INTRODUCTION

What is at stake in terms of difference and cultural interaction when a Finnish woman chooses to learn Oriental dance? How is the relationship between ‘us’ and ‘them’ discussed, if it is discussed at all?

Oriental dance, or *raqs sharqi* (transl. from Arabic: dance from the East), is a women’s improvisational solo dance performed traditionally in Northern Africa and the Middle East. This style of dancing varies in different countries and regions, but mainly it is the Egyptian style that is taught in the West. Egypt and especially Cairo is the centre of popular culture and entertainment business in the Arab world, and thus Egyptian influences have spread all-over the Arabic-speaking countries (Danielson 1996: 300; see also Adra 1998: 411). Oriental dance is best known from its articulated hip and abdominal movements.

In Finland the dance form is usually called Oriental dance1 by the dancers themselves, even though other variations of the name2 exist. The term ‘transnationality’ is used here to emphasise Oriental dance’s multiple locations between nations and cultures, and the various dance and music styles it has been influenced by during its existence both in the East and West. In Egypt of the early 20th century, for example, ballet movements were introduced to the vocabulary of Oriental dance. In Finland, MTV stars like Shakira and their ethnically spiced fusion of disco and show dance have had a major influence especially on the younger generation’s style of Oriental dancing in the turn of the 21st century. The expansion of the World music phenomenon is related to the popularity of Oriental dancing in the West, too.

Oriental dance in Finland is a site for negotiating gendered, ethnic and cultural differences. The purpose of this paper is to examine Finnish Oriental dance practitioners’ conceptions of these differences through notions of stranger fetishism and cultural responsibility. For the analysis, I use theme interviews I conducted with seven Finnish professional and semi-professional dancers and teachers during 1998–1999. All of them were of Finnish origin. Six of the interviewees had started Oriental dancing in the late 1980s or in the beginning of 1990s. One of the dancers got involved with this dance form in 1980, the time when Oriental dance was first introduced in Finland. I use pseudonyms of the interviewees.

The material consists of 20 hours of recordings, and the interviews last from less than an hour to more than two hours. All interviews are transcribed in Finnish. In addition, I have conducted fieldwork among Irish Oriental dancers in Dublin during 2000–2001 but this material (interviews, participant observation, video-recordings) works as background material rather than as a particular object for analysis. My background as a student, teacher and performer of Oriental dance starting from 1990 till now influences my reading, and I attempt to make reflexive notions regarding the specific interview encounters through the analysis3.

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1 *Itämainen tanssi.*
2 *Vatsatanssi* = belly dance; *itämainen vatsatanssi* = Oriental belly dance
3 For a more detailed analysis of research interview as a context of analysis see Laukkanen 2002.
The method of reading is discourse analysis. I understand discourse in a Foucaultian sense as consisting of different statements, or texts, which are grouped around particular effects. The discourses are constituted by exclusion: certain statements are given a value as truth by excluding other truths and knowledges. (Mills 1997: 13.) These discourses enable social agents to act, and they are drawn upon when dancers make sense of Oriental dance. Even though we always operate within discursive limits, and thus are not free to express whatever we want, emphasis in analysis can be put on what individual subjects do within and through discursive structures. (Ibid.: 72, 86, 103; Fairclough 1989: 28, 39.) Even the most seemingly powerful discourses are open to interpretations and resistance, and they are not fixed but changing. (Mills 1997: 26, 120,128.)

My aim is to read the interviews and to examine through what kind of discourses stranger fetishism and cultural responsibility are constructed. At this point, this reading is a suggestive and tentative one, which means that I have picked up some examples and citations from the material for analysis in order to see the already once analysed material in a new light. In my first reading of the interview material (Laukkanen 1999) I concentrated on the performative construction of gender, now I wish to create a more complex reading of the interaction and negotiation of differences.

Cultural appropriation or responsible encounters?

Dance as a form of cultural appropriation has been explored, for example, in Marta Savigliano’s study on Argentinian tango in a global context (1995). This study points to the power hierarchy between dominant, central Western capitalist culture and a weaker, colonised periphery, the South or the Third World, and the way the Western self has used the exoticised other through a commodification, refinement and adoption of movement style. These acts of exoticising the other include the process of acknowledging the difference of the other.

In the very act of acknowledging difference the other is fixed in her place, into essential being. Sara Ahmed has developed from the Marxist and psychoanalytic accounts of fetishisation the concept of stranger fetishism to describe this process. According to her, “fetishism involves the displacement of social relations of labour through the transformation of objects into figures.” Stranger fetishism “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.” It is about fixing difference onto the stranger and strange culture; it is about keeping the stranger in place. (Ahmed 2000:5–6.) Ahmed discusses multiculturalism as a discourse producing the stranger as a figure, as having a life of its own apart from the histories of its determination, like colonialism.

Is there a way out of this process of fetishisation? Is Oriental dance in the West about exoticising the other? What else is at stake?

Sally Ann Ness speaks about cultural responsibility in her analysis of a neoethnic Philippine ballet, Igorot. She draws on Spivak’s terms ‘ethical singularity’ and ‘responsibility’, where ability to learn from others and recognizing agency in an ‘other’ are appreciated. This refers to a dialogic view of cross-cultural communication, but dialogue is not enough. Issues such as cultural appropriation and empowerment need to be taken into account as well. (Ness 1997:69; Ang 2001:178–180.)

According to Ahmed “we can only avoid stranger fetishism (---) by examining the social relationships that are concealed by this very fetishism.” (Ahmed 2000: 6.) This includes the consideration of how the stranger, the authentic Oriental dancer, for example, is an effect of processes, or encounters of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitutes the boundaries of dancers’ bodies and the communities of Oriental dance. (See Ahmed 2000: 6.) Culturally responsible art is willing to “acknowledge and perhaps even to embrace the problems --- culturally focused experiments generate---” (Ness 1997: 101; see also Desmond 1997: 36).

In this paper, my aim is to bring the strange encounters occurring in the field of Oriental dance under examination and to explore the process of stranger fetishism and culturally responsible ways of avoiding it.
The reading of the interview texts is informed by Sara Ahmed’s writing about the modalities\(^4\) in which the contemporary Western subject encounters the stranger: consuming and becoming. (Ahmed 2000: 115.) Can Oriental dance in Finland be read in terms of consuming the stranger through consuming cultural commodity objects (music, movements, costumes)? Is there a desire to become (like) the stranger?

These modalities are examined in relation to three discourses of difference defining the reception of the dance of Oriental dance in West. They are Orientalism, multiculturalism and universalism. These discourses appear first to follow hegemonic understanding of differences in terms of cultural appropriation and imperialism. Hence, I will interrupt this reading by bringing in views and utterances that show a possibility for an encounter of another kind. I accept, that both the creative process of dancing and the reading of such practices involve ethical risks, constraints and paradoxes, when the problematic histories of their determination are taken into account. (Ness 1997: 70.)

**Consuming strangers?**

Consuming strangers is about exoticisation of difference as style, and it involves sustaining of imaginary boundaries between different groups of people. Eating and dressing like strangers can be read as consuming strangers, and thus as a mode of stranger fetishism. The power hierarchy and other social relations preceding the eating or wearing are detached from the commodity object, a dish of Thai food or Indian scarf. Instead, the ethnic spice or garment enable the consumer to take on the stranger’s style, to take on their difference. Simultaneously the consumer unfixes herself and fixes the difference onto the strangers. (Ahmed 2000: 116–118.)

Can dance movement be examined as an object to be consumed? The enterprise of Oriental dance includes, of course, a whole set of trading of material objects like costumes and CDs, but what about movement? Is it a commodity object? Usually Oriental dance in Finland is learned in dance classes, which are organised either by private dance schools or public open colleges. Dance movement could be compared to audially experienced music. Anna Beatrice Scott (1997) has criticized the consuming of world music, where the music is divorced from its politics and identity base and it becomes ‘just another great dance music’. She describes world music parodically as “a coloured body or ‘original’ body playing its coloured music. (---) Hard, primal, passionate rhythms played by exotic, wild, dangerous others, the way they like it.” (Scott 1997: 263.) Similarly, it is possible to read practices of Oriental dance as consuming. What do the dancers themselves say?

In an interview with Marjut an analogy was drawn between dancing and consuming. I asked about the disadvantages in the field of Oriental dance, and after talking about envy and competition among the dancers Marjut took up the issue of exploitation of dancers in the Arabic countries.

Anu: Is there something in this dance that you don’t like about?
Marjut: (---) And then, a thing which we don’t get involved with here, which is of course in these Arabic countries, is the disadvantage that men exploit the dancers, and they have to submit to many things, so that they would maybe get gigs in better places. They’re promised all kinds of things if they agree to sleep with the men. However, they don’t necessarily get any better, they have to perform, all their lives, in some cheap places and that is, the prostitution which is connected to this, is of course a drawback. But it’s there, it doesn’t bother us here of course, people don’t know about this side, not our pupils either, if we don’t tell them. Even if we told it, it is still very utopian, people don’t care about these kinds of things. But it’s a little bit same here when you buy a fine carpet in the end you don’t care who has made the carpet, is it child labour or who has made it, if it’s fine, period. (TKU/A/99/76b:23.)

I read the analogy of dancing and buying a carpet as a criticism of consuming stranger’s culture and detaching it from the relations of power and political conflicts that precede its consumption in the West. Power hierarchy based on gender was taken up here, but it was simultaneously located as an attribute of ‘Arabic culture’ and fixed as a difference onto the strangers, Arabic men and women. Men were seen as

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\(^4\) Passing is the third modality of encountering the stranger discussed by Ahmed, which is left out of this paper to be explored later.
exploiters with agency—however culturally determined—while women were represented as victims with no choice. A white Western woman—not a feminist in her own opinion—showed compassion for the oppressed women, and thus presented herself as an liberated individual free to choose with whom to work and sleep with.

Mari discussed the connection between dancing and prostitution in a slightly different tone. I asked her the same question as Marjut: is there something about Oriental dancing that she does not like. First Mari criticised the attitudes that the non-dancers have about Oriental dance: it is not seen as art, rather it is seen as somehow indecent dance form. She ‘admitted’ that a connection between dancing and prostitution exists, but only in the Arabic countries.

Anu: What is it that you don’t like about?
Mari: (---) well okay, I admit that belly dancing, there’s a connection to prostitution quite much in the Arabic countries but not in Finland. (---) everybody who has worked for belly dancing herself knows, that if you take your clothes off, you can become a strip tease dancer in an easier way, you don’t necessarily have to learn belly dancing for that. (TKU/A/99/74a:14.)

This citation like all other texts (whether verbal, visual, kinaesthetic, audial etc.) concerning Oriental dance can be interpreted in relation to the discourse of Orientalism. It is structured upon patriarchal-colonial ideas of an exotic dancer, and it includes a representation of “a voluptuous woman wearing a skimpy outfit, whose ‘aim,’ due to her loose virtue, is to make money by sexually enticing male patrons through erotic movements” (Osweiler 2001: 1; see also Berg 2001: 93–94). This Orientalist representation, which can be called also ‘belly dance discourse’ is connected to the myth of origins of belly dancing as a purely seductive dance form performed before men in harems.

This view is linked to the negative attitudes towards female entertainers in Egypt. Several studies have showed how female entertainers in Egypt, especially nightclub dancers are perceived as prostitutes. These negative evaluations are derived from religious ideologies and the historical association of prostitution and entertainment. (Nieuwkerk 1996; Lorius 1996: 286).

The interviewees seem to be aware of this connection, but some of them regarded it unnecessary to keep in mind such uncomfortable issues, and thus Oriental dancing could be read as a mode of stranger fetishism, as consumption. The reason for this is clearly the need to elevate this dance form, and to keep the white Finnish body pure from such connotations. However, I read taking up such difficult issues like dance and prostitution as a responsible act, even though in the end the hierarchy and knowable distance between us and them remains there.

In the second round of interviews I told to the interviewees some preliminary thoughts about what I had developed during the research process. They included an idea of exclusion and inclusion in relation to the construction of gender. In a quite clumsy, popularised style I suggested that the boundaries of Oriental dance are discussed among dancers contextually and in relation to the representation of woman they wish to promote. Some ideas and practices are rejected and some are welcomed depending on what kind of image one is supposed to get from a dancer on the grounds of her dance. Marjut, for example, commented on this idea of rejection by describing changes in the way Finnish dancers dress. In the beginning of the ‘belly dance craze’ in Finland almost everyone dressed themselves—regardless of the dance style performed—a bedlah costume, the two-piece glittery dress. Later on, according to Marjut, people started to wear more and more covering one-piece dresses. She stated that Finnish women are too rigid in their attitudes towards dressing and compared them to Muslim women living in Egypt.

Marjut: (---) you would think that the Muslim women are here and not in Egypt. If you look at Dina’s (an Egyptian star dancer known for her exposing costumes) dress (---), it couldn’t be more exposing, and after all, that’s a Muslim country. They’re much more revealing and sexy those women there than we here. (---) we’re like Muslim women here, you know, legs like this and slits (of the skirt) really low and nothing is revealed. It’s really weird (---) (TKU/A/99/77b: 2.)
She continued by describing Finnish women’s clothing in the summer time, when they are half-naked and with bare breasts in the beach. Their need to promote ‘pure, decent dance’ seemed contradictory in relation to the way they dressed. Again, she brought up the situation in Egypt, where belly dancing in nightclubs is pure entertainment including erotic dancing in baring costumes. She stressed the truth-value of this piece of information, which Finnish dancers do not seem to realise and thus criticised, in a way, the consumption of a foreign dance without knowing what it ‘really’ is about.

Marjut: No-one in an Islamic country, where people see veiled women all day long, wouldn’t go to a nightclub to see more of them. In the nightclubs they want to see bare flesh, that really erotic dancing, that’s quite funny. (TKU/A/99/77b: 2.)

The gender of the nightclub audience was left unsaid but even though Marjut spoke about “people going to nightclubs”, it is quite obvious that the spectators mentioned here consist of heterosexual men. Even if Marjut criticised Finnish women for not understanding what happens in Egypt, her criticism was not directed to the heterosexist practices of the ‘original’ culture. Rather, it was seen as a natural fact: “that’s the way it is”. As a Western dancer she would follow rather ‘their’ norms than those of liberated Finns.

Hence, Marjut also understood the Finnish women’s need to defend the reputation of Oriental dance by avoiding the suspicious elements that have been attached to it. (TKU/A/99/77b: 2.) The ambivalence towards female sexuality and double standards of Egyptians and Finns were read here in parallel. Finnish and Muslim women were both somehow out-of-place: the Muslim as a sexy nightclub dancer and the liberal Finn as a veiled and covered belly dancer. The Muslim woman as the one who should be covered, was fixed in her place as a figure, but in a grotesque manner subverted and moved to an equally fixed figure of an overtly sexy belly dancer. A Finnish dancer was left confused to wonder whether to take the position of an exotic, entertaining sexy belly dancer with the load of a suspicious connotations or whether to cover herself decently and create art. (See also Koritz 1997.)

Some dancers’ attitudes towards Finnish dance pupils’ interests about the background of Oriental dance could be conceived in terms of cynicism. Marjut did not regard telling ‘the truth’ about Arabic culture as a realistic option, because people here do not care about the social relations of labour and production that made the consuming of Oriental dance possible at first place. Pupils in the dance class want to dance and move, not to listen lectures about the cultural history of the dance form. Some teachers, however, emphasized that they explain the background of certain dance styles verbally even if they know that all students are not interested about that side at all. In the time of these interviews, 1998–1999, there was not that much printed material available about the dance, and many dancers expressed that they should know more about the culture.

These responses should be read in relation to my question I asked in the interview: Do you tell about the Arabic culture in the dance class when you teach? It is possible to read my question as an assumption or even a demand that everyone should be interested in the cultural background. My position as a dance colleague and an academic student should not be underestimated in the analysis; the answers should be read in relation to the particular interview context and to the relationship between me and the interviewees. However, the discourse of cultural knowledge is drawn also outside this particular context, for example in the web pages of Finnish dance teachers and associations of Oriental dance.

Responsibility and shame were connected to the question of knowledge in the interviews, when the dancers told about their first experiences of performing Oriental dance. The costumes and the ways of moving were described in a tone of embarrassment.

Anu: What then, how soon did you start performing and teaching?
Kaisu: Well that’s the most embarrassing part, that I started to perform really at an early date, because the teacher told me, and said, and at that time there were not really many dancers, it was almost like if you walked through the stage with a veil so that was called dancing, and that was supposed to be great, but well, (---) the dance has changed so fast. In those days we started to perform very early, and to teach and marks from that can be seen today, I’m sorry to say. (TKU/A/98/169:3.)

Marjut put it in these words:
Marjut: I performed quite a lot before I had seen a real belly dance performance, it was totally a fantasy, it was a pure product of my imagination, those first performances. (TKU/A/98/173:3.)

According to Mariana Siljamäki, who has researched the learning process of African dance in Finland, in the beginning of a learning process dancers’ image of ethnic dance is based on stereotypical views of, for example, Africans being natural dancers, as those having inherently the rhythm in their body. The picture changes and gets more complex after a while. (Siljamäki 2002.) This applies to my material, too: dancers were ashamed of their early performances because of not knowing or not being skilful enough. Acquiring more knowledge of the dance and its cultural background was seen as a responsible act. (TKU/A/99/74a:14.) In my reading the aspect of consuming stranger through dancing was responsibly problematised.

Consuming the stranger and becoming one were present in Helena’s response to my question about her other interests in Oriental culture than those related to dance. She laughed and said that she would not get any better dancer even if one would eat all the kebabs of the world. She does not have any Oriental carpets or she does not like mint tea. (TKU/A/98/177a:19.) Kaisu had similar attitude to the consumption of exotic food, clothing and furnishing. However, she told that she felt at home when she travelled first time to Cairo. Music and the people in the bazaars and nightclubs made a great impression on her, and she was convinced that Oriental dance had become a way of life for her instead of amusement (TKU/A/98/169: 11, 12.) Later, in the same interview, Kaisu regarded dance as a piece of culture that she takes for herself (TKU/A/98/169: 22).

On the contrary, for Ulla, Middle Eastern or North African clothes, food and decoration were a part of everyday life. She found, for example, Western music boring and would rather listen to music coming from the Arabic world. Ulla explained her “not normal, not Finnish” interests as a fascination with exotic cultures, but also to the convenience these exotic styles offer. She called Oriental food and cloths a style rather than a way of life, while she connected the way of life as trying to become someone else, a foreigner, which she did not want. The practical styles, like loose-fitting trousers or sweet Ramadan cake, were suitable for her as “a lazy person”. She has also performed with a band consisting of immigrants playing Arabic music.

We can read these accounts from the perspective of consumption of styles and in relation to a discourse of multiculturalism. In this discourse differences are regarded as fascinating, and acts of welcoming or tolerance are performed. For Eileen, an Oriental dancer from the beginners’ class in Dublin, belly dance was one fascinating form of the world music and dance available in the West. In the interview, she constructed a tolerant open-minded multicultural urban self, which was in opposition to her own background in the countryside of Ireland. (Laukkanen 2001: 70–71, 76.)

Critical post-colonial thinkers have criticised the discourse of multiculturalism. Ien Ang, for example, claims that “racially and ethnically marked people are no longer othered (---) through simple mechanisms of rejection and exclusion, but through an ambivalent and apparently contradictory process of inclusion by virtue of othering” (Ang 2001: 139; emphasis in original).

In the discourse of multiculturalism the stranger is seen as the origin of difference. Welcoming is about recognising someone as a figure who is not one of us, but a stranger. This is problematic, because the subject who welcomes or tolerates, for example a multicultural nation-state welcoming immigrants, is the subject, who knows the difference and thus keeps somebody recognised as a stranger in place. Differences are seen as those that are assimilable to the multicultural nation-state. Anything that might problematise the ‘united colors of benetton’ kind of world, where power relations are forgotten, is concealed in the figure of the stranger (Ahmed 2000: 4, 97.) Even if the intention of being tolerant may be undoubtedly good and antiracist, the power hierarchy between the self-other is left untouched. This division and binary opposition is “the epistemological basis of the very possibility for racism in the first place” (Ang 2001: 142).

Assimilable difference is seen as something that the welcoming culture is missing or lacking. For Ulla, “normal Finnish life” and Western music was boring, and she was consciously looking for something else. However, she took only those elements that could be comfortably assimilated to her life. The same idea...
applies to Kaisu, who was not interested in Oriental food, costumes etc., but only in dance, which she
described as a piece she takes for herself. Should this be read in terms of stranger fetishism? At this point I
will raise my hands up and say that because my research goals were not especially focused on cultural issues,
I would not dare to make such interpretation. Thus, this question must be explored further in the future.

In popular media and in some studies concerning Oriental dance (Osweiler 2001, for example) the
assimilable difference that the Western women are lacking in the case of Oriental dance is the natural,
essential femininity. The difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is produced by stating that we, the Western and
Nordic women living in a promised land of gender equality, are lacking femininity, which can be found as a
fixed difference inherently, or alternatively due to the subordinate position (TKU/A/98/173: 19), from the
culture of ‘the Orientals’, on the bodies of the strangers. ‘Their difference’ can become ‘my difference’ by
incorporating a certain style of movement onto ‘my body’. Some parts of the culture are suitable for
consumption, while others are rejected. This aspect came up also in my material, and I will discuss it further
in the next chapter.

Becoming stranger?

Sara Ahmed reads the Hollywood blockbuster ’Dances with Wolves’ (1990) as a story of becoming
other-going native. Dancing of the white, male subject plays an important part in the process of becoming, of
getting closer to the strangers, Sioux Indians. The male protagonist, Dunbar, is renamed as Dances with
Wolves after the Indians see him chasing the wolf he has befriended with. The merging of the man and
animal is accompanied by the merging of a white man and Indians. In relation to dancing, proximity to the
strangers is visualised in two different ways. Ahmed describes the first dance in terms of imitation rather
than becoming. Dunbar dances by the fire alone and desires to be the other, but fails. The second dance is
described like this:

(---) Dunbar, or Dances with wolves, dances with the Indians by the fire. Here, he ceases to stand out as a white
man dancing like an Indian. The multiplicity of the dance reshapes his body. In the physicality of merger, of
lines of flight [sp?] made possible through proximity, Dances with Wolves becomes something other. We can no
longer see his face. There appears to be no distinction between natives and strangers: all we have left is the
physical merger of dancing bodies (---). (Ahmed 2000: 121, emphasis in original.)

Ahmed does not, however, read the dance as an encounter avoiding stranger fetishism. The proximity
visualised in the merger of bodies should be read in terms of a fantasy “which still serves to substantiate the
‘body’ of the stranger, but through the very proximity of the dance” (Ahmed 2000: 122). The story involves
fantasies about the emotional and loving Sioux Indians as being closer to the nature. They become to stand
for what the white man is lacking. Through hybridisation or transgression the white man actually secures his
agency, his possibility to overcome the border between self and other, to love and be a friend with the
stranger by undoing the history of violence. (Ahmed 2000: 122–124.)

How were the fantasies of becoming discussed by the Finnish dancers?

A fantasy to become like an Egyptian dancer was apparent in some interviews (Marjut, Niina), but
simultaneously the impossibility of that fantasy was recognised.

Anu: Can Finnish and Egyptian belly dancing be compared? Can they be equally good?
Marjut: No.
Anu: Why not?
Marjut: Well firstly because, well…they could be, but it’s that a Finn, or it doesn’t matter what nationality you
are, a person of any nationality has to live in Egypt, and then you have to perform in Egypt to be as good as an
Egyptian. If I think about Samasem (a Swedish dancer living in Egypt), for example. Samasem is as good as an
Egyptian, but she has danced in Cairo’s nightclubs for 9 years and she has an Egyptian husband. She is full-
bloodedly in that what happens in Cairo, in the beat and the course of life and everything. But that a Finnish
dancer living in Finland, that’s impossible. Totally impossible. Even if you were married with an Egyptian, it
wouldn’t help, it doesn’t make it easier. You have to perform there in Egyptian nightclubs, there you’ll have it.
And you have to know Arabic language. In my opinion, of course, if you live there and want be one of them, (---
anyone having the dancing skills can be as good as Egyptian. But then you have to get the inner thing into it. Samasem has it, I think, very well. (TKU/A/98/173: 18.)

After this Marjut emphasised the hard work and routine one would get after performing weekly in an Egyptian nightclub and preferably with live musicians. Becoming like the stranger was not here an issue of ethnicity or nationality, rather becoming like her was seen as a result of hard work, knowing the culture and being there. Proximity was stressed interestingly, but not surprisingly, through a heterosexual relationship to a stranger male-body. This strange body would not, however, help, if it would be out of place, ‘here’ in Finland.

The gendered and heterosexualised nature of getting closer, or becoming stranger is present in many interviews. Kaisu, Ulla and Mari expressed the difficulty to get close to Egyptian or Arabic woman. Mari told about an incident in some dance-event, where she had danced among other members of the audience, I suppose.

Mari: It’s wonderful, of course, if an Arabic woman comes (---) very eagerly to pose in the same photograph and such when we have danced, performed the whole night somewhere, jumped on the tables almost. So that’s nice that attention what comes from the woman, because men are always those who are like “yeah, bravo, bravo” (---) So when there’s some woman you take it more seriously, (---) the attention then. Generally I’m more interested in the women but they’re so protected. For example, if you go in Egypt to visit someone Egyptian, you don’t get to talk with the women properly, maybe the men protect these women. I don’t know if it’s because they don’t want them to talk with Western women or what is it, what they’re afraid, in the end. (laughs) (TKU/A/98/176:7.)

A desire to socialise with Arabic women, to get closer to them was expressed here, and the men were seen as those restraining this. An Arabic woman’s attention was appreciated more than men’s shouting because of the assumed heterosexual male desire. This assumption about male gaze was repeated in many interviews. For Kaisu, the reasons for not encountering the women face to face on her first trip to Cairo, were the language barrier and the impoliteness of the Egyptian women. She presumed the unfriendliness to arise probably from the feeling that Kaisu was a rival or that her presence was disturbing, but she does not question why Egyptian women should be interested in her at all. The only positively loaded encounter was with a woman in the street with her child, with whom Kaisu communicated by gesturing that the child is cute. She was greeted with a smile and an initiative for some sort of discussion. Egyptian men were available to get acquainted with even though Kaisu was not interested in them at all. One reason was that she found it impossible to digest Egyptian men’s attitude to women. (TKU/A/98/169: 13.) The quality of this attitude was not explained further, but it is possible to read this story of a failed encounter as a self-presentation of a liberated white, Western woman mirroring herself and her values to those already recognized as strange. All Egyptian men, for example, were lumped together as those having a wrong attitude to women, and simultaneously the women were seen as victims because they live with these men. Both Mari and Kaisu were sorry for not getting to know an Egyptian woman, and in my reading they also problematised their own part in the encounter. The power hierarchy between ‘us’ and ‘them’ was taken up even if not in a very obvious way.

I posed the interviewees a question concerning the differences between Finnish and Egyptian dancers. Thus, the discourse of difference was there for them to catch or reject. Ulla, for example, saw the whole question as complicated, such a comparison would need specific criteria. She wanted to emphasise differences between individual dancers by comparing Egyptian star dancers Lucy and Dina as having completely different styles of moving. However, she agreed to make a comparison by lumping differences inside the nations, and in such a comparison Egyptian dancers seemed to be more emotional and natural while Finnish dancers were described as unnatural and technical. In the end she questioned these stereotypes by depicting a Finnish dancer as a skilful interpreter. (TKU/A/98/178:11.)

The fantasy of the Orientals as more natural and emotional came up in some interviews through the idea of lacking. Mari described ‘contemporary women’ walking like robots, and when they see a belly dancer who moves like a serpent they want to learn the same way of moving. She claimed ‘us’ being estranged from that. In the end she laughingly said that Egyptians still carry sacks on their heads, while we have had the
Technical development was connected to the robot-like moving and contemporary women, which referred to ‘us’. Attributes related to ‘them’ were serpent-like movements and technical underdevelopment. Here the fantasy of becoming like a stranger as the agency of the Western contemporary woman, through learning to dance, is clearly apparent. It connects, also, to the discourse of universalism which is based on an essential and universal view of genuine femininity. Differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ are pushed aside for the unity of a Universal Woman’s dance. (Osweiler 2001: 1.) This discourse includes also the claim about dance as a universal language, and paradoxically Oriental dance becomes a place to search for universal emotions and spirituality (see Brusila 2003: 182–183). It is connected also to the era of Orientalism in Western dance which flourished in the latter part of the 19th century. In ballet and modern dance, nature was given the force that instructs and authorizes the body, and the Oriental other was seen as that lying closer to nature (Martin 1998: 170). The discourse of universalism is accompanied with a discourse of essential differences: the essential gender difference is constructed in the utterances that promote Oriental dance as suitable only for a female body.

To follow Sara Ahmed’s and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s view of universalism in Western feminism, Oriental dance and Oriental others define not simply what ‘we’ are not, but also what ‘we’ once were before modern life, feminism and liberation. (Ahmed 2000: 165.) By taking on their movements, incorporating their difference to our bodies, we give their tradition a universal value (see Ahmed 2000: 170).

Critical distance to the comparison of Finnish and Egyptian dancers was taken by Laura, Kaisu and Helena. It was noted that both Western dance, ballet for example, and Oriental dance are influenced by various dance styles due to globalisation (TKU/A/98/174b:18); that Oriental dance is changing constantly (TKU/A/98/177a:20) and that it is a mixture of Finnish and Oriental culture (TKU/A/98/169/10). In relation to this, I asked provocatively, what is genuine Oriental dance or is there something that could be called that. It became quite clear that the interviewees opposed themselves to a view that genuine Oriental dance would be performed only by originally Egyptian women.

Laura: I just read from here (---), for example about this X, who is an American dancer, well, here for example Y’s comment that ‘because X lived and worked in Cairo, she has the genuine Egyptian feeling and style, not American’. This is, to be honest, racist comment in my opinion. Why not somebody, why does it have to be just Egyptian feeling, do Egyptians have different feelings? As if, as far as I can judge the language of emotions does not know any borders of countries, you know? Well maybe culture has an effect to the way of feeling but not that, anyway we have those basic, basic conditions to feel, we all have those same because we are human beings. (TKU/A/98/174b:17.)

Kaisu referred in a critical voice to the same Egyptian dance teacher (Y) as valuing non-Egyptian dancers on the grounds of how much they dance like Egyptians.

Kaisu: (---) that’s again, an opinion of an Egyptian woman, and then we have to remember that we are, after all, Finnish women and we have this Finnish cultural environment in the background. In my opinion, it’s not worth of pursuing to imitate and to try to be like an Egyptian, because we will never be anyhow. And I don’t even want to be, I want to be a Finnish woman and to be proud of that, I just take a piece from there for myself, that’s it. (TKU/A/98/169: 22.)

In both cited interviews becoming like an Egyptian is not seen as a goal for a foreign dancer, even if Egyptians themselves might think so. The comments differed, however, in their understanding of difference. For Laura, dance teacher’s comment was racist because of its dichotomic view about cultural differences concerning human emotions. She promoted rather a universal, shared condition to feel, even though differences in the way of feeling might exist. For Kaisu, becoming stranger or attempting to become like one was not valued very highly. Imitating and being were seen as contrary terms, and the difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ was regarded as absolute. She conceived of dance as an assimilable piece of culture, which she can take for herself, while keeping the boundaries of body-at-home, of a body of a Finnish women fixed. (See Ahmed 2000: 119.) The Finnish cultural background as a point for reference in Finnish Oriental dance was mentioned also by Helena. She discussed dancing with an analogy to writing and language. We and they share a similar vocabulary or the alphabets of the Oriental dance, but we write the story differently from them. However, she and many others found it difficult to define where the difference is, if there is one.
Conclusions

In sum, the question of consuming strangers through Oriental dance seems complicated. On the one hand, and in some situations, it seemed that the rejection of the social relations of production enables a Finnish dancer to use the dance for her own purposes, to consume it as a beautiful ethnic style of movement, music and costumes. On the other hand, dancers were worried about knowing the ‘truth’ of the strange culture which was regarded as an important way to get closer to the strange culture and to represent the dance properly to Finnish people. Knowing the cultural background was seen as responsible, even if they were cynical towards dance students’ interest in that. In a sense, stranger fetishism was avoided when the dancers brought up difficult issues concerning exploitation of women, for example. However, easily the discussions about problematic issues tended to reinforce the distinction between us and them, especially in gender-related questions.

My attempt to examine the interview material through the concept of becoming was a difficult task. Firstly, the interview material was not sufficient enough because it had been produced for another sort of analysis. A more detailed discussion of the Finnish dancer’s conceptions of cultural encounters and dancing is needed. Secondly, a theoretical refinement of the concept of becoming in relation to human movement, dancing, is needed. Sara Ahmed’s analysis of dancing in the film Dances with the wolves is thought-provoking, but in order to be a tool for dance research, perspectives of other dance-related theories should be added into discussion.

However, the material brought up interesting conceptions of differences. The fantasy of becoming like an Egyptian dancer was discussed both in terms of possibility vs. impossibility, desire and rejection. Becoming like them was seen possible through ‘being there’ and ‘getting closer to them’ either by marrying an Egyptian man or by making friends with an Egyptian woman. These relationships were described as difficult: Arabic men were seen as having wrong attitude towards women and Arabic women were hard to get acquainted with. Impossibility of being like them was explained as a result of different cultural background and the desire of becoming or being like them, was rejected as imitation, as inauthentic, not genuine fantasy. Interestingly, the desire was connected to the idea of the Western women lacking essential femininity, which can be found from the Oriental dance. This linked Oriental dance to the discourse of universalism, where universal value is given to a local tradition which is seen as containing the universal (pre-modern) truth of being a woman.

These views can be read as stranger fetishism, as cultural appropriation, where the difference is known by the white Western dancer who fixes the other in place as pre-modern or essentially feminine. There were, however, hints of acknowledging the power hierarchies and problematic encounters. Differences between individuals (without falling into the trap of individualism) and the changing nature of cultures were discussed, which brought out the culturally responsible way that the Finnish dancers also encounter this strange dance form.

References:


Interviews:

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