ABSTRACT

STRANGER FETISHISM AND ETHICAL ENCOUNTERS IN TRANSNATIONAL DANCE FORMS. Case: Oriental Dance in Finland

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Oriental dance (belly dance, raqs sharqi) in Finland is a site for negotiating gendered, ethnic and cultural differences. The purpose of my paper is to examine Finnish Oriental dance practitioners’ conceptions of these differences through Sara Ahmed’s notions of stranger fetishism and ethical encounters. For the analysis, I will choose interviews I have conducted with Finnish dancers and teachers during 1998–1999.

Orientalism and multiculturalism are examples of discourses defining Oriental dance in the West. Finnish dancers are familiar with the Orientalist representation of a belly dancer as over-sexual and mysterious. They cope with this exotic image by ignoring or reappropriating it. However, Orientalist discourse is also reproduced in the conceptions and practices of dancers. In some of my interviews Egyptian women were seen as more natural, feminine and subordinate than their Northern sisters living in the land of gender equality. The ideas of multiculturalism—all different but equal—were celebrated among some of the dancers as well. Middle Eastern dance, music and costumes were detached from their political and religious background and they became matters of styles to be consumed.

Discourses of Orientalism and multiculturalism can be read as stranger fetishism, which according to Ahmed “invests the figure of the stranger with a life of its own insofar as it cuts 'the stranger' off from the histories of its determination.” The knowing subject imitates the stranger and simultaneously fixes difference onto the stranger and strange culture while allowing herself the freedom to choose individually whether to become or not to become the stranger.

Even more challenging than the analysis of stranger fetishism, is to discover possibilities for culturally responsible, ethical encounters. What could be read as subversive ways of thinking difference in the practices of transnational dance forms? I hope to be able in presenting some alternatives in my final paper.