



## The Dance of Exuberance

by Maria Mar

She was dressed in pink, a long dress gathered at the center by a row of small buttons, the bottom rows left open, showing her muscular legs and the beginning of her voluptuous thighs. But it was not her dress that caught my eye as I looked from a nearby café. It was her stance, the freedom and beauty of her movements, the dignity with which she carried herself. She was present. Alive. Connected to the world.

I don't know her name and would not recognize her if I met her, for I didn't see her face at that distance. Yet this perfect stranger gave me an unforgettable gift, a Medicine which I still carry with me to this day. I call it exuberance.

When others call me fat, chubby or overweight I answer without doubt: "Fat is a label. I am exuberant."

An exuberant woman is luscious, like the elms in summer, radiant and alive. A robust trunk full of intricate carvings, mysterious shapes that evoke the art of shapeshifting, emerald leaves multiplying in the geometry of abundance. The light dancing with them, turning them dark brown, deep green, yellow green, yellow.

An exuberant woman brings to the places she inhabits the moist, tender presence of clay. A round clay pot in which figures of the Goddess have been carved in all her aspects: maiden, mother and

crone. Dancing Goddess, Fertility Goddess, Warrior Goddess, Goddess of Love and Goddess of prosperity. Clay in our hands, soft, wet, the color of life, passion being shaped and re-shaped.

Womanhood has, for centuries, been connected to Earth Mother. To her sinuous mountains and her curvaceous hills, her crevices and rivers, her multicolored stones and luscious forests. The Female Force has been linked to the realm of the waters. Water that quenches our thirst. Water adapting to that which embraces it. Ocean always moving and always still. Change. Dance. Healing. Renewal.

Yet women today are bombarded with thoughts, words and images that would have us believe womanhood is about lack, about repressing all signs of life and sexuality, conforming our bodies to a dull version of "sexiness." The sexiness of a pen or spade, made to fit the user's grip. This definition of what is "sexy" has been fabricated out of fear for the sexual power of a woman who owns her wildness and expresses herself freely. Soledad Bravo sings:

*"Deja a esa mujer bailar en paz.  
Con esa cara de marido,  
ya te ves tan aburrido,  
deja a esa mujer bailar en paz."*

This song makes me laugh and dance. Shakes my whole body up. What does it say? "Let that woman dance in peace."

Your face has become the mask of a husband, and you are getting bored and boring, let that woman dance in peace." It is the song that keeps repeating itself, in many languages and variations, the song of woman dancing her exuberance, her vitality and her sexual power. The song of woman warning the patriarchal structures of power, represented in the song by the husband (not necessarily an individual man). What is the warning? That the repression of woman's sexual power and lusciousness brings about a gradual erosion of the fabric of life.

This is what I see behind the pressure to cut off our curves, dry our moisture, shave off our leafiness, harden our softness. A rejection of the female principle.

When a woman is defined by her appearance and her appearance is controlled by a perception that defiles her nature, we are trapped in a dichotomy. Our body becomes our enemy. Either we conform to the vision of those who want to shape us into their idea of who we should be, or we rebel. But how to rebel? We often rebel by making believe we don't have a body. To do this means to be evicted of the basic territory of our Self. Without a body we have no center, no grounding, no space.

That is the option many female executives take. "I won't be made into a sexual object. Feminine means merchandise or weak, so I will not look feminine." To survive, these women suppress their femininity and try to be "one of the boys."

Another way we rebel is by neglecting or controlling our body, which we may do by neglecting to eat in a healthy way, overeating or not eating or eating and throwing up to have the "best" of everything. When we rebel in this way we make our body our enemy. We control our body, forcing it to bend to our mental designs, instead of befriending and inhabiting it. We become the whip hand for the system that is shaming us, whether we are thin or fat.

A third way to rebel is through the "Mata Hari" or --more recently-- through the "Madonna" principle. The woman who follows this strategy says to herself: "I will use their image of my body to gain my purposes." Whether this purpose is material success, love or recognition, this woman follows the rules of the game, as ordained by patriarchy, and pretends to win. She starves herself, exercises constantly, dresses as prescribed and subjects herself to countless surgical procedures. Sooner or later, however, she finds out that it is not she, but a flat, stereotype of a female, who got to be famous, rich or coveted. She is now trapped in that stereotype. She cannot achieve her dream by

being herself.

Women are --like water and soft earth-- shapeshifters. Our bodies reflect our moods, our lifestyle, our connection with the moon and the earth. We get pregnant and round, mature and ample, old and light. We come in so many shapes and we have the freedom to change our appearance. We wear colors, textures, and an endless array of shapes and movements that expresses the flow of passion within us.

But when our bodies are sequestered, our own eyes stolen, then we become shadow shapeshifters. We begin to use our expressive, adaptive and shapeshifting talents to change ourselves in order to conform or to rebel, sometimes both.

I am an actress. This means that I am a shapeshifter by trade. I can become many things, which is exhilarating. But I became a shadow shapeshifter during my 20's. I was thin. Then I was fat. I was two people at war with each other. I had two wardrobes. I lost and gain 20 pounds at the drop of a hat. This shapeshifting is a form of bulimia little talked about. Yet in my work with women I have found out that many women who are anorexic or overeaters have the same war inside, though they may overtly express only one of the polarities.

When I began my healing path, I stopped dieting. I stopped exercising compulsively. I began to reclaim my self, to heal my Wounded Female and to reclaim my body.

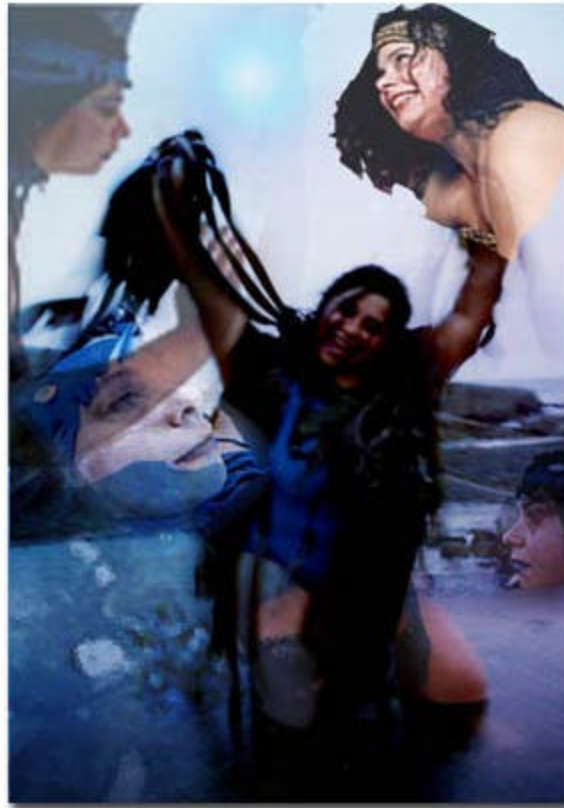
As I did this I reclaimed my capacity to shapeshift as an act of power, of joy and self-expression. I stopped seeing myself with the eyes of others. My body, my weight and my appearance, which had become sources of suffering and rejection, now became a "Medicine" I share with other women. Like the woman who once inspired me to free my body, I now touch other women with my very presence.

"You want to lose weight, right?" said the African woman who saw

me Dancing my Bones, which is how I call my exercise routine. I was giving a series of workshops in South Africa and was staying at a friend's house when I met her. "No," I answered, breathing deeply. I knew what was going on inside her. I could see her assumptions about body shape, her own struggle with weight. Slowly, I pulled my bow and sent the first arrow: "I don't want to lose weight. I love my body just as it is. It's perfect." The arrow entered her heart, and her old vision began to collapse. "So, then, why are you exercising?!" she whimpered. "I am a dancer. I am stretching my body, preparing to rehearse," I replied. The second arrow hit the medulla of her beliefs. "A dancer!" I could hear her screaming inside her own head as she looked for the way out. "This FAT woman is a dancer!!"

She didn't even say good-bye. She ran out of the house, chased by her demons. I watched her leave, and let her go with a big sigh. Would she stay with her fear long enough to understand its source? Would she confront her relationship with her own body, her myths about thinness and fatness? Would she face the fact that she could no longer define herself by others, and could no longer use her weight and shape as an excuse not to follow her dreams?

It was her choice. I turned around and stepped on to the dancing floor, entering my dream.



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*Maria Mar is a writer, performer, dancer, body image coach, visual artist and shaman. Ms. Mar's articles have been published in national magazines and newspapers and her work on the creation of a path of healing through the arts was featured in the anthology: Puro Teatro, A Latina Anthology, published by the University of Arizona Press. She has performed extensively and has taught her healing method, Path of the Swan, nationally and internationally. She now teaches Dancing the Bones classes to help women befriend their bodies, and has a business, Shamansdance. For information, visit her site: [www.shamansdance.com](http://www.shamansdance.com), or contact [shamansdance@nyc.rr.com](mailto:shamansdance@nyc.rr.com).*

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