

# THE ART OF RESTRAINT

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Men, Women, and Arabic Dance

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I stop half way through John Clare's golden paeon to English summer, my voice lost to the heavy hammering of June rain upon the glass, and fight down an urge to laugh. I search for my place, try a few words, and then a crack of thunder plunges the room into green-brown darkness and the electrics die.

"Don't worry," I say. "Yorkshire power-cuts don't last as long as Cairo ones!"

"I am not worried. Do you have Shakespeare?"

"Sure. What do you fancy?"

Majid strikes a player-ish pose and begins to recite: "Shall I compare you to a Summer's day? You are soooo wet and full of rain –"

"Thanks! If you're going to be rude, I shan't read any more!"

An immediate look of abject contrition fills the black treacle eyes behind their half-moon glasses. "Forgive me. I joke. This is very special for me, to hear English poetry. I like it very much. You read of your own choosing." He leans back, assumes a beatific expression, and steeples his impeccably manicured fingers across his chest.

I turn off the lamps, light a few candles, then flick to the index, and select *Childe Roland*. More thunder adds to the atmosphere.

As I finish, he looks up, smiling, hand on heart: "Alas, alas, it is too terrible. Terrible, and beautiful, and you, when you read, are sooo beautiful I have great troubles to restrain myself...."

"Flatterer!" I laugh.

The treacle eyes well up with imagined hurt. "Not flattery. Very great compliment. If I tell you I *restrain* myself, it is a very great compliment from a man of good heart, and good family."

"It sounds a lot like flattery to me!"

"That is only because English and American men do not know how to restrain themselves. You think because you have discovered sex, you no longer place any worthiness upon restraint. Everywhere it is sex, sex, sex. So you must believe me, when I tell you that it is a very high compliment when an Arabic man tells you that he practises *restraint*."

I must look unconvinced, so he repeats himself slowly, somehow managing to place three disdainful syllables within the word "sex".

“You are Arabic dancer, I thought you would understand this.”  
I close the book, and sit back in the chair: “Explain.”

This man, the friend of a friend in Cairo, is in my house because I have agreed to take him around the sights of York. Not that we'll get to see much in the continued downpour and power-cut. Thus far, he has been delightful company, with a courteous, unworldly air that makes him seem far older than his 28 years. He's a medical doctor, about to embark on an MA in gynaecology, if he can persuade his mother to allow him to continue his studies, rather than settle down with a dutiful wife. He comes from the old Alexandrian aristocracy, from a family that wisely chose medicine over politics some three generations ago. Seated on my sofa, he gives the impression of an overgrown Middle Eastern cherub: all smiles, close-cropped hair, perfect skin, dancing hands, and expanding waistline. In reality, he's a curious mixture of social confidence, and personal shyness and all this while I have been on my best behaviour, suppressing the inclination to tease him mercilessly.

“Go on,” I say. “Explain.”

In Alexandria, he says, we can seem more European. We have the sea, and the traffic, and the light, and you might think the Italians left for Rome only yesterday. You might say that Cairo is like Egypt, but Alex is like something else. In many different ways, this is true, but you must know that life is slower for Alex, and what happens behind the doors of the street is older than for Cairo. In Cairo everybody tries to be like Western peoples – you know, they have disco at weddings, and not dancers, and singers. Now, they have string quartet, not traditional musicians, and everybody says: how Western, how chic, how full of taste. Cairo chooses everyday for the fast life, but Iskandariya is more slow in life, and traditions are behind the doors of every street.

This is true of Arabian dance.

In Cairo, Arabic dance is for entertainment – you go to nightclub to eat a meal, and maybe see Arabic dancer, or hear Arabic singer. You could say: shall we go to see a play, or to the film-theatre – it is the same thing, just entertainment, maybe since 1970s. That is why dancers from the West try to dance like they are entertaining in a club. It is the same with new Egyptian dancers, also. They do not know that Arabian dance is really for the joy of celebrations and weddings, and private entertainments, not for clubs. Night-club dancing is only *secondary* – to earn money from Western people after the war, and then for tourists. It is *secondary*. It is not why we have Arabic dance. Now, new Egyptian



dancers also do not have tradition, because they have not grown up in tradition. In this way, they are the same as dancers from the West. In Alex, we still have tradition, although maybe this is last generation.

I am telling you this, not because I am Egyptian, but because I have asked many questions, because I have been looking for the traditions in many things, not just in Arabian dance. Egypt changes every day, and many changes are good, but I do not wish to say goodbye to traditions I do not understand. We should stop doing things only because it is no longer right to do them, not because we no longer understand them. This is in my head, I think, because I am Alexandrian. My father is Muslim, but my mother is Christian, Greek Orthodox, not Coptic. When she was married, my father said: it is okay if you wish to stay Orthodox, it is really okay. Instead she chose to become Muslim, although many things in her life are still Orthodox. Also, in my life there was Muslim, and Orthodox. I have friends who are Muslim and Orthodox, and my father did not say to me until I was 16 that I must choose my religion. I chose to be Muslim, like my father, but this was not because my father was Muslim. I chose to be Muslim because it seemed to me to be better. Even so, there are many things I do not understand, and so I ask questions, to understand why things are so.

I have many questions about women in Egypt. This is from my work, and also from wanting more understanding of being Egyptian, and of being Muslim. You know, in Egypt, a woman does not have to wear the *hejab* unless she choose to wear it. If she wish to say: I am devout, she will wear *hejab*. In Saudi, and UAE women all wear *hejab*. This is not because Saudi women are more devout. It is because Saudi men do not practise *restraint*. In Egypt, we have a culture of restraint.

I do not know if this is something from being Muslim, or from being Arab, but you will see it in everything from old Egyptian culture – in art, in poetry, in architecture, in music. If you have the eye, you will see it in the mosques of Cairo, which are the very greatest mosques in all Arab countries for beauty and restraint. Everywhere there is beauty, there will also be restraint. Now it is changing, particular in music. Before we had the finest composers. Now we have pop. I like the pop very much. Amr Diab is my best singer. But the music is changing, like everything else. Soon there will be no restraint, and then maybe no beauty.

This is how I know about Arabic dance. When I was sixteen, I went with my father to my family house to see a dancer. Her name was Fawzia. You will not have heard of her, because she was already old, and she did not dance for public display. She was a folkloric dancer, and also like Soheir Zaki. Very much a woman, not too thin or bad costumes like





Dina, or the Western dancers. You have seen Fifi Abdou? Well, Fawzia was like Fifi Abdou with no money, no cars, no bodyguards. Maybe you have seen current dancer for Alexandria, Danda'ash? Maybe a bit like Fawzia. So, I go with my father and my uncles to see Fawzia, and after this, the uncle of my father said to me: remember this. This was like old Egypt, and this is why I invite you to my house, so that you have seen it.

This is what the uncle of my father told me about dancers in old Egypt, and this is what I am telling you about restraint. You know about harems? Rich men in old Egypt had their women in harems for no one to see, but as well as ladies, they had singers and musicians and dancers, and they were also not seen. Not always women, but also poets and lute players, men and women. So that when there was a feast, there was an entertainment in the house, to which only certain guests were invited. You know, because the dancers and poets were from the household, a man invited only friends of discernment, and restraint. Thus, it was a great honour to attend a private entertainment, and a very great honour to attend a private entertainment of the household of a great man. Everyone said: there is a man of great restraint and modesty, for he has the trust of this great man. Everywhere, he was praised for his restraint.

And then there were the houses of men who were not so rich and who did not keep dancers and musicians, but who wished to give private entertainments. For this they pay musicians to come to their houses to give private entertainments, so that there would be both entertainment and restraint and therefore praise. This was good, but then the paid dancers and lute-players became rich, so that they would have private entertainments in their own houses paid for by money from making entertainments. So, you know, that is how it was: dancers, private entertainments, money, and – always – *restraint* for men of good taste.

Yet also there were other dancers for Egypt: dancers of the people who do not dance for private entertainments, but in open places, for the big feast and the little feast. They have superstitious dances, dances for good luck, and for blessings, so these dancers you will also find for weddings, and for the birth of children. These are good dancers also, but not expensive, so they also come to dance for private entertainments, so you see, all these dancers become confused. And there is confusion also about restraint.

In music do you know about *tarab*? Yes, George Wassouf, *Sultan al Tarab*... *Tarab* is by very fine singer, or dancer, who holds emotion in everything, and who causes emotion in his audience. The greatest singers, like Om Kalthoum, play with their audience, holding onto





emotion, not letting go until they wish it, and then you hear great weeping from the audience, but only when the singer wishes it. This is *tarab*. It is true for dancers as for singers. You see very beautiful dancer, and you wish to weep, but you cannot weep until the moment is right. The dancer is *tarab*, and the audience is *tarab*, and *tarab* is also *restraint*. There are other words for restraint, but *tarab* is familiar to you.

If you see good singer or dancer, and you weep too soon, or you cry out too soon, that is not good restraint, and you show yourself to have no good breeding, no education, no good ear. Only when what you see is most exquisite should you allow yourself to cry out. Everything is restraint, restraint, restraint!

But with the dancer, there is another restraint, and this is to do with the sex. There are many things in Arabic countries that we do not speak about, but that does not mean we have not discovered them. This is the way with the sex. I have said before that there were always dancers at Egyptian weddings. Once dancers from outside the house, for the old way of celebration, but now just the once dancer, but always there must be a dancer. This is for the luck of the wedding, and also for the good relationship between the man and the woman. The dancer, she dances at the wedding for the man and the woman so that when the wedding is over they are prepared for the sex. They are aroused – even if they have never seen each other before. This is what it was like in the outside weddings and at the feasts – the dancer danced and encouraged the man and the woman to dance so that by dancing they were made ready for each other. And also the dance was to keep away harm and bad influences, and to bring children. And also to bring money to the man and the woman from the gold in the dancer's hair and on her clothes.

This was how it was in the villages, but it was not like that in the cities like Cairo and Alexandria. There, everything behind doors, and not in the street. Man and woman not dance together, and so the dancer must dance once for the man and once for the woman separated from each other. With the man who is to be married are all the other men of his family, and his friends, and there are dances to be done for them. In this way, the dance is like the old private entertainment. With the woman who is to be married, are all the other women, and the married women to tell her about what she must expect, and there are dances here, which are dances of celebration. But now it is same dancer who has become both a dancer of private entertainment, and of celebration. So, behind the door where the women are, there are dances to prepare for the sex, and the women-guests are to join the dancing, and they

make the cries, and they laugh at the men, and play the *reqs*, and make each other's make-up. It is very loud, very wild. This the dancer does by her dancing. Everything is sex, but it is not lewd, it is not lascivious.

First the dancer will dance for the men who are outside the door, and again, her dance is about the sex, but it is also about restraint. Everything should be beauty, control, restraint. Not like the Western dancers, or like Dina, who shake everything into your face, and who fall out of their clothes. It is about the beauty of the woman, not about the beauty of the dancer. This is why Fawzia was dancing when I was sixteen. She was already old, but her dancing was full of beauty. It is a dance of *tarab*. It is like a poem about love, which touches your feelings both in your mind, and in your sex, so that it is like a glass arrow in your heart.

And then the dancer will dance for the women who are behind the door, and we must sit in the room outside the door and listen to the music and the shouting. Do you know what it is like to hear dancing, but not to see it? Can you imagine what it is like to be aroused by the dancing, and by the *tarab*, and to be restrained? And then to be outside the door, and not see the dancing? You can hear the women-guests encourage the dancer, or make admiring remarks, but you cannot see the dance. Can you imagine what that is like? And the dancer has her job to encourage the women-guests to dance also, so that women will dance behind the door who will never dance where others can see.

Can you imagine what that is like? It is like having the old village behind one door, and inside your house, with all of the blessings. Can you imagine what it was like for my father to know that my mother was dancing behind the door? For my father, who has never seen my mother dance since the day of her wedding, which is more than thirty years ago? Can you think what that is like? And only a door, or sometimes a curtain between them. You see what I mean when I say we practise restraint!

Now it is different. More so in Cairo than in Alexandria. Weddings are parties where everyone dances, young, old, men, women. But there is still that tradition, so that there will always be some part of it, where there is an apart celebration for the women-guests, even if there is no private entertainment for the men-guests. This is very strange for you to understand, but you must know it is strange for us also. It is like this. We know a girl, we think she is a good girl, and it is okay to see her dance every day, but then when we think of what happens behind the door....it is difficult, restraint, you know!



There is my friend Hossam. He was at a wedding party. He went to make mobile call, and he came back the wrong way, where he could see into the room where the women-guests were with the dancer. Although he knew he should not watch, he watched, and he saw one of our friends dancing by herself. Now, Hossam can think of nothing but this girl.

"Hossam!" I say to him. "What is wrong with you! You have always known this girl, and you have seen her dance in the disco, and in the night club. What is wrong with your head!"

It is because he has seen different dancing, and because of the rules of restraint, and about what is private, and what is public. So that even today, when Egypt is more like the West, and it is okay to go dancing with your friends, there is still a difference between disco dance and Arabian dance.

The video clicks, whirrs, and beeps into life as the power comes back on. It seems a very alien modernity, intruding upon sunlit mashrabiya daydreams.

My houseguest bounces up from the sofa. "Look! No more rain! We get bus for York to go walk on walls, and see The Monster, and Shamble-street where houses touch together?"

Two and a half exhausting hours after I left it, I slump back into my bus-seat, having just shown him to his train. We've danced and pirouetted along the old Roman walls like a couple of three year-olds; hung off the top deck of an open-topped tour-bus like idiots, waving and hollering at complete strangers; and gate-crashed a posh wedding outside one of the old churches to pose for pictures. We've accosted at least half-a-dozen bemused foreigners at interesting locations to take our photographs; turned up our coats like sails to catch the winds at the top of Clifford's Tower; tested the ecclesiastical echoes in the nave of "The Monster" by shouting for the Zamalek football team; galloped round some of the more picturesque narrow streets scattering shoppers and tourists alike; and, finally, stuffed our faces with fish and chips, his with half the salt-pot and most of the ketchup. He's also managed to go through at least a packet and a half of cigarettes....

I turn back to his story, and wonder what to make of it all. They always tell you, don't they, that "baladi-style" is urban folk. I'd always imagined that as the dance of the peasant farmers coming up from Middle Egypt to try their luck in the big city, a dance born in the back-streets of Cairo. I now begin to wonder how much of it was created behind closed doors, in the twilight world of the last of the *almehs*, the professional, trained entertainers whom only the very affluent could afford, and the



“dancers of the people”, whoever they were, who first danced only for the “apart celebrations” of the women. By the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, it would not only be the *Ghawazee* and so-called “circus-families” who could be termed “dancers of the people”: there would have been all manner of displaced women who had turned to dancing, and other professions, to earn a living. These dancers, who eventually found themselves the solo-dancers of the celebrations and entertainments of the aspiring, but less affluent middle classes, were only a generation or so earlier than the cabaret dancers of the inter-war years. So many lives and so many threads have gone into weaving the pattern of this dance.

So is baladi the art of restraint? And is it this peculiar hybrid of “entertainment” and “celebration” that has created a dance that, whilst not overtly about sex, is entirely and subtly erotic? Is this why I enjoy it so much?

Rain starts to batter at the bus windows. I resolve to take myself home, and indulge in a long, hot bath with candles, scented oils, and all the trimmings. Is this because I am still lost in the faded glories of turn-of-the-century Alexandria? Absolutely not! After trying to keep up with Majid for two days, I am *thoroughly* drained...

All the Egyptians of my acquaintance can tell a rattling good yarn, if pressed – but not one of them knows a damned thing about self-restraint!



Note: Although a good story-teller should never reveal her sources, in the interests of absolute accuracy I should note that the above article was put together from events on two separate days with two separate narrators. Since so many stories are the gifts of passing guests, I should also record my thanks to Shadi and Majid - may we meet again insh'allah!