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5-2017

## Soul Simplicity: An Inquiry into Dance, Women and Islam

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### Recommended Citation

Odetunde, Mariam T., "Soul Simplicity: An Inquiry into Dance, Women and Islam" (2017). *Senior Honors Projects*. Paper 571.

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## How can dance be compatible with Islam?

### **Abstract**

Islam has guidelines and rules that its followers must abide by in order to fulfill the tenets of the religion. Lawful acts are labeled “al-halal” and the unlawful and prohibited are “al-haram.” Many al-haram activities affect Muslim women specifically – particularly some leisure activities, such as listening to music and dancing. For example, Islam does not permit activities that can be perceived as “erotic” or “arousing male passions.” Elder Muslim women guide and supervise younger women in order to pass along religious morals and values from generation to generation. I am the product of this tradition and my research is an inquiry into this cultural convention. Given the strict rules regulating many leisure activities, I sought to answer the following: Is dancing, specifically by women in Islam, an activity that is “al-halal” or “al-haram”? The purpose of this project is to research the Qur’an (Islam’s sacred book), interpretations by Imams (Muslim scholars), and other religions in order to clarify whether or not dancing is subjected as “al-halal” or “al-haram.” Though, I am a woman of faith whose passion for dance is a critical aspect of my identity, it’s imperative that I discover whether or not my religion and my passion for dance are compatible. The results of this research will dictate the direction the remainder my life takes.

## **Introduction**

The effects of religion on Muslim women's leisure activity, behavior and sports has been an area of concern and interest. There are certain guidelines in regards to what is considered al-halal and al-haram within the Muslim religion. Muslim women are not allowed to dance with men and are not allowed to dance in front of them. However, some Muslims dance in their homes with their brother(s), husbands, or even their fathers (Banes 247). In circumstances such as parties with music where both non-Muslims and Muslims are encouraged to dance, Muslims cannot dance with the opposite genders. Considering there are circumstances in which women are permitted to dance and other in which it is prohibited, the question on whether dancing is allowed in Islam raises a lot of controversies that need clarification.

There have been incidences such as the Taliban in Afghanistan when they shocked the world in 2012 August 27 by beheading 17 Muslim individuals for allegedly engaging in dance participation at a mixed-gender gathering. Many Muslims and Muslim leaders raised concerns as to whether this act was justified. Islamic scholars are divided into two sides on whether it is prohibited or not, though there is hardly a mention on dancing in the Qur'an among Muslim women.

## **Qur'an and Hadith on Dancing**

The Qur'an is the primary source that offers guidance on what is al-halal and al-haram in the Islamic religion. In most of Muslims' collective stories by Prophet Muhammad known as hadith, there are a number of stories of instances where Muslim women danced (Banes 28). The hadith is the religion's second important source of guidance on the doctrines and practices of Islam. In a story found in the collection of hadith by Imam Ibn Hanbal, one of the Islamic

scholars in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, he outlines that there was an instance that Prophet Muhammad observed a dance but did not object dancing. The prophet together with his wife Aisha watched once a group of Abyssinian Christians in the performance of a modest dance in a mosque but watched the whole dance without objections. The other group of Islamic scholars who support dancing among Muslim women says that the hadith stories teach that dancing is permitted only on certain specific occasions (Banes 81).

One of the conditions enforce that the Muslim women should not dance on occasions where there is alcohol in the parties or ceremony. No gender mixing is allowed when women are allowed to dance. The Muslim women are also allowed to dance only when they display no effeminate movements and not do so excessively. Therefore, the Muslim women are allowed to dance but with certain barriers that advocate for modesty. If the four conditions listed are observed during dance participation, then dancing becomes permissible according to the hadith.

### **Scholar's Interpretations**

However, even among Imams, there are different split opinions on dancing. One Imam Ashrafuz Khan Zaman who is the group's President and head of New York Islamic circle chapter of America disapproves of dancing across Muslim women. He justifies the prohibition by citing that Muhammad was never heard or seen dancing and therefore all Muslims and Islam followers should not practice or participate in dancing.

Imam Ashrafuz prohibits dancing, whether professional or for leisure. Even though it is not addressed in the Qur'an, he says that Muslims should also follow their messenger's actions and deeds (Nourai 98). Other leaders only view dancing among women as forbidden if it leads to further advancements such as indecent touching and inappropriate movements.

## **Non-Muslim Views on Women and Dance**

Different religions have different purposes for dancing. Some dance as their way of promoting religion, to recreate and create certain social roles, and others to honor and worship God. Yet, many religions share Islam's restrictive approach to women and dance. The root of prohibiting dance not only in Islam but also in other religions is due to its sensory sensitivity and perceptions. The performer's movement, the sounds of their physical movements, and the feelings it ignites, are considered by some to evoke sexual imagery. Dances rely on what the dancers do, when they do it, how and whom it is done with. Therefore, the variables such as gender roles, race and class status play a key role in how it is viewed. Keeping dance professional, spiritual, and devoid of sexual intention is of key concern to religious followers. This is because views of the mind and body, more so concerning emotions and one's sexuality affects dance in religion. Various art forms use the body as an accessory to create sounds but dance is manifested through one's body. Christian, Hindu, and Muslims beliefs show different views on dance and religion.

### **Christianity**

Due to Christians having significant importance placed upon their bodies, this has brought about both negative and positive attitudes towards dance. Christians recognize Christ's humanity and their views on the human body are that the body is a temple that houses the Holy Spirit. Christians call the church "body of Christ". As Paul in the bible once quoted, "Christians glorify Christ in their bodies" (1 Cor. 6:15–20). From the second century, most Christians such as Theodore from Cyrrhus and Clement from Alexandria once described dance participation as an imitation of perpetual dance and movements of angels. Dancing, to Christians, is righteous

and considered as blessed people expressing themselves physically of their desire to enter the heaven gates. Therefore, women are allowed to express this feeling freely. The Hebrew tradition in which Christianity is built demonstrates pious dances in which no part of it was affected by the love of God.

Christians have a problem with dance when it is used as an instrument to provoke sexual ideation that would otherwise not have been instigated. Dance, to some Christians, brings about fear of uncontrolled arousal of passions and sexuality. Consequently, religion and governments attempt to exert control on certain dances. Some Christians hold the body's glorification and dancing as an anathema (Crawford 128). They are enemies of physicality, explicit movements, and eroticism.

### **Hinduism**

In other religions such as Hinduism, dancing among women is celebrated and contributes to a positive image of women. In areas such as northern India, many weddings incorporate dancing for both genders to Bollywood pop music. Some Muslim groups may also engage in these practices but only in situations where the Muslim women are alone or dancing without their male counterparts (Nourai 56). Unlike Muslims, Hindus dance in a manner that might be viewed by Muslims as provocative and inappropriate since it involves movements of certain body features such as their hips. The type of attire adorned by the Hindus while dancing in such occasions is not as modest as in the case of Muslim women (Mir 83). Hindu women, when dancing, are adorned in attire that may expose certain parts of their bodies. From the Islamic point of view, clothing serves two main purposes: One is to cover completely the body and to beautify the woman's appearance. Women in Islam are expected dress modestly and how they

dress is related to their own dignity. Allah (God) warns every one of nakedness and neglect of appropriate appearance (Qur'an 7:26).

Despite the objections of Mullahs (a Muslim learned in Islamic theology and sacred law) in Northern India about Hindus dancing to Bollywood pop songs, Hindus still practice the dances especially in weddings and other similar occasions. Muslim immigrants brought some of the types of dances and the traditions caught up in America. The younger generations have kept and preserved those practices. Some of the Muslim parents have enrolled their children in ballet classes and hip-hop dance classes but it is viewed as indecent and against the Islamic teachings (Mir 155). Some immigrant parents have adopted American attitudes toward freedom of expression, claiming that humans need to express and move themselves to fulfill their desires of self-expressing their inner feelings.

### **Example of a Muslim Woman's Conflict with Dance and Religion**

Some examples of cases in which Muslims have given up their dancing practices and careers is the case of Khadija Anderson, a 35-year-old dancer who converted to Islam in 1993 (Nourai 100). She believed that dancing violated her belief and faith in Islam and gave up dancing for nearly 10 years. Even though she had stopped performing, she still kept on taking dance classes.

Khadija later gradually began Butoh, a Japanese dance type that was less conservative, confirmed to her religious beliefs and Islamic values. Butoh is a type of Japanese dance that is not about the attractiveness of the body movements, but takes an activist approach. In 2012 August, she performed the Butoh dance in an event to commemorate the 67<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nagasaki's atomic bomb for the attack victims. Some Muslim leaders and Muslims believe that

the intention of a woman's dance means everything and is all that counts. Some Muslims use dancing as a form of social protest rather than a show of their bodily features and movements (Robinson 6). According to anthropology, humans dance to express a feeling and awareness that is difficult to be expressed in words. Dance across all religions is an expression and also intended to fulfill a set of intentions and dynamic functions. Social activism is one of those dynamic functions as evidenced by Butoh.

### **Dancing in Other Cultures**

The Europeans recognized that the dances that were non-European were intertwined with some indigenous moralities and religion. However, the dances had themes that were comparable to the European folk dances and the colonialists considered these indigenous dances to be "savage heathenism" (Jones, 2005). Therefore, dance was antagonistic to the intended "true faith" (Jones, 2005). The British sought to get rid of those dances and their influence also led to the fall of Hindu temple dancing. The dance in religious premise came back in later years and Hindu temple dancing rose to become known as the Indian national symbol of middle-class women. After these events, the Nigerian Yoruba's God's assemblies, black slaves in America, and white Christian groups all included in their worship patterns of dance practices (Crawford 83). The dances were however under different names such as the "shout," "play," or "feeling the Lord" because dancing was expressly prohibited by slaveowners. The oppressed, therefore, had to use secret codes to identify their dances and music-making to evade punishment by slaveowners. Islam, however, views dancing differently. Some scholars would state that Islam disapproves of dancing and considers it a distraction of Muslim's contemplation of the prophet's wisdom. These Islam leaders view dancing as filled with contempt.



## **Dancing in Muslim Societies**

For some Muslim leaders, dancing is not unacceptable but it is the way in which it is carried out or performed that raises the questions. A representation of about 5% of Muslims among the Sufi order of Islam believes that dancing is an actual integral expression of devotion among the Muslim women. The Sufis ~~group~~ also believe that dancing not only expresses devotion but is a way of connecting with God. ~~The~~ Sufis around the world actually practice dancing and one of the most famous ones is the whirling Dervishes from Turkey (Mir 60). In many Muslim societies, dancing amongst women has been integral including Filipino Muslim dancers known as Singkil and Pangalay. Across other parts of the world, belly dancing has been practiced not only in the Middle East but also among other religions such as Hinduism, Christianity, and Judaism. Other instances that dancing among women in the Muslim communities is in the long dance parties preceding the Muslim weddings in areas such as South Asia.

People in these cultures use dance to reveal divine nature through its creation and to entertain. Its knowledge is acquired through initiating movement, observation, divination and copying (Robinson 4). The entertaining dance styles that are learned through observations from young Muslim women are what Muslim leaders term as misleading and having a negative influence. This is because those movements do not conform to Islamic practices and teachings. Movements in most music videos tend to have this kind of movements and indecent exposure in dressing and adornment.

## **Lyrical Dancing as a Solution**

The ultimate goal of my research is to discover whether or not dancing in Islam is considered al-halal (permissible) or al-haram (forbidden). The Qur'an does not have express language regarding dance. The contemporary individuals who interpret the Qur'an stand on both sides of the fence in regards to Muslim women dancing. There is a large group of Imams who state that dancing for Muslim women is permissible under certain conditions, whereas, other Imams state that it's never permissible. However, there is evidence within different Muslim cultures that have a history of dance, such as: The Sufis who are famous for the whirling Dervishes from Turkey, and the Filipino dancers known as Singkil and Pangalay. Nevertheless, in some religions, such as Christianity, dancing is considered an act of worship.

As a woman who self-identifies as Muslim, and as a dancer, I am presented with a dilemma. My research points me to a variety of options. At one end of the spectrum, I have the approval to dance, as neither the Qur'an nor Prophet Muhammad explicitly mentions any comment on the matter, while at the other spectrum, it is absolutely prohibited due to explanations stated by very conservative Muslim who deem it as unacceptable. Ultimately, I understand lyrical dancing as being an al-halal form of dance that will allow me to continue to pursue my passion for dance, while respecting the boundaries of my religion. Lyrical dance gives me an opportunity to express myself, and to what I understand from my research, is compatible with Islam.

Lyrical dances challenge the choreographers and dancers to involve motion in interpreting the music they are dancing to and express its emotions. A lyrical dancer should have to engage movements to illustrate the meaning of a song or music. The lyrical dance is passionate and an emotional type of dance. The intended emotion it portrays is love and Hindus use it in weddings and occasions after the wedding ceremony (Otterbeck 220). The lyric jazz is

normally used to tell a story through every movement and express freedom. Lyrical dancing has a relative history and origin based on the merging of pop/rock/folk/jazz and different types of modern music and dance. Due to its nature of being performed with lyrics, and the lyrics being the driving force and source of its inspiration for the movements, lyric dancing is used in other religions to either tell a story or express feelings of joy or love in some occasions.

Since lyric dancing is mostly done commercially, some Muslim leaders are not against it. Their school of thought is that, Islam is not against any woman who is working and earning her own living by fair means. Some lyric dances are used to communicate a strong powerful message on a touching issue that needs to be addressed and the dance is one of the best avenues that are considered influential in that regard (Otterbeck 218). The leaders say that Islam gives the women maximum rights to a much respectful and valued life to express their own feelings in the way they feel comfortable and do not jeopardize their faith and relationship with God.

### **Opposition to Lyrical Dancing**

Other Muslim leaders against the dance argue that music itself is forbidden in Islam together with dance and singing. Music and dance go hand in hand therefore; both are prohibited going by this rule. In the Islam religion, there are Mehram and Non-Mehram individuals to a Muslim woman. A Mehram is a person or man who is related to a Muslim woman. This would include her biological brother, father, uncle, son and grandfather. The Non-Mehrams are not related to the Muslim women such as her friends, fiancé, and workmates. Since lyric dancing involves body movements and performance in front of a wide audience that is consisting of both Mehrams to her and Non-Mehrams, lyric dancing is not allowed. To the leaders, the Muslim

woman should not engage herself in any activity that makes her the center of attention in other people's eyes especially the Non-Mehrams'.

Dancing in front of Non-Mehram and other men is not allowed just as is the case with other forms of dancing. Dancing in parties where the guests are all women is acceptable since no man is present to watch them dance. However, the music itself is forbidden and that alone acts as a barrier. Muslims also have the Mehndi functions in which all the women can dance together in celebration. Lyric dancing may then only be acceptable behind closed doors and without a wide audience of not Mehrams (Otterbeck 220). The only place that the Muslim woman is allowed completely to perform the lyric dances is in the presence of Mehrams or alone in their households.

### **Overall Opinion toward Muslim Women Dancing**

The physical body of a woman and man is the central vehicle, which links the dance, gender, and sex and a dance performance can be viewed as provocative in which such is considered a sin in Islam (Ansari and Vanessa 20). Dance as an expression is a non-verbal emotional way of communication and may provide room for a wrong interpretation or unintentionally provoke. This may make a pure innocent dance be interpreted differently and lose its pure intended meaning of praise. Different cultural attitudes determine and dictate whether dancing conflicts the teaching of Islam and women's behaviors. Modern aspects of culture heavily influence the conflicts but what remains clear is dancing is considered al-haram when performed in certain inappropriate circumstances.

### **Workshop**

On a personal note, I am a woman of faith and dancing is important to me. In order to test and create a dance environment that I now understand to be compatible with Islam due to my research, I created a workshop. My workshop incorporated only women with the intent to teach and learn from one another about how to create a lyrical dance piece that can be emotionally expressive. This was my first time creating a lyrical dance piece that was solely focused on the emotional intent behind the routine, rather than just the dance moves. My dance depicted internal struggle. Which is ironic because I struggled with crafting the routine. The hardest part about performing the routine during the workshop was, learning how to actively express the emotions behind each move. The other women helped me strengthen this skill by giving me advice on how to either, change a particular move, or on how to channel the right mental state in order to access the key emotions I needed to depict.

Through this workshop, I was able to learn that my body can be pushed, and is more than capable of utilizing various ballet and/or contemporary techniques such as, “arabesque,” a gesture where the leg is extended behind the dancer’s body at 90° or higher. I learned how to channel the emotions I need to actively express while dancing, and I was able to experience a much needed bonding experience. My workshop is proof to me that if it ever comes down to it, I am perfectly happy with only doing the genre of lyrical dance with an audience of just women.

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