

“If I can’t dance then it’s not my revolution”: Gender, dance, and the culture of protest

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Abstract:

The central problem associated with the analysis of non-European forms of dance as a discourse is the absence of a canonized body of knowledge. The anthropology of dance or the identity of dance as a subjugated form of knowledge which sought to negotiate with power relations emerged fairly late in academic scholarship. Every known history of dance was invariably grounded in racial and ethnographic stereotypes. The unproblematic association of exaggerated physical movement to the beat of percussions with elaborate mating rituals is a native stereotype that the colonized have strived hard to disengage themselves from. The paper seeks to establish how dance, as a subjugated form of knowledge negotiates with power relations. It primarily looks at the ways in which the body negotiates with structures of gender and identity through the medium of dance.

Keywords: Gender, dance, protest.

One of the principal problems associated with analyzing dance as a discourse is the absence of a canonized body of knowledge. The art form made its way into serious academic debate only towards the late 60s. Until then, all discussions pertinent to dance were invariably fraught in reductive binaries; “ethnic dance” versus “art dance”, “folkdance” versus “dance”.ⁱ Dance ethnography and dance anthropology, which developed as part of the university discourse, sought to locate dance within the framework of social, political, and cultural dialogue. The focus of these studies was to not just discern rhythmic patterns or catalogue repertoires; the aim of these analyses was to go beyond a solely aesthetic study of dance. These disciplines attempted to understand dance as not just a product of culture, but as a *producer* of culture as well. They sought to study the histories behind dance forms, understand the reason they assumed the form they had, and more importantly, discover the “invisible” underlying system, the processes that produce both the product and the system, and the socio-political context.’ⁱⁱ Adrienne L. Kaeppler draws our attention to an interesting fact which is that anthropologically grounded studies on dance forms include sacred rituals, recreational engagements, martial arts, sports and even sign languages within the ambit of its analysis. She emphasizes the need to establish a difference between “dance” and “non-dance”. Not all structured, synchronized movement can be subsumed under the overarching identity of “dance”, which itself is a Western concept. While delving into the politics of what

constitutes non-dance forms of movement would be a digression and beyond the scope of this paper, it is crucial to note this difference Kaeppler is trying to establish.

In order to evaluate dance and movement it is first and foremost essential to understand its grammar and syntax. Each language follows its own rules, has its distinctive vocabulary, is punctuated differently and understanding it entails a process of initiation into its grammatical order. The dominant colonial discourse has always attempted to view these grammars through the lens of western rationalism. Dipesh Chakrabarty in his "Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts"ⁱⁱⁱ recalls Ranajit Guha's account of the Santhal rebellion of 1855. Police records of the uprising, scant as they were, quote testimonies of Sidhu and Kanu, two of the leaders of the movement. Their confession states how the revolt was instigated by their deity, *Thakur*, who also assured them that the technologically superior British ammunition would not harm the tribal rebels in any way. This was the official testimony made by two men on death row. Kanu and Sidhu did not cite democracy or equality as causes for the insurgency, Thakur's intervention was the sole factor that triggered the protest, they contended. The question this incident begs is can superstition claim to be fact? Can faith find a place in historical documentation? Chakrabarty speaks of arriving at a certain number of 'workable truths' before one sets to reassess subaltern pasts. But are these 'truths' predicated on rationality and the school of knowledge espoused by the Enlightenment or are these truths more inclusive? The answer, he says, is to forgo any attempts at reconciling history and myth. Understanding either in terms of the other would lead to a skewed assessment of both. What historians need to do is acknowledge a plurality of narratives, without seeking to present history as a strand of narrative that follows a unilateral path.

It is this skewed understanding of colonial pasts that has led to the misappropriation of several native cultures by the colonial rule. A pertinent example would be the cult of temple dancers. *Devadasis* were women married to a temple deity in an elaborate ceremony. They dedicated the rest of their lives working in the temples and offering services to the deities. They were trained rigorously in classical dance and performed in temple rituals. They also offered sexual favours to patrons who vowed to protect them and also pledged to sponsor the temple's maintenance. *Devadasis* got to exercise a sexual autonomy that was not granted to women bound in conventional monogamous marriages. Their dances garnered the attention of devotees far and wide. Despite these privileged living conditions, the British Raj abolished the tradition in an attempt to 'emancipate' the *devadasis* who they believed were victimised by a sexually predatory society. Women were deprived of the opportunity to actively engage in temple rituals and gather knowledge about the way of the Vedas and the scriptures just because the white, imperialist male thought being 'married' to a god seemed silly.

It is these distorted assumptions about native cultures, a hierarchization of western knowledge over native wisdom which mars the colonial perception of native art forms. The postcolonial condition of dance, not only in form but also in structure lies in its defiance of the word or *logos*, that which the phallogocentric imperialist discourse prides itself on.

Investigating the ways in which dance destabilizes and/or reinforces gender constructs has been part of scholarly debate for decades now. Judith Butler who contended that gender itself was akin to an elaborate masquerade where each individual merely played out the performative role laid out for their sex. The arbitrary relationship between sex and gender and how it lends itself to socio-political constructions of identity has emerged as a critical point of departure for theorists of gender studies. Theatre and dance assume particularly significant roles in this context as they ascribe specifically gendered roles to their participants. It is amusing to wonder if that makes these art forms a performance within a performance. Transvestite theatre is interesting for its simultaneous internalization and inversion of gendered roles. In Elizabethan theatre, both male and female characters were played by male actors. While Greenblatt thought this was a reinforcement of the archaic notion of gender difference existing not as male and female, but as male and not male, others opined that this was a revelation of the futility of ascribing gender binaries. If merely donning a corset instead of a pair of breeches brought about a change in your essential being, then the meticulously devised user manual for gender was rendered completely pointless. Some others believed the stage was a means of containing the litter of transvestism, pedaresty, pedophilia, and homosexuality, so that it did not spill over the edges. In an attempt to curb sexual deviance, or at best contain it to a limited area, the Elizabethan stage permitted the inclusion of cross-dressers, little boys dressed as women being seduced by grown men on stage, men playing women playing lovers to other male actors on stage, as a medium to vent the sexual repression imposed by Elizabethan morality. The same can also be said of *Jatra*, the street dance-theatre form popular in Bengal where male actors impersonated women in the performances. Male dancers playing *gopis* fawning over a young Krishna who is pursuing a male dancer in the garb of Radha, is not an unusual sight during a *Jatra* performance.

Certain other dance forms have earned the status of being exclusively feminine forms, where the presence of a male figure is often considered an anomaly or an intrusion. Ballet is predominantly performed by female performers. The relative paucity of male dancers in the field has mired the reputation of the exceptional few deep in social stigma. Chastised for being effeminate, assumed to be homosexual and bullied consequently, exponents of dance forms such as ballet or *Bharatanatyam* find their vocational grace and poise to be the reason of their social ostracism.

Mahesh Dattani in his play *Dance like a Man* explores the predicament of a young boy who aspires to become a *Bharatanatyam* maestro. Jairaj is keen on pursuing a career in classical dance only to discover that his father, Amritlal Parekh vehemently opposes his dreams.

“A woman in a man’s world may be considered as being progressive. But a man in a woman’s world is pathetic,”^{iv} remarks a furious Amritlal Parekh. “The craft of a prostitute is to show off her wares- what business a man has learning such a craft? No use. Similar with dance,”^v continues his tirade.

Parekh considers dancing a lower profession because it is chiefly dominated by women. He considers sex work degrading because he thinks it is meant exclusively for women. His

grievance with his son dancing is associated with the anxiety of him becoming effeminate if he does so.

Abhinaya or to act is one of the key components of *bharatanatyam*, as taught by the *Natya Shastra*. It involves miming feelings, actions, and even impersonating gender. Dancer and scholar Purnima Shah asserted that in Indian classical dance, perfection can be achieved only in the spiritual transcendence of one's gender^{vi}. Performance scholar Avanthi Meduri has even gone so far as to say that "the Indian classical performer is a "perhapter", a self-styled magician playing at everything without inhabiting any one space exclusively."^{vii} A 'perhapter' is one who is simultaneously a lot of things and therefore also simultaneously nothing. Their bodies are a fluid integration of genders, and also a dissolution of gender binaries.

Ramli Ibrahim, a contemporary *bharatanatyam* artiste says that a patriarchal society such as ours would much rather eroticize the female form than the male^{viii}. The female body is sexualized to a greater degree than a man's is, drawing more spectators to watch a danseuse perform. Being an able dancer in fact is considered a desirable trait in women, especially classical dance. It is these age old traditions that often appreciate women dancers for the wrong reasons, and keep men from venturing into the territory. Ibrahim also speaks about the unreasonable beauty standards men are expected to conform to. Since male *bharatanatyam* dancers perform bare chested, their bodies are subjected to unrelenting scrutiny and they often receive unflattering judgment for the way they are built.

There are however more male dancers in *bharatanatyam* today than there ever have been. They're fighting hard to expunge the sense of shame that still surrounds their vocation. But eminent dancer K. Shanmugasundaram's justification seems problematic.

"There is a belief among people that a male Bharatanatyam dancer tends to get effeminate over a period of time. There is absolutely no truth in the statement. If you learn Bharatanatyam under a good guru, there is no way a normal man can become effeminate. I have been bombarded with this question from time to time and I have done my fair share of research on the subject. Films also play a part in spreading such misconceptions."^{ix}

His equation of normalcy with masculinity and considering being called effeminate an affront to the male ego is inadvertently fraught with prejudice. He appears to be in support of male dancers pursuing *bharatanatyam* only so long as their vocation in no way effaces their 'manhood'. Dancers who do develop a body language conventionally considered more appropriate for women do so because of the inadequacies in their training, according to him. He does nothing to dismantle the stereotype that all dancing men are effeminate. His voracious disavowal of the same further compounds the stigma associated with men being not quite men enough.

Individuals engaged in transvestite dance or theatre, or drag queens as they're more popularly referred to, negotiate with gender roles in unique ways through the medium of dance. Dancing is akin to a masquerade for them, pun intended. It is a celebration of their

unconventional situation in the locus of gender and sexual identity, and also allows them to explore and assert the same from behind the veil of anonymity and detachment offered by the stage. Theatre or the realm of the performing arts both contains and threatens to spill over that which civilization considers less than desirable. Its laws are more forgiving than those of the spaces that lie beyond it. The feathers, the faux fur, the garish make up that makes it almost impossible to discern one’s features are convenient elements of disguise that have provided comfort and solace to those seeking redemption from the tyrannical laws of a hetero-patriarchal system. Spectators have been so conditioned that the ribaldry which may seem anomalous on the streets appears more acceptable on stage.

While one is on the subject of inverting pecking orders, the life and work of revered Kathak exponent Kumudini Lakhia comes to mind. Her solo performance in 1971 titled *Duvidha* depicted the inner conflict tormenting an ennui ridden housewife who was torn between fulfilling her filial duties and pursuing her own dreams. Illustrating the plight of an urban, middle class woman forced to make a difficult personal choice was considered by purists a travesty of the ideals of *Kathak* which traditionally enacted tales of gods and goddesses on stage. The story of an everyday individual fraught in the drudgery of domestic unhappiness appeared vulgar and irreverent to those who swore by antiquity with a rigid allegiance.

“The *Natya Shastra* has set patterns for the *nayikas*. They had to be beautiful, young, et al. So I thought of ‘Duvidha’, which is about a middle-aged, middle-class woman, chained to her duties and bored with life. She is charmed by the picture of a modern woman with short hair, sleeveless blouse, surrounded by all men – those were the days of Indira Gandhi,”^x explains Lakhia.

What made this performance an even greater act of rebellion was Lakhia’s rejection of the traditional *Kathak* costume and jewelry in favour of a simple saree tucked away at the waist, and no adornments gracing her body. She chose to make an appearance on stage sans any of the makeup that typically accompanies classical dance recitals. To already unforgiving critics, the coup de grace came in the form of electronic music composed by Atul Desai accompanying the protagonist’s dilemma. Even her movements on stage were an exercise in absurdism as she sacrificed elaborate grand gestures for abstract movements which indicated her engagement with household chores. She redefined the stage in its totality, transforming every aspect of it and transcending every known barrier.

“I hate archaic classicism. I asked my students to abandon unnecessary ornamentation - no bangles, elaborate chains, hair jewels that always get caught in the *dupatta*,” remarked an indignant Lakhia.^{xi}

Classists who chastised her for tampering with the sacredness of the dance form libeled her as ‘*besharm*’ or shameless, for taking to the stage without the prescribed costume. Placing the plight of a troubled housewife on the same platform as that which also recites tales of deities in all its mythological splendor raised as many eyebrows as it drew applause.

Lakhia experimented further with form, structure and matter. Her depiction of the spirit of a coat in her stage adaptation of Sarvesvar Dayal's poem "Khunti par coat ki tarah ek arshi se mai tange hun" was a tragicomic account of an idle coat hanging from a nail, waiting for someone to wear it. Delving into the 'soul' of a discarded coat, attempting to dismantle the anthropocentrism of dance was an unprecedented move in the history of contemporary Kathak. What Lakhia does to her audience is stir them from their complacency and prove wrong everything they think they know about what they are going to witness on stage. A connoisseur of classical dance accustomed to watching elaborate *raas leelas* or Draupadi's disrobing, wonders if he is in the right auditorium when he sees the pithy lamentations of an unused garment take center stage. It is precisely this inversion of the order of meaning that Lakhia wishes to achieve in her performances.

Lakhia says she does not just want to dance or teach dance, she wishes to create a 'movement laboratory.'^{xii} Each dancer is built differently, with their arms and legs having unique proportions, explains Lakhia. Therefore, when a dancer negotiates with the space of the stage, or when multiple dancers are engaging with each other as well as the space of the stage, the differences in their bodies play out in different ways on stage. While designing a recital, it isn't just sufficient to imagine dance as a disembodied spirit traversing the stage. Understanding proportions, ratios, and how these numbers engage with each other to engineer the desired effect is as critical to the success of a performance as is contemplating its aesthetics.

She wants to interrogate and investigate every element of classical Kathak that we seem to have accepted unquestioningly as handed down to the human race via divine intervention. The *guru-shishya* dynamics endorsed by most classical dance traditions demand an unwavering allegiance pledged to the teacher, who is placed on a pedestal higher than god. Lakhia dismissed these rationally ill founded traditions and prohibited her students from touching her feet.

Lakhia's tryst with Kathak was one that constantly questioned its relevance. Her reverence for her art found manifestation not in a blind faith in its efficacy, but in an urge to consistently re-imagine its boundaries and re-examine its foundational tenets.

The transgender community of *hijras* too use dance as a means of asserting their identities. Intersexed, emasculated, bisexual, impotent, homosexual, recreational cross-dressers, hermaphrodites, gender fluid, gender neutral; there isn't a dearth of identities assigned to India's third sex. The resounding clap which accompanies the arrival of a *hijra*, almost as if announcing their presence, is as much the subject of anthropological discourse, as it is public ridicule. The clap is a part of an esoteric semiotic structure meant to communicate with non-*hijras* as well as communicate with fellow *hijras* in the presence of non-*hijras*. These are not generic, undifferentiated claps without semantic relevance. Kira Hall^{xiii} draws a distinction between the *dedh tali* (one and a half claps) and *adh tali* (half clap) often used by hijras in public spaces. When the palm is brought together with straight, spread, raised fingers, followed by the same gesture again but without any ensuing sound, it constitutes the *dedh tali*. When this happens, two or more

hijras begin playing out a rehearsed argument among themselves, orchestrated only to scandalize unassuming bystanders.^{xiv} Catching passersby unawares and making them unwitting audience to these scripted conversations laced with risqué humour is a common trick often employed to alarm unsuspecting strangers. This charade is as much an assertion of one’s own authenticity as part of the *hijra* community, as it is a reminder to the non *hijra* that they will always remain outside the locus of this esoteric knowledge held by the *hijras*. Carmen Llamas^{xv} opines that this booming clap, and the bawdy humor is a compensatory mechanism for their sexual incompetence when weighed against the standards of a conventional, normative conjugal structure. Gayatri Reddy^{xvi} in her study of *hijra* lives notes how a clap is also used to reinforce one’s authority as the superior *hijra* in a dispute. A transgression of *hijra* codes of conduct or any misdemeanour which could potentially bring shame to the clan is rebuked in the form of clapping loudly before them, to remind them of their misdoings.

The paradoxical position of *hijras* in the social hierarchy is similar to the *rudaali*’s. They are humiliated and considered lesser beings, but their services are indispensable. A *hijra*’s blessings are considered to bring good fortune to newborns and newlyweds. They are paid to visit weddings and dance to shower blessings on the bride and groom.

Gender is a performance as is dance. The stages may be different, as may be the audience, but they are played by similar rules. Does the impersonation of a gender within a dance further jeopardize the authenticity of the self by compounding the element of performance, or does dance nullify the subterfuge of gender and thus bring one closer to one’s essential self? When Jairaj enacts his role as a dancer on stage, he is simultaneously defying another role, one assigned to him by virtue of being a man in a heteropatriarchal setup. When Adam performs on stage replete with all his drag trappings, does gynomimesis eclipse his performance as a dancer or do the two enactments complement each other? While there can be no conclusive answer to that puzzle, the inferences I personally have drawn from the aforementioned instances is that the masquerade of dance makes the masque of gender a little more bearable.

The purpose of this paper has been to attempt a reading of dance in the culture of protest. Synchronized movement has the power to assert one’s identity with an indomitable voracity. Dance performs the dual task of not only resisting oppressive regimes, but also emphasizing agency and affirming one’s complete autonomy over the body.

The ability of context to transform a previously licentious form of movement into an expression of nationalist sentiment proves how the medium holds the power to communicate more poignantly than verbal languages can. What makes the status of dance unique in the hierarchy of linguistic or semantic orders is how it both, spatially and temporally, communicates a message.

Dance, particularly in the postcolonial context assumes a greater subversive value in its accomplishment of a discursive mastery that refuses to be reduced to the same denomination as imperialist knowledge systems. It commands its own laws, its own

syntax and becomes an act of rebellion as much in its audacity as it does in its inclusiveness.

Notes

ⁱ Gertrude Prokosch Kurath. "Panorama of Dance Ethnology," *Current Anthropology* 1, no.4 (1961): 233-54, accessed April 27, 2016.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2739713>.

ⁱⁱ Adrienne L. Kaeppler, "Dance Ethnology and the Anthropology of Dance", *Dance Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (Summer, 2000): 116-125, accessed April 27, 2016.
<http://sites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic152817.files/dance.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts". *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, no.9 (1998): 473-79, accessed April 24, 2016.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4406471>.

^{iv} Mahesh Dattani, *Dance Like a Man: A Stage Play in Two Acts* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2006), 50.

^v *Ibid.*, 25.

^{vi} Purnima Shah, "Transcending Gender in the Performance of Kathak," *Dance Research Journal* 30, no. 2 (Autumn, 1988): 2-17, accessed April 29, 2016.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1478835.pdf>.

^{vii} Avanthi Meduri, "Western Feminist Theory, Asian Indian Performance, and a notion of Agency", quoted in Sara Azzarelli, "Queering My Mudra," *Postgraduate Journal of Dance Research and Practice* 1 (2015): 16-31.
<http://motiojournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/QueeringMyMudra-SaraAzzarelli-Final.pdf>.

^{viii} Priya M. Menon, "Male dancers find the going tough in a woman's world," *Times of India* (Chennai, Tamil Nadu), Nov 17, 2009.
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/Male-dancers-find-the-going-tough-in-a-womans-world/articleshow/5237956.cms>.

^{ix} P. Sangeetha, "Bharatanatyam cannot make a man effeminate," *Times of India* (Chennai, Tamil Nadu), Jan 7, 2013.
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/music/news/Bharatanatyam-cannot-make-a-man-effeminate/articleshow/17921729.cms>.

^x Tapati Chowdrie, "Moulding each dancer differently", *The Hindu* (Delhi), Dec. 31, 2015, assessed April 24, 2016. <http://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/moulding-each-dancer-differently/article8050785.ece>.

^{xi} *Ibid.*

^{xii} Erin Kelly, "Renowned Dancer Kumudini Lakhia: Tradition and Innovation Are Not Oppositional," *Swarthmore College* (2012), accessed April 26, 2016.
<http://www.swarthmore.edu/news-events/renowned-dancer-kumudini-lakhia-tradition-and-innovation-are-not-oppositional>.

^{xiii} Kira Hall and Anna Livia, *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 448, quoted in Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006), 138.

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^{xiv} Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006), 138.

https://books.google.co.in/books?id=5OrTp5Fd23AC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=o#v=onepage&q&f=false.

^{xv} Carmen Llamas, *Language and Identities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 176.

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^{xvi} Ibid.

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