

## अनुक्रम

1. A Study on Bamboo and Cane Based Products in North-eastern region of India	<i>Dr. Sukanta Sarkar</i>	1
2. Gender Variations: A Study of Discrimination Due To Sexual Orientation in Lakshmi Narayan Tripathi's <i>Me Hijra Me Laxmi</i>	<i>Dr. Nasreen Ghani</i>	8
3. A Study of The Impact of Digital Music Services on The Economics of Music	<i>Dr. Nidhi Kulshrestha</i>	14
4. Ethnoecological study of Kameng Valley, Arunachal Pradesh	<i>Dr. Nilam Nandini Sarmah</i>	20
5. A Study on Inspiring Indian Women Who Became the Role Models of Empowerment	<i>Dr. Radha D R</i>	28
6. Non Toxic Printmaking in India : Advantages and Disadvantages	<i>Dr. Rakesh Bani</i>	32
7. हिंदुस्तानी संगीत के साहित्य में ब्रजभाषा का स्थान व महत्व	<i>डॉ. सरबजीत कौर</i>	39
8. Exploring Feminism in Belly Dance and Its Media Representation"	<i>Dr. Sridevi Dr. Thanpakiam Mr. Mohana C</i>	43
9. Rajasthan Block Printing-New Experiments Build a Global Identity	<i>Dr. Suman Jangir</i>	52
10. Exploring Sexual Identity and Artistic Expression : A Study of Bhupen Khakhar's Representation of Gay in India	<i>Ashita Gupta Dr. Suresh Chandra Jangid</i>	57
11. "Danceocracy : The Harmonious Fusion of Dance and Democracy"	<i>Pasumarthi Kumara Datta Dr. Vidya Kumari S</i>	64
12. Bridging The Gap : A Harmonious Interplay of Sadhana and Bharatanatyam in the Modern World	<i>Srilakshmi MP Dr. Vidya Kumari S.</i>	69
13. वैश्विक मंच पर काशी के सांस्कृतिक और आर्थिक विकास में मीडिया की भूमिका (2022 से 2023 के विशेष संदर्भ में)	<i>डॉ. ध्वनी सिंह</i>	74

# Exploring Feminism in Belly Dance and Its Media Representation"

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## Introduction :

Bellydance has debated origins, known by names like "dance du ventre," "cifte telli," and "Raks/Raqs Sharki." It's evolving as "Eastern dance." Its origins are debated, possibly starting in Egypt or brought by Indian gypsies. Linked to both erotic and religious aspects, some trace its roots to ancient fertility cults, symbolizing reproduction and prosperity.

Ancient societies often believed their prosperity hinged on the contentment of mother deities, typically not celibate figures. Rituals incorporated practices like temple prostitution and sacred dance, with a particular emphasis on the abdomen as a symbol of fertility. In contemporary Egypt, it's customary to have bellydancers at weddings, posing with their hands on the dancer's stomach. Traditionally, bellydance is performed barefoot and has its roots in Eastern music. Over time, it transformed from a religious ritual to a form of entertainment, evolving from folk dances into more refined and professional Oriental Dance forms.

Raqs Beledi, a traditional Arabic dance, has a rich history involving performers of all ages and genders. In Islamic culture, strict gender segregation meant that men who were not immediate family members were not permitted in women's quarters. European invasions in North Africa and the Middle East, notably led by Napoleon, kindled Western interest in the Arab world. French influence extended to regions like Algeria, Tunisia, Syria, and Lebanon, while Egypt fell under British occupation in 1882. During this time, European writers and painters, known as Orientalists, were fascinated by the exoticism and mystique of these regions. They often depicted highly sensual scenes of semi-naked concubines dancing to entertain men. This artistic movement contributed to the multifaceted perception of bellydance. Historically, due to gender segregation, women primarily danced in the company of friends and family. However, today, both men and women freely dance together at social gatherings and events

Bellydance, a traditional Middle Eastern dance form, was initially misrepresented as a burlesque or carnival spectacle, often wrongly associated with sensuality. This skewed image was perpetuated by Hollywood productions, which portrayed bellydance as erotic, reinforcing harmful stereotypes. The bellydance costume underwent a Hollywood-inspired transformation. Traditional attire involved covering the body with a hip-tied scarf. However, influenced by burlesque and vaudeville fashion, Hollywood introduced a dazzling bra and belt set adorned with beads and sparkles. Egyptian dancers, notably Badia Masabni, embraced this new costume in the 1930s. Masabni, a Lebanese dancer, singer, and actress, played a pivotal role in elevating Middle Eastern folk dance Raqs Baladi into a refined performance art. Bellydance evolved into various styles, including Raks Sharki, the Arabic term for what Westerners commonly refer to as bellydance. Raks Sharki incorporated more stage space, traveling steps, and engaging chest and arm movements, enhancing its appeal and popularity. The Egyptian film industry also contributed to the global recognition of bellydance by producing movies and musicals featuring celebrated dancers like Samia Gamal, Tahiya Karioka, and Naima Akef, who achieved international fame.

Bellydance, a popular dance form in Egypt, North Africa, and the Middle East, encountered opposition from both religious and public figures. In 1952, Dr. Rageb imposed a ban on Raks Sharki, labeling it as lewd and morally objectionable. Nevertheless, bellydance remained a significant tourist attraction and a vital part of Egyptian culture. In 1954, the ban was partially lifted with

certain restrictions, such as requiring dancers to cover their stomachs and forbidding floor work. Raks Sharki underwent rapid adaptations into various styles. During the 1940s, Turkish and Iranian dancers relocated to New York, giving rise to American Cabaret bellydance. This form continued to evolve, leading to diverse styles like tribal fusion, Lebanese, and Turkish bellydance. Today, bellydance has become an integral part of global culture, with various facets garnering positive recognition and support.

In ancient societies, women often faced oppression and limited agency, with constraints on property ownership and decision-making. The first recorded feminist document emerged in 1792 with Mary Wollstonecraft's "Declaration of the Rights of Women." However, the Code Napoleon during the French Revolution halted the progress of the women's liberty, equality, and fraternity movement.

### **Literature Review :**

**Bell hooks :** Feminist theorist and cultural critic, bell hooks, defines feminism as a movement aimed at eradicating sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. She explores various dimensions of feminism, encompassing politics, education, body image, and global feminism. In the realm of theoretical literature on dance, there isn't a precise definition, but conventional theories of art as imitation and expression offer a more comprehensive understanding. According to Aristotle's Poetics, art imitates nature and serves as a means of expression, not only reflecting the work itself but also the emotions of the creator and the experiences of the audience. Nevertheless, philosophical concepts



related to dance have often been hindered by patriarchal biases.

**According to instructor Jasmin**

**Jahal :** Dance and its diverse movement styles transcend various boundaries, including class, ethnicity, nationality, media, and migration. Gender is another significant dimension under scrutiny, as dance stands out as a platform where women can perform publicly with relatively less backlash. Dance plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural notions of gender differences.

**Ann Daley's :** As researchers and practitioners in the field of dance explore new paradigms and ways of visualizing dance, existing notions will inevitably be challenged, offering fresh perspectives on the significance of dance today. For instance, Ann Daley's article "Unlimited Partnership: Dance and Feminist Analysis" asserts that dance is an art form intrinsic to the body, with gender differences fundamentally rooted in the body itself.

Feminist studies of dance have evolved over time, with current emphasis on the representation process, the viewer's perspective, and the possibility for women to represent their beauty without adhering to or relying on male standards. This feminist analysis of dance provides profound insights into the meanings conveyed by dance and has the potential to foster broader acceptance and appreciation of this art form.

The historical record of belly dance is fragmentary because of its association with traditional Arabic society as a predominantly female dance form. Much of the available evidence is derived from

the accounts of travelers and journal entries. According to instructor Jasmin Jahal, belly dance is considered the oldest documented dance form, with origins dating back to 4000 B.C. in Egypt, as evidenced by hieroglyphics adorning ancient walls. This dance was primarily practiced by women, serving religious and ceremonial purposes, including weddings.

Belly dance, one of the oldest documented dance forms dating back to 4000 B.C., was primarily a female practice with religious and ceremonial significance. The term "belly dance" has origins in French ("danse du ventre"), Arabic ("Beledi" and "Raks-al-arabi").

**GAP :**

Research on body image within belly dancing reveals its positive influence, promoting inclusive norms, reducing conformity pressures, and fostering high body satisfaction among dancers. These aspects challenge traditional gender roles and structures. Feminism and belly dance share common themes of empowerment, body confidence, and self-expression. Belly dance has historical ties to fertility rituals and goddess worship, invoking a sense of divinity and beauty. Feminist analysis helps Dancers Bridge the gap between their aspirations and societal perceptions. Virginia Keft-Kennedy's study delves into the politics of gender and race in belly dance representation, examining the complex ways it has been portrayed in colonial travel writing, fiction, and popular culture. It highlights the connections between (neo) colonialism, commodification, consumer culture, sexuality, and female embodiment in representations of belly dance.

**Research methodology :**

Research is a structured investigation that aims to elucidate, forecast, and manage observed phenomena by employing diverse methodologies, encompassing both deductive and inductive reasoning. Research serves various purposes, including description, prediction, and explanation of natural or social phenomena. Descriptive research employs measurement and observation to understand what occurred. Prediction research aims to forecast future events based on past information, particularly in educational research to identify students at risk. Improvement research assesses intervention effectiveness, using experimental design. Explanation research encompasses all types, aiming to understand, describe, predict and intervene effectively in educational phenomena.

Research purposes can be categorized into basic research for understanding, applied research for problem-solving, evaluation research for assessing outcomes and action research for addressing specific issues. A dissertation is a structured written work responding to a central question, backed by research evidence. Quantitative methods involve gathering and analyzing numerical data.

Qualitative research focuses on specific cases and hypotheses, while quantitative research verifies these findings. Often, social science research combines both approaches, with qualitative methods helping to interpret quantitative results, and quantitative methods providing precise expressions for qualitative concepts. Mixed-methods research combines both approaches. Qualitative research is widely used in fields like social sciences and market research to deeply understand human behavior and decision-making.

Methods like Expert Interviews, Focus Group Discussions, and Content Analysis provide valuable insights. Expert Interviews, for example, facilitate informal knowledge sharing and encourage participation from experts in the field.

Focus group discussions are a method for gathering semi-structured data through group conversations among participants addressing specific topics. Originally developed to enhance survey comprehension, it offers cost-effective insights. Content analysis, on the other hand, is a research technique that systematically codes and analyzes textual material, such as documents, oral communication, and graphics. This method translates qualitative data into quantitative data and is commonly used in the social sciences, with increasing popularity among organizational scholars in recent times.

**Research problem :**

The researcher intends to employ qualitative methods, including content analysis, expert interviews, and focus group discussions, in her dissertation. This research will explore belly dance through a feminist lens, considering various aspects such as body image, societal acceptance, and male interpretations. Feminist theorist Bell Hooks emphasizes that feminism is about achieving equal rights and opportunities for both men and women, allowing women to pursue their choices and desires in areas spanning politics, race, gender, and the human body.

Belly dance, one of the oldest dance forms, has often been misconstrued as a means of titillation rather than a form of sensual expression. Women who practice belly dance frequently face discrimination



and are wrongly labeled as too “free” or “shameless.” However, for many, belly dance offers a platform for diverse self-expression, contributes to physical fitness, and positively influences self-esteem and body image.

The researcher’s goal is to offer a more positive interpretation of belly dance from a feminist perspective, shedding light on body issues, societal challenges, and the impact of male perspectives as viewers. Given the prevalent issues like violence against women today, it is vital to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding belly dance, which has often been associated with derogatory terms like “bar dancers” or “item girls.”

Through this study, the researcher aims to provide a more nuanced and positive portrayal of belly dance, fostering a better understanding of this art form. Additionally, the media’s portrayal of certain subjects significantly influences public perception and understanding, underscoring the importance of this research.

#### **Analysis :**

##### **The focus group discussion :**

The focus group discussion centered on the awareness of bellydance in India, primarily through social media and YouTube. Participants generally held a positive view of bellydance prior to learning about it, but they encountered challenges in convincing their families to permit their involvement in this dance form. Some common stereotypes associated bellydance with being sexual and intended for male entertainment, but these stereotypes did not dissuade many young women from pursuing bellydance.

Participants noted numerous positive effects of bellydance on their mental and physical well-being, including increased positivity, confidence, improved health, and a sense of empowerment. Bellydance was seen as unique in its ability to provide women with bold individual recognition in society while enhancing their internal sense of individuality and self-assurance. Interestingly, one participant highlighted that bellydance contributed to feminism more than other dance forms.

The discussion then shifted to the topic of media influence, with participants expressing the belief that media, including movies and certain broadcast channels, tended to portray bellydance in a sexual manner or as “item numbers.” However, they acknowledged that print media had done a commendable job of recognizing bellydance as a distinct dance form and discussing its fitness benefits.

Lastly, when asked if the practice of bellydance and the sense of liberation it offered to women could be linked to the increasing incidence of crimes against women, participants rejected this association. They emphasized that crimes against women stemmed from a lack of respect for women and argued that no dance form could be held responsible for such action

##### **Expert 1 (Male Perspective) :**

First encountered belly dance by seeing several Belly Dancers and found them pretty.

Initially didn’t have strong impressions but found the women and their costumes attractive.

Believes belly dance empowers anyone who gives it an honest try by building confidence and promoting body acceptance.



Expresses a belief in gender equality and relates to feminism as a “masculinist.”

Views belly dance as empowering and believes it allows both men and women to be true to themselves.

Acknowledges complications faced as a male belly dancer, particularly in regions less accepting of this form.

Affirms that belly dance is empowering for men, personal empowerment is attributed to passion and integrity.

#### **Expert 2 (Unnamed Expert) :**

Describes the media portrayal of belly dance in the US as generally neutral or slightly salacious but not as negative as in some other regions.

Notes that classical dance forms like ballet are often presented as difficult and high-brow entertainment, while belly dance is not seen as difficult, despite its challenges.

Advocates for a more respectful portrayal of belly dance in the media, emphasizing its status as a social folk dance.

#### **Expert 3 (Sruthi Kulkarni, Professional Dancer) :**

Information provided about Sruthi Kulkarni's background in dance and her involvement in belly dancing and other dance forms.

If you have specific questions or need further information on any aspect mentioned in these responses, please feel free to ask for more details or clarification.

This paper delves into the evolution of Belly dance from a feminist perspective influenced by responses provided by Sruthi Kulkarni, the professional belly dancer :

## **SECTION-1**

### **1. How did you first hear about Bellydance?**

I first saw the belly dancers from the Banjara school of dance perform on a reality show.

What was your first impression of it before learning, and how have perceptions changed after learning bellydance? (Common stereotypes that you had before and after learning belly dance)

I was extremely impressed with the form, primarily because it appeared so feminine and graceful. The isolations the form demanded fascinated me. Once I started practicing belly dance, I completely fell in love with it as it enhanced my inner beauty as a woman.

### **2. Do you think belly dancing empowers women? If so, how?**

Undoubtedly! The very posture of belly dance, where we teach students to always have their chest and chin lifted, provides an inherent sense of strength and energy, fostering a feeling of beauty as a woman. The demanding isolations of the art form instill hope and the belief that achieving seemingly impossible things is possible, as these isolations aren't natural to the body.

### **3. How has it empowered you?**

I began belly dancing at a point in my dancing career when I was shattered due to a setback in my dream of pursuing dance. I had lost all hope as a dancer. Belly dance provided me with a renewed sense of purpose and self-confidence.

## **SECTION 2**

### **Media Portrayal of Bellydance**



**1. Is bellydance portrayed in the media today? Do you think today, the portrayal of bellydance in the media is positive or does it seem to be degrading?**

Bellydance is portrayed in different ways in the media. While some outlets portray it positively, highlighting its artistic and cultural aspects, others may focus on more sensationalized aspects that could be seen as degrading. Overall, it's a mixed portrayal.

**2. Classical dance forms such as ballet have always seen more acceptance. Are there differences in the portrayal of dance forms such as ballet as compared to belly dance? If so, how?**

Yes, there are differences in how ballet and belly dance are portrayed. Ballet is often presented as a high-brow art form, while belly dance sometimes faces misconceptions and is not as widely recognized for its artistic value. There's a perception gap between the two.

**3. What according to you would be the ideal portrayal of bellydance by the media?**

The ideal portrayal of bellydance by the media should focus on its artistic, cultural, and empowering aspects. It should dispel stereotypes and emphasize the hard work, dedication, and beauty of the dance form.

**Conclusion :**

Dance is often regarded as a path to happiness, allowing individuals to liberate their souls from inhibitions and bolster mental resilience. It is considered an art form inherent in every person's being. Feminism, a multifaceted ideology, encom-

passes various interpretations but generally aligns with Bell Hooks' concept of gender equality and the rejection of discrimination solely based on gender. Dancers typically engage in their art for personal satisfaction, sharing the joy it brings with their audience, rather than depending on external encouragement and support.

Bellydance, an ancient Middle Eastern dance form, has evolved significantly due to westernization and the globalization of culture. Despite its original purpose of celebrating the female body and aiding in childbirth, it has been misinterpreted as something sexual and provocative. Today, it often fails to receive the respect it rightfully deserves.

Both feminism and bellydance find themselves in a similar predicament, influenced or oppressed by a patriarchal mindset that dominates much of the world. Both celebrate feminine energy without repressing masculine energy. Unfortunately, many bellydancers still face discrimination and lack the respect they should command. The researcher has personally encountered instances where students learning bellydance have concealed this from their parents or faced criticism from others for pursuing this dance form.

Media holds significant power, especially in democratic countries like India, where it can sway public opinions and shape perceptions. The Agenda Setting Theory by McCombs and Shaw emphasizes the media's role in determining what is considered important. According to this theory, the media can influence how people perceive dance forms such as bellydance, which is not universally embraced.



To explore the role of print media in shaping perceptions of bellydance compared to other classical and culturally accepted dance forms, the researcher conducted expert interviews, focus group discussions, and content analysis of newspapers in India.

In this study, experts from India and other countries, including both male and female bellydancers, were interviewed to explore two main themes: a feminist analysis of bellydance and the influence of media on it. The selection of experts was based on their authority in the field and their experience.

The findings revealed that these experts had various exposures to bellydance, either through live performances or television, with one expert having a family connection to bellydancing. Interestingly, they did not conform to typical stereotypes about bellydance. Some expressed apprehension due to its technical difficulty, while others were captivated by the sensuality and feminine energy displayed in bellydancing.

The study also uncovered articles and blogs discussing how bellydance is empowering for individuals. The basic posture of bellydance, emphasizing confidence and power, was seen as contributing to a better body image. Many bellydancers reported increased happiness and comfort with their bodies after learning this dance form, which also fostered a sense of identity and individuality. Bellydance encouraged them to be stronger, make choices, accept themselves and explore new ways of dancing.

The dissertation delved into feminism as a concept emphasizing gender equality, with bellydance being recognized as a

significant contributor to breaking traditional taboos regarding women's behavior and body image. Experts highlighted that bellydance, created by women for women, celebrated their body, mind, and soul.

Regarding media portrayal, experts believed that bellydance is depicted more positively now, often promoted as an excellent fitness tool. However, Bollywood cinema still tended to portray it in a titillating manner, perpetuating stereotypes. The experts suggested that mainstream media has room for improvement in portraying bellydance objectively and with the respect it deserves. Social media was acknowledged as a positive platform for promoting bellydance.

Comparisons were made between the portrayal of bellydance and other "high-brow" dance forms like bharatnatyam in India and ballet in the U.S.A. The study found that bellydance was generally depicted more favorably, whereas ballet was often seen as superior due to its European origins. Ethnic dance forms, despite their rich heritage, were sometimes marginalized in terms of funding and media attention.

In conclusion, the study highlighted the intricate relationship between gender, cultural norms, and media influence on bellydance. It showcased how bellydance has evolved and empowered individuals while also shedding light on the challenges it faces in media portrayal compared to other dance forms.

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