

# **Dancing Fear and Desire: Race, Sexuality, and Imperial Politics in Middle Eastern Dance**

**Stavros Stavrou Karayanni**  
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The book *Dancing Fear and Desire* takes a comprehensive look at the history of Middle Eastern dance and the intertwined connection between developments in culture and the influence these changes had on the dance. There are many factors including race, gender, class, and imperialism that relate and have affected the types of Middle Eastern dances we see today. The Cypriot author of the book, Stavros Stavrou Karayanni, examines numerous writings and sources to provide a thorough and well researched analysis of belly dance and its relationship with homosexuality and post-colonialism.

First, belly dance originated in the Middle Eastern area of the world and is sometimes referred to as Oriental dance. The dance has the movement focused on the arms, head, and torso. The footsteps are small, and very little physical space is used. Moreover, there are many different variations of belly dance. The *tsifteteli* is the Greek version that has very sexual body movements of the torso. Another solo dance performed in Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey is called the *zeibekiko*. Regardless, in all of the dances the performer's gaze is very important. It appears that the performer is in a trance-like state. Some interpretations of the Middle Eastern dance is that this trance helped the dancer unite with a spiritual god or goddess and gave the dancer power. Kohl, a black powder, is applied around the eyes as a sign of concealment and mystery. The tradition of Middle Eastern dance has an extensive history, but changes started to occur once it was introduced to foreigners.

Karayanni takes an in-depth look at how Middle Eastern dance appeared to European men when they first encountered and wrote about it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The traveller's impressions of the Oriental dance seemed to imply sex and deviance from the excessive body movement. The famous dancer Kuchuk Hanem first met Gustave Flaubert and George Curtis in 1850 in Egypt. Karayanni examines their writings to show how the West viewed this type of dance and how European attitudes during imperialism affected the perceptions of the dance today.

Flaubert has the stereotypical view of Kuchuk as being exotic, scandalising, and passionate and writes that the dance and dress is sexually enticing. Indeed, Flaubert sees the spectacle as a sexual invitation and the only meaning and purpose of the performance is for his pleasure. He does not appreciate the dance and simply degrades the dancer to a whore or prostitute. In a letter to a friend, Flaubert dehumanises Kuchuk to make her seem like a machine.

Yet, he also stated that she displayed a masculine quality. In Islamic society, a woman is not biologically inferior to a man. In fact, she is seen as powerful and dangerous. Then, things such as polygamy, sexual segregation, and submission at home were used by men to suppress her power. Since Kuchuk avoided these social rules, she had obtained this masculine quality.

Conversely, Kuchuk would have viewed the encounter as being very different. This was her way to earn a living and make money. Since Flaubert was wealthy, she would offer him what he expected which was exoticism in her dance.

George Curtis describes Kuchuk's dance as against Western morals and views her as racially inferior. The suggestive movements embarrassed Westerners who had specific posture with controlled hips, shoulders, and lumbar region. The dance seemed against their scruples, and the traveller's thought the people should be more civilised and refined. The dance was too sexual and created uneasiness in the Westerner even though they had a desire for the dancer. The erotic, sexual and savage dance was intriguing and desired by the individual but disapproved by society. Therefore, as colonisation took place and western beliefs were implied on other cultures, changes were made to belly dance.

During the 1800s, Mohamed Ali tried to modernise, industrialise, and Westernise Egypt which led to colonial influence and dependence. The public dancing girls were prohibited from Cairo since they seemed indecent and unacceptable to Europeans and needed to be banned for Egypt to become modern. As a result, the numbers of dancing boys increased.

Male dancers had been popular throughout Egypt, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Sometimes in Turkey, the younger boys would be dressed like girls. Even in Uzbekistan, public female dancers were not allowed so boys danced instead. These dances were considered lustful but not indecent. Their general appearance was feminine, and the dance was the same when done by women. Either male or female dancers could perform at a home, marriage, birth, circumcision, or festival, but sometimes male dancers would be preferred. The audience enjoyed watching drag because they could not tell the difference between the males and females.

When the Western traveller first learned that the dancers are male, his emotion changed from desire to feelings of frustration and discomfort in the way the boys appeared. He felt that his ethics and taboos had been crossed. Although the dance performance was quite similar to female dancers, the performance now seemed homoerotic, indecent, disgusting, and threatening to the traveller. Even if the Westerner enjoyed watching the male dancers, the dance alluded to sex and this would suggest homosexual desire. Therefore, a phobia of male dancers began to develop. The fear and disrespect of homosexual men now moved into Middle Eastern dance. Egypt's morality was being questioned since female public dancing was restricted but male dancers were still respectable. Soon after British colonisation in Egypt, Egyptians started to criticise their own customs and ceremonies.

The author makes an important point in that he believes the development of homophobia and laws against sodomy in some countries, including Cyprus, was a product of colonialism. For example in Pakistan, these laws are not religious. Also just seven years after British rule in Cyprus, a law against sodomy was made. Therefore, homosexuality is not a Western phenomena but homophobia is. The negative view of homosexuality also spilled into dance traditions. Karayanni writes "... the litigation against dance and dancers strongly parallels legislation on sexuality and, more specifically, the spectacle of homosexual sex. As queer sexuality contradicts the norm, Middle Eastern dance contradicts proper posture and upsets respectability. (114)." As homophobia spread through the society, its effects were seen in dance by the social limitations of male dancers.

Similarly to Egypt, Greece and Cyprus were strongly influenced by Western ideas and beliefs. When described by Europeans, Greece was often viewed as part of Europe but vastly Oriental and uncivilised in their customs and manners. In response, Greece has been trying to remove any Eastern heritage in order to make Western allegiances. The cultural cleansing began when the elite focused on worshiping ancestors and the past. They wanted to deny Ottoman Empire associations and concentrate on classical Greece.

In 1922, large numbers of people from Asia Minor were forced out of their towns and resettled in Greece. The Greeks did not want to accept or incorporate the culture and traditions that these people brought with them. During Metaxas' dictatorship in the 1930s, the refugee's music, which has a distinct Eastern sound, was banned in Greece as well as in Turkey in order to westernise the areas. The refugees saw themselves as an independent society partly because the Greeks mistrusted them. Their music and dance traditions were not respected, appreciated, or approved.

Then in the 1960s, there was a large research project led by Dora Stratou's dance company to research traditional Greek customs, folk dances, and music. She omitted anything with other cultural influences and presented a commercialised, unauthentic view of Greek heritage that changed the dance traditions in Greece. The government wanted to support this identity and sense of nationalism and promoted her work. Unfortunately, Stratou chose only the acceptable forms of dance and movement to include in her research. Any excessive or threatening dance movements that were not considered modest enough were absent from the Greek performances. In order not to embarrass the viewer, more tame and desexualised versions of the dance were performed.

Stratou also only acknowledges the predictable and respectable dance movements of males since Greek and Greek Cypriots are more conservative and scrutinising when watching Oriental dance. When men perform the tsifteteli it is controversial; the zeibekiko is more acceptable because it has an assertive, firm, and masculine form that is in control. Therefore, the zeibekiko became more popular since it upheld masculine behaviour. The audience is comfortable watching the male dancers because the masculine movements and machismo character that is expected in a man is approved and admired. Because of this, the zeibekiko is still accepted in Greek traditional dance even though its roots are traced back to Asia Minor. Contrastingly, the tsifteteli, which is also Eastern, gradually became undesirable in the society because of the feminine, sexual movements. People even assert sexist misconceptions claiming that the tsifteteli looks better performed by a woman than a man.

Around this same time in Cyprus, during the 1960s and 1970s, there was hatred between the Turkish and Greek Cypriots. After the civil war in 1974, the Greeks wanted to oppress anything Eastern – including belly dance. Cyprus wanted to appear and identify itself as European so it acknowledged and rejected certain traditions.

To illustrate his point, Karayanni gives details of the time he saw the Eurovision Song Contest in 1976 to describe how different societies perceived belly dance. At one point in the contest, Mariza Koch gives a televised singing performance. Her song is about the war between northern and southern Cyprus and the suffering of Cypriots. Yet, in Turkey the broadcast is quickly cancelled and instead replaced with belly dancing. As a young boy, the author really enjoyed both Mariza Koch's performance as well as the belly dancing. However, this would not be encouraged or accepted for boys in his society. Because Cypriot nationalism had become important and his Greek culture was stressed, he did not learn about the tradition or meaning behind the dance he observed. Hence, the author was not exposed to belly dance as much because he was a Greek Cypriot and male.

Even today, male belly dancers are not respected. The dancers are rare and hardly talked or written about anymore. This is because, as an article written in 2000 explains, a male dancer's performance is scrutinised as being seductive and alluring but generally not approved of by European society. Homophobia has eliminated male Middle Eastern dancers from society's view.

Middle Eastern dance performed by females has changed too. The Hollywood version of belly dance in the West has been remarketed to fit their views of gipsy females expressing feminism, fertility, and romance. Dance classes and performances have tamed the sensuality to appeal to white, middle class women. Hollywood has exploited Middle Eastern dance with performances showing little dancing skill and talent and emphasising the dancer's glamour and exoticness. Similarly in Egypt, choreographers have made adaptations to desexualise the dance because they have adopted Western attitudes and are embarrassed by the sensuality of male and female performers.

In conclusion, Karayanni discusses different sources and analyses their accounts and opinions of Middle Eastern dance performances throughout history. He determines that the West has interacted with Middle Eastern dance during times of colonialism through to the present by suppressing the dance to a more modest, unprovocative, and respectable version to follow their morals. Once popular and common, male dancers have now been restricted due to society's homophobia. They are instructed to dance more masculine so the audience will not feel threatened by the ambiguous gender role. With *Dancing Fear and Desire*, Karayanni informs the public to recognise these changes that have developed in belly dance over the years with hopes of breaking down the stereotypes and biases that have been attached to Middle Eastern dance. A very interesting and fascinating book indeed.

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