoke the bond with nature to appeal to an imaginary antiquity in which neither religion nor culture would seek to domesticate female bodies, excluding the notion of sin. For Sara Guirado, the feminism that is practiced with oriental dance is related to the sexual freedom of women, with decisions about her own body and an open mentality of sexuality.

This dance tells you to move your pelvis, which is the most sacred thing for us. And it is what we have blocked, it is our focus of problems, we have everything that others want and we cannot enjoy it. So to be able to mobilize that area that is so important for us, for our happiness and to create life, to be able to liberate it and to be a really energetic channel and that everything flows through your body without having to block any part, because I think that is the basis of it being a

feminist dance (Guirado, Valencia, 2019).

However, she emphasizes that the dance is more feminine than feminist, because she considers that men can practice it if they are willing to work on their feminine part and recognize that they enter into a feminine world in which they do not enjoy the privileges that they can enjoy outside of it. The participation of men in oriental dance classes (and by extension in the artistic world) is a debate in this discipline, which revolves around whether the students feel comfortable dancing together and whether the male students are aware that they have to work more to acquire movements designed for the female body. Sara Guirado considers herself a feminist, and attends mainly demonstrations in Spain.⁴

As a dancer, I have had to face a world that men consume a lot, and I have to face it alone, because belly dance is also a solo dance. I have been in a position where a man believes that because I am a dancer he has the right to touch me or to do other things, and I have learned to handle these situations. With this I may have made those men see that what they are doing is not right, because you put them in their place (Guirado, Valencia, 2019).

In her classes, Guirado focuses on motivating the energy of her students, and leaving physical beauty aside, insisting on the importance of taking care of herself and having healthy relationships with men and women.

In the field of Fusion Belly dance, the teachers express certain points to this position. Rachel Brice places the discipline in a perspective focused on gender equality. She points out that the Fusion Belly dance represents the construction of feminine sensuality, understood originally as the root of evil. However, Brice explains that her discipline combines *ying* (masculine) and *yang* (feminine), and it is difficult to consider that the movements of the Fusion Belly dance, which arises from oriental dance, are more characteristic of one genre or another, as it happens also with flamenco or Egyptian folklore. She believes that dance has empowered herself and has helped her in accepting her own body and building a language that shows strength and sensuality at the same time. In her study in Portland she has had many male students, and some have been certified in Datura Style. Mat Jacob points out that she understands feminism as equal rights. From that perspective, it is sure that the Fusion Belly dance is a feminist dance, because it does not consider a political dance, but

⁴ The debate is very present in Spain at the time of the interview, after the protests by the Women’s Strike on March 8th, and against the controversial sentence for the La Manada case of collective rape, the movement “Ni una menos”, etc.

purely aesthetic, in effect, showing through the technique an image of strength.

Among the practitioners, there seems to be a consensus on how oriental dance meets with second wave feminist values, related to women's sexual freedom and empowerment relative to their independence. But the dancers expose disagreements with certain sectors of feminism: "No one has explained to them that oriental dance is a dance for women, and that it was later perverted with the male gaze that made it an object of spectacle, of seduction," explains Caroline Achouri. "So in France it doesn't have a very good reputation. On the other hand, in the United States, from the 80s onwards, with the Fusion Belly dance movement, oriental dance was protected to give it a feminist value, re-appropriating the codes of the phantom of the Orient".

The transmission of feminist values in oriental dance is carried out according to each teacher and it is not always explicit, although it seems consensual that the practice of the discipline would enhance the acceptance of the female body in the eyes of the trainer. However, the experiences of the dancers expose that the reception by the public is more controversial. In a similar way, there is a paradox between amateur dance teaching and the world of oriental dance performance. The oriental dancers (Achouri and Guirado) denounce that in order to succeed in Egypt today, professionals must adapt to masculine expectations about their bodies. However, in Europe, dancers claim the use of their discipline as a form of empowerment and self-acceptance of the female body.

Respect and research to overcome Orientalism

In the current context of debate about cultural appropriation, the transmission of dance among Western practitioners is a key aspect. If the orientalist imagery is often a starting point that attracts a part of the students, the position of the teacher during learning allows dismantling prejudices and spreading a more realistic knowledge of this dance ascribed to a specific culture.⁵

The last part of the interview asks about the teaching of the cultural origins of dance, as well as the position of each dancer regarding artistic innovation and tradition. The danced question asked for a choreography on innovation and tradition, however, in the extended questions it is asked about what cultural knowledge is taught to the students, and the explanation of aesthetic elements such as costumes

5 Mainly in the case of oriental dance, as its evolutions in Fusion Belly dance are more an artistic construction from the Oriental aesthetics and techniques.

and jewellery or music.⁶

Recently, debates have arisen about the cultural appropriation by the Western Fusion Belly dance, and Western oriental dance. The colonialism as an excuse to use aesthetics belonging to minority people has been questioned within the community of dancers. Recently, in the United States, the debate has motivated the voluntary suppression of the word "tribal" replaced by "transnational" in the name of the dance style by some recognized performers.⁷

For Caroline Achouri, throughout her career as a dancer, the question of respect for the cultural origin has been a constant concern:

What you must do when you choose oriental dance, the inevitable and obligatory process to avoid falling in cultural appropriation, is to go see what is being done in the country where the dance was born. Although it has not been fully responsible for it, Egypt has seen it spring, welcomed it and made it grow (Achouri, Toulouse, 2019).

This attitude contradicts what some articles on cultural appropriation expose: a disinterest on the part of the western dancers regarding the Arab culture⁸. Her training trips in Egypt are part of Achouri's research about how the transmission of oriental dance in the West could be respectful and even enriching. Achouri, who also practices and teaches FCBDC® and Fusion Belly dance, recognizes that the freedom of hybrid fusion disciplines allowed her to develop her own creativity and aesthetics, since in oriental dance her option is to transmit the Egyptian tradition, as she has learned it in Egypt.

It is cultural appropriation when you are not interested in what is happening in the country of origin or the conditions of the artists there, or when in the West we teach all the orientalist and new age clichés. Life is very hard for dancers in Egypt (Achouri, Toulouse, 2019).

Achouri's bet in her classes is to attribute each movement to the dancers who created them and dedicate sessions to the history of dance. Guirado, who has also trained and performed in Egypt, teaches an intensive course on Arab dances based on the

6 Fusion Belly dance costumes and jewellery are usually inspired by different oriental folklores, such as flamenco, gypsies or Indian dances. In addition, Fusion Belly dance moves away from Arab music to any type of music, and especially electronic music.

7 <https://donnainthedance.com/2020/01/10/transnational-fusion-dance-an-open-letter-to-my-dance-community/>

8 "Strikingly, none of the belly dancers I spoke to said that they became interested in learning the dance because they were interested in the Middle East or in learning more about Arab culture" (Maira, 2008, p. 327).

origins of the oriental dance. From another point of view, Maïssane Narjis answers the danced question with a fragment of her last solo, in which she performs oriental dance on the song "Mon Dieu" by Edith Piaf.

I was born in France of Algerian origin, and my childhood icons were neither Samia Gamal nor Tahia Carioca, but pop singers like Shakira⁹, Beyoncé or Madonna. At family parties we did listen to music from the Maghreb, but when I went to my first oriental dance class at the age of 14 I realized that I didn't really know anything about it. Because it is a discipline that must be learned and because that culture is not really mine: I did not know the great Egyptian dancers or singers. If I dance with Edith Piaf it is because it is my culture, I have grown up with these songs. I think we can only speak of cultural appropriation when we modify a traditional dance, without respecting it and without knowing it (Narjis, Toulouse, 2019).

Maïssane Narjis explains that western dancers are criticized for many things and that they are not thanked, for example, for what they have done to legitimize dance, either in Egypt or in their countries of origin. She gives the example of the dissemination task of Russian dancers with Iraqi style:

Those dancers have revalued this discipline, and that has made other dancers want to train with Iraqis. I think you can speak of cultural appropriation when you use a dance without knowing it. (Narjis, Toulouse, 2019)

From the Fusion Belly dance, Mat Jacob points out the importance of this debate and the complexity of approaching it from a discipline that precisely mixes aesthetics and symbols of different minority cultures.

I think a lot about this issue, and not only about appropriation, but also about the relationship with globalization, with the Internet, with the urgency that everything has to go fast. The need for immediacy and aesthetics at any price for the purpose of the image. Unfortunately, Fusion belly dance is sometimes a good representation of these things. I find it very problematic when we take symbols from other cultures, such as the Amerindians, that at once we believed inferior and that today we decided that they had beautiful things that we can use. For me, there is

something violent in that. I think there are some symbols that should not be touched, such as those that have a religious or tribal meaning (Jacob, Barcelona, 2019).

Mat Jacob's aesthetic avoids the use of folkloric elements from other cultures with this objective: to avoid trivializing the violent domination between cultures, especially the minorities that concentrated sacred elements in their costumes.

To explain her relationship with the oriental dance tradition, Rachel Brice recalls her training, in a time when there was no internet, from acting in Arab restaurants with her teacher. Her influences are other American dancers, such as Suhaila Salipour, Caroleena Nericcio or Jill Parker. The fact of developing her career in the West does not exempt her from the awareness of the debate on cultural appropriation, which has led her to read several articles:

My story is different from what people are experiencing now. I danced in restaurants for a decade. The first people who supported me were from the Middle East, and I felt very honoured. It's not like I take their culture without caring about anything. I have always felt like a guest. I asked musicians a thousand questions, I felt like a student of their culture (Brice, Portland, 2019).

Later she studied at the Ethnic Dance University and was disappointed by the western centralism of the classes. When she started innovating with the Fusion Belly dance she was aware of the challenge: "You can 'just try to play to the archive of another culture and place, but I do believe that there is a respectful way to do it, which is studying and knowing you're a guest for a long time" (Brice, Portland, 2019). Respect is a value perceived of great importance in the transmission of Rachel Brice, through the attribution of each imported movement. Recently, her Datura school has decided to offer cultural studies content on the North of Africa, Middle East and the other influences used in Fusion Belly dance.

The interviewed dancers are aware of the cultural appropriation controversies that are attributed to dance when it is practiced by Westerners, or directly discussed by their own community in the case of the Fusion Belly dance. Certain performative aspects are more sensitive to this debate, such as the space for performing, the interaction with the public, the choice of music, clothing, or even the technique of certain movements. The evolution of dance with respect to its Egyptian origins has created controversies around an occidentalization that would not be respectful of the original characteristics. The choice of these dance teachers is to spread cultural

9 "But with increasing interest in the Middle East, and with pop stars like Shakira [the Lebanese Colombian pop star whose music video Hips Don't Lie featured belly dancing], it became more popular, and there was an interest in knowing who are these people we're dealing with" (Maira, 2008, p. 328).

knowledge in their classes, show respect with the dance heritage in their discourses and emphasize the creative aspect of Fusion belly dance.

Conclusions

In recent years, debates on cultural studies have been present among teachers of oriental dance and Fusion Belly dance. Women studies question how this primarily feminine dance has a paradoxical effect with regards to the male gaze and emotions of shame, on the one hand, or whether it enhances the liberation of the female body, feelings of pride and sorority on the other. Postcolonial studies, legacy of Orientalism in the West glides over multiple aspects of a discipline that is fascinating with an idealized East its main gateway.

The interviewed dancers claim the search for an assumed and autonomous femininity as a starting point for their decision to become professionals. Feminine pride, referring to the acceptance of the abused body by society, is at the base of its pedagogy. Implicitly, their classes are dedicated to transmitting notions of empowerment, community, freedom and respect in complement of an exigent technique. Posture, precision in movements and the enhancement of relevant parts of the female body such as the torso or hips are the key elements that celebrate femininity in belly dance.

Feminism does not seem contradictory to the practice of oriental dance for the dancers and their amateur students. On the contrary, it is presented as a way to practice the aforementioned values, with an emphasis on pride and social bond. Practitioners share the experience of valuing their bodies against the social expectations that repress women, and only accept a very specific body type.

In the case of the debate on cultural appropriation, the interviewed dancers show awareness of the debate, as well as concern. Their reaction is to share in their classes their knowledge of the culture of origin, without minimizing the importance of the controversy, in a way of respect for the Arab culture.

The complexity of oriental dance, beyond the choreographic technique, resides in the double representation of the female body and of oriental culture. The reception is completely different depending on the decoding from social elements, and not only aesthetic. Today a sector of professional dancers do not hesitate to continue transmitting this dance in the West, aware of the debates in cultural studies and using dance in favour of feminist and multicultural values. With a very personal pedagogy in each case, belly dance students

develop the choreographic technique at the service of an aesthetic that reinforces body self-esteem and acceptance. This learning can naturally lead to a bond of sorority. Regarding the tribute to the culture of origin, the dancers carry out a work of knowledge dissemination explaining the culture and history of oriental dance. Among Western practitioners, respect for themselves and for others, as well as social bond are relevant emotions transmitted by dance teachers, who are highly aware of cultural studies debates around belly dance.

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