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Approaching Dance: Young Muslim Women Reflect on Their Relationships to Dance as an Art Form

Dansa Yaklaşmak: Genç Müslüman Kadınlar Bir Sanat Formu olarak Dans ile İlişkileri Üzerine Düşünüyor

Ayrin Ersöz *

Abstract: Muslim communities are growing in many Western countries, and the experience of being Muslim is intertwined with ethnic, religious and gender related issues. There has been an increase in research focusing on understanding the Muslim population's situation within Western societies after 9/11. A considerable number of studies, qualitative research and oral histories were conducted that extensively explore Muslim communities, particularly Muslim women's life experiences and perceptions living in predominantly Western countries. The research literature regarding young Muslim women's participation in bodily practices is predominantly confined to physical education courses, and extra-curricular activities during the subjects' secondary school education. Such research shows that young Muslim women can face particular problems when participating in physical activities because of religious and cultural restrictions. Nonetheless, it appears that there is a research gap regarding young Muslim women's relationship to dance as an artistic and/or recreational practice. The question such as what young Muslim women think of dance as a concept, artistic field, and bodily experience seems to be not included in the literature of dance studies and social sciences research. The author of this paper conducted a *qualitative research* study titled *Muslim Female Students in Higher Education in the United States: Approaches to and Experiences of Dance and Embodied Performance* between the years of 2016-2017 at Rutgers University in New Jersey USA. The study was supported by Turkish Fulbright Commission and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Office of Research and Regulatory Affairs Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University on October 14, 2016 with the protocol number 17-123. The aim of the study was to examine the role dance plays within the lives of Muslim female university students with a specific focus on young women age 18 to 24. In structuring the research study, the questions were framed to gather data regarding the following: the perceptions of young Muslim women regarding dance as an art form; their personal participation in dance as recreational and/or artistic expression; and their impressions and understanding of dance as a component of various religious, political, social, and cultural contexts in America. The research was conducted with 12 young Muslim female students from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds, who voluntarily participated in the study. The study intended to explore how the concept of dance art and its practices are realized, experienced, and negotiated within participants' daily religious practices and beliefs. The research revealed various approaches to dance, strictly connected to how Islam is understood and experienced by these young Muslim female students. Another important finding is that family relations and patriarchal understandings are also strong determinants

* Prof. Dr., Yıldız Teknik Üniversitesi, Sanat ve Tasarım Fakültesi, Müzik ve Sahne Sanatları Bölümü
Prof. Dr., Yıldız Technical University, Art and Design Faculty, Music and Stage Arts Department
ORCID 0000-0002-9501-2981

aersoz@yildiz.edu.tr

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of how dance is considered and experienced. Further research is required to uncover the patriarchal characteristics in the construction of bodily perception of young Muslim women.

Structured Abstract: Introduction: For a Muslim woman interested in dance, the most critical problem she can face is that the values of her religion and the practices of dance could create a conflict zone. The convention regarding the stance of Islam regarding embodied practices is that Islam restricts participation in these practices, particularly women's involvement. Islam does not distinguish between secular and religious life, and views the human body in religious terms. The daily life of a Muslim believer is required to be structured under the law of Islam. Nothing is seen as secular or religiously neutral, and hence the human body is also always viewed in religious terms (Winter, 1995:36).

After 9/11 there is an increase of research regarding Muslim population within the Western societies. There is an extensive exploration of Muslim communities and predominantly Muslim women's life experiences and perceptions within Western societies (Hopkins et al., 2007; Kwan, 2008; Abu- Lughod, 2013; Göle, 2015). In this context, considerable number of qualitative research and oral histories were conducted capturing views of Muslim women living in predominantly Western countries (Sarroub, 2005; Raouda, 2008). Research about young Muslim women's participation in and experiences of embodied practices is mostly limited to physical education courses and extra-curriculum activities during the subjects' secondary school education. Such research show that young Muslim women can face particular problems when participating in physical activities because of the religious and cultural restrictions (Dagkas & Benn, 2006; Kay, 2006; Dagkas et al., 2011). Nevertheless, there is a research gap on the relationship of young female Muslims' dance and the embodied artistic practices. What young Muslim women think of dance as a concept, practice and bodily experience was not an explored area in dance studies and social sciences research.

In this frame a qualitative research study *Muslim Female Students in Higher Education in the United States: Approaches to and Experiences of Dance and Embodied Performance*¹ was structured with a particular focus on the perceptions of young Muslim women regarding dance as an art form; their personal participation in dance as recreational and/or artistic expression; and their impressions and understanding of dance as a component of various religious, political, social, and cultural contexts in America. The intention of this research was to explore how the concept of dance and its practices are realized, experienced and negotiated with the daily practice and beliefs of Islam by these young women living in the United States.

Method: The *Muslim Female Students in Higher Education in the United States: Approaches to and Experiences of Dance and Embodied Performance* research was developed and realized by the researcher with the aim to examine the role that dance plays within the lives of Muslim female university students at Rutgers University with the specific focus on young women age from 18 to 24. After the approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), Office of Research and Regulatory Affairs Arts and Sciences at Rutgers University on October 14, 2016 with the protocol number 17-123, the research was conducted between November 2016 and February 2017 with 12 young female participants. Students were approached through requests for announcements by professors teaching in Middle Eastern Studies and AMESALL and through email correspondences and an announcement in a Friday prayer via the help of Muslim Students Association at Rutgers University. Participants were asked to answer semi structured questions in informal settings.

Through the analysis of the data from qualitative research conducted by the author and the phenomenological knowledge based on her personal experience as a dancer and scholar living in Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country, it is apparent that Muslim female students' approaches to dance are structured on an individual's understanding of the religion and the relationship of the cultural and familiar determinations that frame this understanding. Participants in this study, were asked to spend no more than 4 hours of their time in interviews, and follow-up consultations. The investigator conducted one face-to-face interview with the participants and if needed one follow-up interview either face-to-face, by email, or by phone. The initial interview took approximately 2 hours in length. After the interviews were transcribed, the participants had the opportunity to review the transcripts. The interview questions focused on the participant's perceptions of dance as an art form and their participation in dance as a recreational and/or artistic expression. The time and the private location where the interviews will take place was decided by the

¹ The research was supported by Turkish Fulbright Foundation for six months between years 2016-2017 realized at Rutgers University, NJ, USA.

researcher and by the participants together. The participants were given the opportunity to have their names to remain anonymous and the researcher and the participants mutually agreed on what code will be used in the place for name. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by the researcher.

Findings and Discussion: The data from the interviews suggests that young Muslim female students in USA are placed between the local and the global perspectives when forming their hyphenated identities. Each of the participants have their own perspective of faith and an approach to relate their faith to their daily life. The way they construct their identities and value system is dynamic and in sync with the expectations of their education and career prospects. Yet while they navigate their social and economic life as active participants and contributors of public life they do not oppose family obligations such as arrange marriages. Evaluation of the data gathered through interviews reveal that their understanding and appreciation of dance is deeply informed by their own sense of being in-between, i.e., the reality of being Muslim and living in a secular Western Country. Most of them expressed a clear acknowledgement of dance as a profession, as a practice that requires talent, and immediately distanced themselves from dance as professional occupation because of perceptions of their lack of ability since they would not think of themselves as talented or able to dance. Dance as a bodily practice that is immediately associated with ability is easily discarded from their options of appropriate jobs. These answers can be interpreted as that young Muslim women create a discussion proof protection around the issue, which has the power to blur the visibility of the real reason.

Keywords: Dance studies, muslim female students, dance, embodied practices, Islam, veil.

Öz: Müslüman topluluklar birçok Batı ülkesinde büyüyor ve Müslüman olma deneyimi etnik, dini ve cinsiyetle ilgili konularla iç içe geçmiş durumdadır. 11 Eylül'den sonra Batı toplumlarında Müslüman nüfusun durumunu anlamaya odaklanan araştırmalarda artış olduğu gözlenmektedir. Müslüman toplulukları, özellikle de ağırlıklı olarak Batı ülkelerinde yaşayan Müslüman kadınların yaşam deneyimleri ve algılarını kapsamlı bir şekilde araştıran önemli sayıda nitel araştırma ve sözlü tarih çalışmaları yapılmaktadır. Genç Müslüman kadınların bedensel pratiklere katılımına ilişkin literatür, ağırlıklı olarak beden eğitimi dersleriyle ve müfredat dışı etkinlikleri ile sınırlıdır. Bu tür araştırmalar, genç Müslüman kadınların dini ve kültürel kısıtlamalar nedeniyle fiziksel aktivitelere katılırken belirli sorunlarla karşılaşabileceğini göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, genç Müslüman kadınların sanatsal ve/veya hobi olarak dansla ilişkisine yönelik literatürde boşluk olduğu görülmektedir. Genç Müslüman kadınların dansı bir kavram, sanat alanı ve bedensel deneyim olarak nasıl düşündüklerine dair soru, dans çalışmaları ve sosyal bilimler araştırmaları literatüründe yer almıyor gibi görünmektedir. Bu makalenin yazarı, ABD New Jersey'deki Rutgers Üniversitesi'nde 2016-2017 yılları arasında *Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'nde Yüksek Öğretimde Müslüman Kız Öğrenciler: Dans ve Bedenlenmiş Performansa Yaklaşımlar ve Deneyimler* başlıklı nitel bir araştırma yürütmüştür. Çalışma, Türkiye Fulbright Komisyonu tarafından desteklenmiş ve Rutgers Üniversitesi Etik Kurulu'nun 14 Ekim 2016 tarihli ve 17-123 sayılı kararı ile onaylanmıştır. Çalışmanın amacı, dansın Müslüman kadın üniversite öğrencilerinin yaşamlarında oynadığı rolü, 18-24 yaş arası genç kadınlara özel olarak odaklanarak incelemektir. Araştırma çalışması yapılandırılırken, sorular aşağıdaki konularla ilgili veri toplamak için çerçevelendirildi: genç Müslüman kadınların dansa bir sanat biçimi olarak bakış açıları; rekreasyonel ve/veya sanatsal ifade olarak dansa kişisel katılımları; Amerika'daki çeşitli dini, politik, sosyal ve kültürel bağlamların bir bileşeni olarak izlenimleri ve dans anlayışları. Araştırma, gönüllü olarak katılan çeşitli kültürel ve etnik kökenlerden 12 genç Müslüman kadın öğrenci ile gerçekleştirildi. Çalışmanın amacı, bu genç kadınlar tarafından İslam'ın günlük pratikleri ve inançları ile dans kavramının ve pratiklerinin nasıl gerçekleştirildiğini, deneyimlendiğini ve müzakere edildiğini keşfetmektir. Çalışma, dansa farklı yaklaşımların, genç Müslüman kadınlar tarafından İslam'ın nasıl anlaşıldığına ve deneyimlendiğine sıkıca bağlı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bir diğer önemli bulgu, aile ilişkileri ve ataerkil toplum anlayışının, dansın nasıl ele alındığını ve yaşandığını belirleyen güçlü etmenler olduğudur. Genç Müslüman kadınların bedensel algısının inşasında ataerkil karakteristikleri ortaya çıkarmak için daha fazla araştırma yapılması gerekmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dans Araştırmaları, Müslüman kadın öğrenciler, dans, bedensel pratikler, başörtüsü

Introduction

Muslim communities are growing in many Western countries, and evidence suggests that the experience of being Muslim is intertwined with ethnic, religious and gender related issues. There has been an increase in research focusing on understanding the situation of Muslim population within the Western societies after 9/11. Since then the academic and social research about these Muslim communities and particularly Muslim women's life experiences and perceptions were extensively explored (Hopkins et al., 2007; Kwan, 2008; Abu- Lughod, 2013; Göle, 2015). In this context, considerable number of qualitative research and oral histories were conducted capturing views of Muslim women living in predominantly Western countries (Sarroub, 2005; Raouda, 2008). The literature, regarding the research about young Muslim women's participation in and experiences of embodied practices is mainly limited to physical education courses and extra-curriculum activities during the subjects' secondary school education. Such research show that young Muslim women can face particular problems when participating in physical activities because of the religious and cultural restrictions (Dagkas & Ben, 2006; Kay, 2006; Dagkas et al., 2011). However, there is a research gap on the relationship of young female Muslim's dance and the embodied artistic practices. What young Muslim women think of dance as a concept, practice and bodily experience was not an explored area in dance studies and social sciences research.

The most critical problem a Muslim woman interested in dance faces is that the values of her religion and the practices of dance could create a conflict zone. It is common knowledge that participation in embodied practices is highly restricted by Islamic doctrine, especially for females. Islam as a religion does not make a distinction between the secular and religious life; the human body is viewed in religious terms in Islam. The daily life of a Muslim believer needs to be organized under the law of Islam. Nothing is seen as secular or religiously neutral and hence the human body is also always viewed in religious terms (Winter, 1995: 36). As put by Sayyid Abdul Al'a Mawdudi in his work *Towards Understanding Islam*, "Islam is not a religion in the Western understanding of the word. It is at once a faith and a way of life, a religion and a social order, a doctrine and a code of conduct, a set of values and principles and a social movement to realize them in history." (Mawdudi, 2013: xii). Turkish Islamic feminist scholar Hidayet Şevkatli Tuksal explores in depth the distinctive patriarchal socio-political structuring operating at the time of the production and the transmission of the basic principles of Qur'an in her research *The Reflections of Anti Woman Discourse in Islam Tradition* (Kadın Karşıtı Söylemin İslam Geleneğindeki İzdeşimleri). She explains that these patriarchal socio-political structures were effective in deeming the female species different and inferior to the male gender that find place in Qur'an and expertly states that in Islam, the transcendental religious ideas charged with patriarchal culture are transferred to the mundane practices (2012: 47).

Thus, even aesthetic pursuits of the believers should be in accordance with the Islamic teachings and ethical principles. Moreover, Islamic art and music expert Lois Ibsen al Faruqi states that dance did not hold an important cultural or aesthetic role in the Islamic civilization as it did in some other civilizations; she reminds us that "... [t]he Muslims were never able to quite resolve the uncertainty which they, as people, felt over the legitimacy of dance." (Al Faruqi, 1978: 6). Al Faruqi also specifies the concept of *tawhid* as the strong notion of unity in Islam that

"*Tawhid* not only demands adherence to beliefs and practices in religion, but also conformity to Islamic ideals in his social, political, economic, and even artistic endeavors. There is no separation of the sacred and secular in Islam. Even the aesthetic pursuits and the recreational activities of the Muslims must somehow be brought into relationship with the Islamic teachings and ethical principles. The fact that this is not possible for all kinds of dance has perhaps made the whole art form suspect." (Al Faruqi, 1978: 6)

Tawhid in her article *Dance as an Expression of Islamic Culture* is placed as one of the three explanations she formulates as reasons for the fact that dance did not play an important role in Islamic civilization (Al Faruqi, 1978: 6). Another explanation she gives is structured around the knowledge that dance was used as a ritualistic practice for pre-Islamic religious cults. Islam is in clear opposition to the practices of pre-Islamic cults; thus, dance was reckoned as inappropriate for Islamic religious endeavor. Henceforth its generalization by Muslims for not being appropriate for the daily life reminding the inseparable relationship of the divine and the mundane practices in Islamic understanding. For the last explanation Al Faruqi explains the difficulty to separate dance from its worldliness, the connection of the dancing body to natural life (Al Faruqi, 1978: 6). The Islamic notion of beauty should be connected to the divine, thus nature and its connotations are refrained from being represented as they are. Hence the accepted and appropriate aesthetic forms in Islam can be seen to be abstract designs that are repeated symbolizing the infinite divine (Al Faruqi, 1978: 6).

However, the contemporary approaches to dance among young Muslims have been changed drastically. Dance as a bodily, artistic and social practice where the dancing body is in deep contact with itself and many times also with other bodies is an important aspect to be added in the research to understand how the lives of young Muslim women are structured around their belief and their embodied experiences.

Navigating Dance Practice in a Predominantly Muslim Country

The initial motivation and the phenomenological knowledge brought to this research regarding what role dance as an artistic practice and/or recreational activity stands in the lives in young Muslim women is based on personal experience of the researcher who is a dancer and choreographer creating her work in Istanbul, Turkey. The challenges of being a dance artist and scholar in Turkey, a secular but also Muslim country, are quite different from those of the Western countries. Dance as an artistic, social, and recreational practice in Turkey faces many other challenges than Western countries' dance experiences. The experience of dance as a contemporary artistic endeavor or within the configuration of the historical dance forms is within the structure of Turkey's modern-patriarchal-Islamic hybrid culture. It can be argued that the majority of Turkish society doesn't recognize dance as an *art form*, profession and in some cases even as hobby.²

Islam and the tradition of patriarchy function as main cultural determinants in regard to the challenges in the contextualization of dance as an art form in Turkey. In this respect dance and its connotations are majorly framed and understood within Islam practiced in Turkish patriarchal society. As Daryush Shayegan expresses that art in the non-Western world (his analysis is mainly for the Islamic world) could never be considered as an autonomous field, which has never been separated from religion and tradition and has always been part of an indivisible whole (Shayegan, 2013: 67) it can be discussed that dance as an art form can also be considered under this analysis. As the rich bodily performative traditions of Turkey, such as folk dance traditions (based on the collective experience of the community) and the bodily practices as part of the religious rituals

² This fact is part of Turkey's social and cultural reality, and as the statement "The majority of Turkey's population is Muslim" is a knowledge that needs not to be proven, is 'une vérité de La Palice.' Recep Tayyip Erdogan is the first elected president of Turkey. Before his election (2014) as a president, he was the prime minister of Turkey since 2002. He won every election he attended. His party won the majority of the parliament's chairs and is seen as Islamist from the opposition. When he was the mayor of Istanbul in 1994, prior to his political career as the prime minister, Erdogan publicly presented his ideas on dance. For him, dance (ballet) was a deviated profession, and he wouldn't want his daughters to be part of it. He responded to the question of the interviewer, "if I came here as a ballerina," as "my first advice to you would be to leave this profession in my opinion." No doubt, these views represent the majority of Turkey's opinion in the political field. For details visit (<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/basbakan-a-bale-sorulsaydi-hasan-pulur-yasam-yazardetay/21.07.2010/1266182/default.htm>)

such as in Sufi Mevlevi tradition and Alevi Cem rituals, it is not easy to separate these practices from their religious or traditional connotations.³

Additionally, the history of solo entertainment dance tradition of Istanbul, a form that is heavily connected with concept of sexuality – the literature clearly puts an emphasis that the practitioners were not Turkish Muslims, but different constituencies from the Ottoman era (Armenians, Jews and Romani people) (And, 1976: 130-145). Western dance was formally introduced in the 1940's by the establishment of National Ballet School and later the National Ballet Company, as an important element to represent Turkey as a modern secular country, embracing Westernization ideology which included the accession of Turkey to the NATO and becoming part of the Western Bloc in the time of Cold War. The ballet education was spread in many conservatories, but modern/contemporary dance remained limited existing only in three conservatories with many problems regarding infrastructure and academic staff.

A dance artist in Turkey can find herself in the constant advocating for dance as a legitimate art form within the society's religious and patriarchal atmosphere. Contemporary dance artists in Turkey are expected to navigate their professional practice in environment that on the one hand is supporting dance by ongoing state funding of six State Opera and Ballet institutions in six different major cities with hundreds of performers, and on the other hand trying to realize their artistic endeavor where there is no any funding system that would support independent dance artists, as backbones of the contemporary dance and performance artistic field. Normally dance is not accepted as a legitimate profession by the society, due to its assumed implications to immorality and immodesty. Thus, dance artists as is the author of this article fine themselves caught to circumnavigate the explanation of their art without using the words "body" and "dance". Yet, there appears to be an interest towards dance from young Muslim women wearing headscarves; a constituency that was perceived as distant to this artistic form. The interest however brings its own issues that dance artists in Turkey - a small community mostly consisting of citizens coming from education through which Western ideals and the Western way of life is sanctified -are not familiar with.

In 2015 two female Muslim students of Yildiz Technical University approached the researcher after she gave a seminar about dance art as part of the basic design course in School of Art and Design. Students both of whom were wearing hijab were interested in dance and were willing to be part of a dance class. One of them asked if it is possible for her to participate with her headscarf. After a thorough discussion on how the hijab can be incorporated to the suitable practice outfit with the aim to not compromise the need to cover and to be able to dance comfortably, it was agreed to create an extracurricular dance class in which students who are non-dancers could actively participate. The other Muslim female student asked if a dance class that is open only for female students could be possible. This possibility was realized later however, the student could not participate. In 2018 the researcher gave a series of dance and body awareness workshops to students at Yildiz Technical University as part of personal development workshops held by the Office of Dean of Students. These workshops were open to all students at the university and were attended by students from different departments. One of the attending students was a young woman from the psychological guidance and counseling department. Wearing a headscarf and defining herself as a devoted Muslim woman appeared to enjoy participating in the dance workshop. The researcher asked the student about how she would describe the perception towards dance among

³ For further reading see:

Erol, A. (2010). Re-Imagining Identity: The Transformation of the Alevi Semah. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 46(3), 375-387. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20720677>.

Uludağ, S. (2005). *İslam Açısından Müzik ve Sema* [Muzik and Sema According to Islam], Kabaıcı.

And, M. (1977). The Mevlana Ceremony [Turkey], *The Drama Review: TDR*, 21(3), 83-94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1145153>.

And, M. (1976). *A Pictorial History of Turkish Dancing*. Dost Yayinlari.

devoted Muslim women. She stated that some of her friends would have been concerned about dancing in the presence of men, and some would have been concerned about how they would appear dancing with the headscarf. As for her own experience, she stated that she loves dancing, and she would have willing to practice dance professionally if her dancing is not judged by any segments of society, be it secular or religious. Additionally, her statement included that she is more confident in her local folkloric dances, and she wouldn't want to be part of any dance that would enunciate sexuality.⁴ These female Muslim students were addressing the same desire to be able to enjoy dance practice. However, their concern regarding participation in any dance practice differed. Their questions presented reappearing issues that reveal the intention to combine the dance practice with the norms of Islam; on the one hand, the desire was to be able to dance with hijab and not being judged by it and trying to find a suitable and comfortable solution for that, and on the other hand, the desire to be able to dance in a women-only environment as the solution for the apprehension of dancing in the presence of man.⁵

Hijab or veiling at the university setting was a contested issue after the abolition of veiled female students from University setting as one of the consequences of the 1980 Turkish military coup.⁶ According to Turkish sociologist Nilüfer Göle "Islamic veiling is a political issue in both Muslim and Western European countries....The veiling of Islamist students appears as a controversial issue because it is the most visible reminder of religiosity and traditional roles of women in modern social context, such as university campuses, urban centers, political organizations, and industrial workplaces." (Göle, 1996:3). Göle continues her analysis by reminding that the contemporary form of veiling is affirmation of Muslim women's identity as distinct from traditional Muslim women's veiling (Göle, 1996:4). Young Muslim women in contrast to the traditional veiling, are considered and argued to be active protagonists in their decision and are willing to be acknowledged like that. "In this respect veiling does not express passive submission to prevalent community norms but, instead, affirms an active interest in Islamic scripture." (Göle, 1996:4). The above discussions in the groundbreaking research of Göle is shedding light on how the young Muslim women in Turkey were located within larger political realm both in the ideals of the governing secular elite and the visibility requests of Islamist political opposition movement. In October 2013 with the official regulation the ban for wearing headscarf in the public spaces was lifted. However, the young Muslim students' presence in the university setting that were subject to above mentioned encounter was after an over a decade long ruling of AK Party government. In these years the ideological connotations of veiling of young women changed drastically. The sociological discussions regarding young women and men and their approach to Islam shifted from their active presence as part of the political Islam and became more part of the contemporary life of the country especially in the big cities. Young women with headscarves were seen present in the Gezi Protests criticizing AK Party government. After the 2002 AK Party government, the young Muslim generation that is considered to be the children of the Islamists were observed to be undertaking more individualistic and existential directions in their relation to belief than their preceding generation which were organized more around the idea of collective belonging.

⁴ Personal interview. Conducted by A. Ersöz. Istanbul. March 2021.

⁵ These issues were firsthand experienced in the class environment in Turkey and after through the research interviews with young Muslim women at Rutgers University.

⁶ Women were not employed with their headscarves in public institutions due to the "public dress code" that was enacted after the military coup of September 12, 1980 and remained in effect for 31 years. The headscarf ban in the public sector reached its peak in 1997, when the military intervened in politics. This was the military and bureaucracy-centered prohibition and punishment process against some religious practices and headscarf, which started with the decisions announced as a result of the extraordinary meeting of the National Security Council on February 28, 1997. For some a political icon for others a religious obligation, the headscarf and its ban was an issue that Turkey discussed for decades.

Young Immigrant Muslim Women Express Locality within a Globalized World

A qualitative research study *Muslim Female Students in Higher Education in the United States: Approaches to and Experiences of Dance and Embodied Performance*⁷ was developed and realized by the researcher with the aim to examine the role that dance plays within the lives of Muslim female university students at Rutgers University in New Jersey, USA, with the specific focus on young women age from 18 to 24. In structuring the research study, the questions were framed to gather data regarding the following: the perceptions of young Muslim women regarding dance as an art form; their personal participation in dance as recreational and/or artistic expression; and their impressions and understanding of dance as a component of various religious, political, social, and cultural contexts in America. The intention of this research was to explore how the concept of dance and its practices are realized, experienced and negotiated with the daily practice and beliefs of Islam by these young women living in the United States.

Method

The research was conducted between November 2016 and March 2017 with 12 young female students at Rutgers University, NJ who were voluntary participants of the study. Students were approached through requests for announcements by professors teaching in departments such as Middle Eastern Studies and AMESALL and through email correspondences and an announcement in a Friday prayer via the help of Muslim Students Association at Rutgers University. Participants were asked to answer semi structured questions in informal settings. No more than 4 hours was estimated for the interviews divided as one face-to-face interview with the participants and if needed one follow-up interview either face-to-face, by email, or by phone. Participants were provided with the opportunity to review the transcripts of the interviews.

The interview contained semi structured questions aiming to not disrupt the flow of the conversation and were focused on the participant's perceptions of dance as an art form and as a recreational and/or artistic expression. Students firstly were asked to describe what they think when they hear the word dance and later in the conversation they were asked how do they perceive the role of Islam in their perception of dance as a recreational practice and/or artistic form. Most of the participants of the research were from South Asian origin. Some of them immigrated when children and some were born in the U.S. to immigrant families.

The time and the private location where the interviews took place was decided by the researcher and by the participants together. The participants were given the opportunity to have their names to remain anonymous and the researcher and the participants mutually agreed on what code will be used in the place for name. The mutual agreement was to use the initials of the names. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed by the researcher.

Examples

Interviewee 1⁸, a young woman immigrated to the US from Pakistan with her mother and her siblings at age 10, is coming from a small village in Pakistan and her immediate and extended family as she describes them is very religious. She wasn't wearing a hijab at the time of the interview, a decision made both by her and her mother after receiving increased verbal attacks from her peers in middle school in the U.S. She described her love of dancing and how she was desperate to have dance as part of her life. She immediately added that her parents are not aware of her desire to dance and when asked what would have been their attitude towards her wish to dance, she explains that they would disagree and wouldn't let her do it. She is expected to get an arranged

⁷ The research was supported by Turkish Fulbright Foundation for six months between years 2016-2017 realized at Rutgers University, NJ, USA.

⁸ The name of the students participated in the research will not be revealed. The pseudonymous will be used throughout the article.

marriage as soon as she completes her studies. Her wish is to have a future husband who would be accepting her desire to dance and will not stop her from her dream. However, her inside knowledge of the general attitude of man from her culture - both from her brothers and her father and also from men in the Pakistani Cultural Club she is very suspicious of finding any Pakistani man that would tolerate her dance desire.

Interviewee 2, another Pakistani Muslim student coming from Karachi one of the biggest city of the country is clear in her statement that dance as a profession beside the fact that she loves dancing as recreational practice would be a biggest “no” both because of her family wouldn’t accept it but also because of her understanding of what is appropriate for a Muslim woman to do. When asked what would have been her parents' reaction if she decided to become a dancer? She quickly explains

“No, no, no, that would be like the biggest No in my life. Bigger than being a teacher, of course. And the reason would most likely be, I think, that I cover. It would just be weird because I would dance with my hijab. ... If it was in the past, maybe I would wear tights with a shirt and just wrap a scarf around my head. Maybe I would do it, but now I don’t think so. I have changed too. It would be perceived as a “No” by everybody.”

She states that for her being a devoted Muslim who wears hijab dance would be something that she can do only as a recreational practice and only in front of women. And enthusiastically stating if there was a dance company that was female only she would definitely be part of it. “I would totally do it, I would so do it. You have no idea. I would so do it. Oh my God, oh my God. OK. Because my parents might be OK with it.”

Interviewee 3, another student from Indian origin who decided to wear hijab even though her mother is not wearing hijab, also is clear that she wouldn’t be comfortable dancing in front of people *“I definitely wouldn’t feel comfortable because as Muslim, as someone who wears a hijab as well, there is a modesty aspect to how I present myself in public. So I definitely wouldn’t feel comfortable.”* She also explains that she enjoys dancing in pre-wedding parties only together with her female friends and relatives and only if they are sure that no man can enter the room they are in.

Interviewee 4, another student from Pakistani origin, experiences more relax approach to dance. She does not wear hijab, and her statement is that dance is not a much contested issue in her family. *“So my mom and her sister open to the whole mixed-gender dancing. I have cousins who actually feel differently about that. They are not against it but they personally prefer that it’s only women around them if they are dancing. So they are not against it or anything, but it’s just their preference to be in an environment where it’s only female if they are going to dance. But they are not actively against it or anything. They just feel that way.”*

Findings

The transcripts of the records were first sorted by the questions and after by the emerging themes in the interviews. The common theme occurring was how the participants related the stance of Islam in relation to dance practice, especially for women. Through the analysis of the data and the phenomenological knowledge based on the personal experience of the author as a dancer and scholar living in Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country, it is apparent that Muslim female students' approaches to dance are structured on an individual’s understanding of the religion and the relationship of the cultural and familiar determinations that frame this understanding.

The analysis of the interviews proposes that young Muslim female students in the USA are positioned between the local and the global standpoints when creating their hyphenated identities. Each of the participants has their own view of faith and how they relate their faith to their daily life varies. They present a dynamic construction of their identities and value system, which they

synchronize with the prospects of their education and future careers. Nevertheless, they do not oppose familial obligations – for example, arrange marriages - while they navigate their social and economic life as active participants and contributors to society. Evaluation of the data gathered through interviews reveals that their understanding and appreciation of dance is deeply informed by their sense of being in-between, i.e., the reality of being Muslim and living in a secular Western country.

Most of them expressed a clear acknowledgment of dance as a profession, as a practice that requires talent, and immediately distanced themselves from dance as a professional occupation because of perceptions of their lack of ability since they would not think of themselves as talented or able to dance. Dance as a bodily practice that is immediately associated with ability is easily discarded from their options of appropriate jobs. These answers can be interpreted as that young Muslim women create a discussion proof protection around the issue, which has the power to blur the visibility of the real reason. Is the discipline not suited because of its demanding physical ability or the fact that religiously it is not easily accepted? The latter has the power to reveal the already problematic situation of Islam and women's rights in Western culture. Through the interviews, it was apparent that Muslim female students were aware of the ongoing debate regarding the stance of women within the Islam faith. Many of them disagreed with the idea that Muslim women are oppressed and rejected these connotations. For most of them, faith shouldn't have been considered as an opposing element for their desire to be active members of society and have careers.

The data of this research suggests similar findings to the findings of the research regarding the lives of immigrant Muslim women in Britain compiled in the book *The Daily Lives of Muslims, Islam and Public Confrontation in Contemporary Europe* by Nilüfer Göle. Muslim immigrant women living in Britain, "... call for Muslim normativity, but they also question themselves about their beliefs, religious practices, dogmas, and the validity of Islamic prescriptions in the English context. Far from being static, their sometimes contradictory responses prove the reflexivity of Muslim women toward their faith, seen through the prism of their lived experience in Europe." (Göle, 2015: 207). As in Göle's research the young women participating in the *Muslim Female Students in Higher Education in the United States: Approaches to and Experiences of Dance and Embodied Performance* research were mostly from South Asia and the Muslim identity they wanted to carve out for themselves appear to be a unique one that was not completely compatible with the one of their parents brought from the home country. Their search for individualization is not based on the Islam of their parents infused by 'ethnic', 'traditional', ideological or 'cultural' components. Nevertheless, it is apparent that they construct their identities through the incorporation of elements brought from their home culture - concepts that are connected with familial and patriarchal social construct - and specific requirements of Islam - such as veiling, and modesty requirements - with the concepts linked to the female empowerment and the ideals of becoming the protagonists of their life. Furthermore, these young Muslim women are willing to participate in the social, economic and public life as equal members of society and yet they refrain from the practices that they feel are not compatible with their belief system. The analysis of the data suggested that the ideas of what would be perceived as appropriate practice for a young Muslim woman was deeply entwined with participants ideas about what would be acceptable by their families, despite their prospect of being active participants in professional life. Although it is clear that there is need of further research and data gathering, it would be possible to state that these ideas echo the understanding of Islam that is colored by the patriarchal system of the home countries of the participants. As is the meaning of the patriarchy a historically "structural system of male domination" (Omvedt, 1986:30) it is possible to interpret the ideas of these young Muslim women regarding dance and other bodily practices as they represent mostly the structured ideas coming from the local and familial culture brought by their immigrant parents.

There was an obvious overlap in the answers regarding the modesty requirement for a devoted Muslim. Dance as an art form and a profession refers to being present in front of opposite sex both as dance partner and as a potential audience member. The touch and the gaze are problematized issues related with body, sexuality and visibility in Islam, thus for these young Muslim women the practice of dance outside some specific conditions was not possible. Yet some of them represented a clear desire to dance and were willing to navigate their faith and the requirements of modesty to the requirements of dance.

Conclusion

How can we discuss the desire to dance by young Muslim women? Is there an easy answer to what is and is not appropriate behavior for a devoted Muslim woman living in a secular country? How much of the decision on whether young Muslim women should participate in bodily practices comes from the teachings of the Islamic religion and how much from the accepted conceptions of the patriarchal social order? These are some of the questions that were central to this research conducted with the aim of exploring how the concept of dance and its practices are understood, experienced and negotiated with the daily practice and beliefs of Islam by these young women living in the United States. Nonetheless this research is only the beginning of this effort. As the increase in the literature regarding the life experiences of Muslim women in Western countries indicates, it is evident that the research regarding the approach to dance as an artistic form and/or recreational practice is a necessary contribution to existing literature. Dance is a form that directly targets the understandings of the body and gaze. As such, dance triggers a deep desire that goes beyond the social, cultural and religious restrictions as clearly conveyed by the young female students wearing headscarf at Yıldız Technical University in Turkey.

The evidence suggests that approaches towards bodily performative practices and the understanding the role of Islam towards the engagement of Muslim women in these practices, especially in dance, varied extensively. Students' answers presented a range of perspectives, including the assertion that dance has nothing to do with their religion, and that the decision to whether to dance or not is up to the believer, to strict rejections in which dance is not even acceptable to be performed in a female-only environment. The common thread in the answers from these students was their relations with the family. This point brings to mind the following question—is the patriarchal society, including its family structures, the primary source of tension? Both the in-depth analysis of the research data and the scholarly literature reveal that the approach towards dance has deep relation to the patriarchal social structure that colors how Islam is understood and practiced.

Despite the various answers and perspectives for some of these young students both in USA and in Turkey there was clear manifestation of the desire to dance and will to adjust their religious identity with this desire. The patriarchy is deeply entrenched in the culture surrounding both for women in Turkish context and through the familial culture that these particular young Muslim women are living in the USA. This research is just the start of an investigation into the kinds of challenges young Muslim women face when trying to negotiate the power religion has in their life. It is possible to say that empowering these young female students and introducing them to the sense of personal power and individualized identity that can come from dancing is indeed a duty. Further analysis of who is responsible for this duty, however, is research that exceeds scope of this article yet should be taken up in a comprehensive effort to better grasp the impact of dance art in the lives of such young citizens.

Through the experience as a Fulbright scholar in the USA, the researcher was provided with the ability to access a deeper level of how Muslim women perceive and approach dance in a country where dance is considered an important and valuable artistic and professional practice. Young Muslim students were able to engage in qualitative interviews about highly personal subjects such as religion, identity, desires, and dreams. What they shared was instrumental in

realizing that, even though Islam restricts women to dance, and that their personal experiences of faith and daily life is deeply connected to their hyphenated identities and strong familial connections some of them still address their desire to dance.

The results of this research can be used in cultivating a mutually respectful dialogue through which beliefs and perceptions of dance as a social practice and an art form and the relationship of dance with the Islamic religion are explored. They also will contribute to the discourse on the relationship of Muslim woman with dance as a tool of personal and artistic expression, particularly through theorizing the body and dance in the experience of young Muslim women in cultures across the world.

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