

PRESENTING EMOTIONS AND ABSENTING BODIES? A GLANCE BACK

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Abstract: Kathakali is a traditional Indian dance native to the southern state of Kerala. To perform it, artists deck out in elaborate costumes and colourful makeup to tell stories from Hindu epics. A Kathakali performance, like all classical dance arts of India, synthesises music, vocal performers, choreography and hand and facial gestures together to express ideas. The paper attempts at over viewing the traditional themes of the Kathakali such as its folk mythologies, religious legends and spiritual ideas from the Hindu epics and the Puranas. The vocal performance has traditionally been performed in Sanskritised Malayalam. In modern compositions, Indian Kathakali troupes have included women artists as well, the characters of which are discussed herein.

Keywords: Kathakali, intangible heritage, theory of emotions, Sanskrit hymns, human as agents, female self, caste, female characters

From as far back as I can remember, there was a replica of the heroic green Kathakali face¹ mounted on the living-room wall of our single-storied middle class Nair home in central Keralam. Today, if one travelled by train from Thiruvananthapuram, its capital city, to any of the northern districts of the state, the Kathakali face would greet one repeatedly from signboards that announce the respective station. For a certain generation of modestly privileged Malayalis who have had their childhood located in the pre-liberalised world of the 80s, growing up had a number of inflections that disappeared from everyday significance later. It would be years later that the Kathakali face would morph into a quasi official touristy insignia of a “uniquely ethnic” Malayali identity, featured with remarkable frequency in government sponsored commercials of the tourism department in its aggressive campaigns; as the inevitable masthead of websites of tour companies selling “authentic” culture trips and green hideaways; as the prime highlight of flex boards of any kind of political party gatherings and so on. However, it had already made possible the transition from art to artifact.

When I look back now to that phase of my childhood, this artifact seems to step down from the wall in some surreal manner and encapsulate some of those specific experiences. If, as Arjun Appadurai says, the meanings of things ‘are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories’ and it is ‘only through the analysis of these trajectories that we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that enliven things’, one needs to wonder what relationship this artifact had to the human agents around it (5). Resonating from a time and place where the words “picnic” and “pilgrimage” need not have had a lot of difference in experience, where a long drive to the popular Guruvayoor temple was the most exciting adventure accessed annually, the Kathakali face is inextricably linked in my memory to the much anticipated late night visits to a nearby temple during its annual festival. As a multi-sensorial event, which afforded tangible delights – gastronomic and leisurely aesthetic events included— consisting in little leaps of joy like a deep fried piping hot plantain *baji* or a plastic bracelet in eye-smiting fluorescent colours you could wind around your wrist like a spring, it also carved out a time and place out of humdrum routine. It was suddenly possible for little girls to be out on nights that changed colours from pale purple to thick indigo against the twilight hues of temple lamps. It was okay to sleep on the bare stone floor right in the middle of nowhere while noble heroes played out their valour or a *lalitha* ² morphed suddenly into a dark skinned *karti*³ character. It was, in other words, a respite from the usual norms that governed one’s upbringing.

At the back of the wall that exhibited the Kathakali face there was a little *puja* room in which clay figurines and framed photographs modeled both from Sivakasicaleendars⁴ and Ravi Varma ⁵ paintings of deities sat along with austere looking black and white studio snaps of deceased ancestors. Evening prayer rituals in this claustrophobic but lavishly populated room meant lighting a lamp and somewhat mechanically, though studiously, mouthing three or four barely understood Sanskrit hymns taught by my father and addressed to specific deities. One did of course gauge some meaning from Sanskrit words which had flown into Malayalam as well. My father has had no official training in Sanskrit, but availed himself of a working knowledge of a number of Sanskrit hymns from Malayalam devotional books that printed these hymns in the Malayalam alphabet, followed up with paraphrases of individual hymns. On certain auspicious days like a *Krishna Jayanti* ⁶ for example, this meagre ritual would be extended to include a few common devotional songs addressed to Krishna in Malayalam which my mother would sing while preparing the offerings for her favorite deity or arranging them in the *puja* room. She would also croon them on long power-cut nights typical of the 80s, as she braved the humid heat, moving musically as it were, on a cane swing. One of these songs written by the 16th

century Malayalam poet Poonthanam Nambudiri, a beloved name in Keralam's devotional canon titled "*Anjana Sreedhara*", narrated the life of Krishna while also aiding in the teaching of Malayalam vowels. Another song I clearly remember titled "*Ambadithannilorunni*" was a popular piece written by Vayalar Rama Varma, poet and lyricist, for the 1972 movie *Chembarathi*. This song starts with a head-to-toe description of little Krishna and proceeds to lilting refrains where an unidentified motherly voice calls out to him to come and have his meal and lie down by her to sleep. In performance, the song affords an expressive expansion as the singer has the simultaneity of being both the mother and the devotee who addresses the god directly in rapturous affection. Moreover, though addressed to the divine kid, in practice, it could easily glide through its soothing refrains typical of lullabies to refer to any kid who is gently coaxed by a parent to retire to sleep. None of these songs, as far as my memory goes, including the Sanskrit hymns somewhat unwittingly recited, were written down though they came from the archive; rather, they imprinted themselves in a child's memory through repeated listening. Similarly, the epics swept into our imagination first through bedtime stories with a moral finale, (where the gods were always just, the demons harboured ill will, but were pliable through repentance to be deemed worthy of salvation and the truthful, ultimately rewarded for their sufferings), then through the *Amar Chitrakatha* graphic story series followed up with the hugely popular television adaptations aired on Sundays. In each of these retellings, the content shape-shifted to suit the grammar of the performance in question, certainly imbued with its political leanings.

At some uncertain point during this phase, my mother, who has had a long training as a Bharatanatyam⁷ dancer, but whom I had never seen dancing, apart from poses she might suddenly strike in response to a piece of music that appealed to her or while critiquing a certain dancer's posture, apprenticed me to a somewhat impoverished Mohiniyattam⁸ dancer who never married and made a living out of dance classes conducted from her home. Long before the 80s, both these women's dances had become "respectable"⁹ enough to be considered as extensions of appropriate gender socialisation for young girls. ("Good girls don't sit with their legs open, nor do they cross them" and the like.) I persisted for a year and then wailed myself out of the training sessions in which caning for body taming was a norm and which also meant I had to stay back with my maternal grandparents during summer holidays while the rest of my family went to wherever my father was currently posted. Years, or perhaps a lifetime, later and as part of my research work after having dug out certain unexplored insights into the genesis of this dance form and bowled over by the passionate eroticism, in particular of the Swati Tirunal¹⁰ *padams* ¹¹ composed for this dance, I have been harbouring a yearning to re-

apprentice myself to understand the emotions unleashed through a “*Poonthennermozhisakhi...*”¹² or a “*Panimathimukhibalee...*”¹³ and have just started taking baby steps in this direction. When I became a mother, along with other lullabies, I went back, perhaps inadvertently, to my mother’s rendering of “*Ambadithannilorunni*”; as if the body could reproduce forgotten lyrics located in one’s own childhood simply by repeatedly trying out the remembered tune. Years later I realised it was an old movie song and that the original version is somewhat different in rendition to the way my mother sang it. Perhaps, it would perturb some that a movie song could slip in and out of the familial and the religious realms, but such dynamics, it needs to be stressed, have always been the mark of embodied practices in its relation to the archive.

I use this haphazard collection of remembered experiences to articulate certain questions that had assailed some of us while participating in the “Decolonising Theories of the Emotions” Conference at Thiruvananthapuram. How does one talk about what one understands as one’s heritage? Is it assimilated by human agents mutely and without complication? Can there be an abstract notion of heritage severed from the all too human question of inheritance? Can there be “intangible heritages” as UNESCO proclaims?¹⁴ How does one put into words the unease that stirred in some of us as a fair amount of papers continuously evoked the reverential approach to old texts, as if the very act of talking about them demands another evocation of their auratic values? Are our inheritances as democratic and ahistorical as we suppose them to be? If the past is to be thought of as no longer a singular monochromatic entity and heritage itself a matter of selection, articulation and repetition, how does one make space for a political reactivation of the archive now attempted in order to decolonise western theories of emotions? How certain are we that this doesn’t lead to epistemic violence or a recolonisation of vernacular cultures yet again through a re-privileging of Sanskrit texts? Raising these caveats is by no means a pessimistic denial of the archive or of the possibilities of the conference, but we need something more than a reappraisal of old texts. In probing these concerns, I would also like to suggest what I see as a more critically expansive means of dealing with the ancient texts.

If our disciplinary training and reflection on accumulated experiences inform our reading, viewing and listening, it cannot be out of place to wonder why certain elaborations of high Sanskritic wisdom harping on transcendence, as if by default, tags along an erasure of the body. Is the assumption that staged emotions have nothing to do with ordinary human emotions as innocent a claim as it purports to be? In other words, do the multivalences of embodied performances and everyday practices warrant such a claim? I would like to

briefly go back here to the performances staged as part of the conference: Sitara Balakrishnan's unforgettable staging of Radha's heart-wrenching complaint in "Yaahimadhava" drawn from the *Gitagovinda*¹⁵ affords us a case in point. In this performance, is the *nayika*'s (heroine) desire for Krishna completely separate from her growing disenchantment towards him? As she bitterly enumerates the marks left on his body from the previous night's lovemaking with a different partner, does she also hint at a possible shaming of the lord who after all emerges here only through the exceptional effulgence of Radha's array of complex emotions? Even as such behaviour corresponds to the bodily idiom *Natyasastra* allots to the enraged heroine, it needs to be asked whether such reciprocation is all that happens in expressive communication. If the enumeration of the *nayika*'s own adornment of her body in anticipation of her lover with which the song begins is a part by part creation of her exquisite wholeness, can the opposite attempt at pointing out leftover signs of infidelity be removed from her mounting (though temporary) disdain towards him? Within the dynamics of performance, do such part-by-part evocations, first of adornment and then stages of desolation, comment on and mirror each other? Perhaps, it is in such ambivalence – the contradictions and confusions in which desire itself is mired and released through embodied communication – that Radha stands closer to her human counterparts and their vacillating emotions.

A related point that demands attention here may be problematised again from the vantage point of the Koodiyattam play performed at the conference. This concerns the sudden and dramatic cleaving of the female self into two separate bodies in particular plays wherein they are on the verge of bursting out in anger, pain from being spurned or plain hatred. The fleshing out of the demonic female being that resides at first in a beautiful/seductive *lalitha* guise is a common device employed in Koodiyattam and Kathakali plays as well as in the *yakshi*¹⁶ tales of Kerala. How does one culturally locate the relevance of such a schism in practice? How is a female spectator meant to respond to such dramatic bifurcation of the female self typically followed up with mutilation and taming of the abjected self? On the other hand, are ironic humour and satiric commentary a trait that marks the dark-skinned abjected self and an element never accessible for the noble heroines in Kathakali and Koodiyattam? If so, in what way does it respond to the controlled bodily registers of the idealised *nayika* especially when it comes out in the broken Malayalam interjections of the demonised body?

History certainly affords one some clues to address these questions. We may go back to the charged initial half of the 20th century when as part of the nationalist project, performative arts from various geo-cultural terrains of the sub-continent were both

classicised and standardised, a process which involved a detailed distancing from what got to be defined as “folk forms” through such standardisation programmes. One only needs to revert to the *sringara* controversy¹⁷ at the heart of the reformation of both Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam, where the debate consisted not just on how much *sringara* could be allowed, but what bodies should appropriately perform them as well. Here is a reminder for us that even the choicest of *rasas* has time-place coordinates and has been through historical acculturation processes. In other words, instead of assuming the relationship between the archive and various performance traditions to be a one-way process, reading the archive alongside and in tandem with embodied performance practices of historically situated performing communities or the repertory of a particular individual performer would emerge as a more democratic and insightful practice as it helps us to understand how performance talks back to the archive and plays with it. A work that immediately comes to mind is Rich Freeman’s exemplary essay on Teyyam¹⁸ performed by a number of lower caste communities of Keralam titled, “There upon Hangs a Tail: The Deification of Vāli in the Teyyam Worship of Malabar.” His reading explains how the performance of Teyyam makes use of the *puranic* character of Bāli and infuses it with elements drawn from heroic folk tales rampant in the south to voice both a collective sense of experienced stigma of caste as well as felt resistance to the same through the deification of the human-miscegenatedapehero. Characters from the *puranic* lore become malleable in such cases to stage a more respectable past and are used to deal with present stigma even as caste (as a dehumanising apparatus itself) can be questioned. The human nature of Bāli articulated here works not as some abstract contrast to divinity, it carves out instead a reflective space paradoxically located within *puranic* performance itself in which his killing by the upper caste Rama becomes a timelessly repeated staging of upper caste violence and the hostility it breeds. The following lines from a Teyyam that commemorates the very low Pulaya caste may be cited here:

You gather in great temples, Lord;
We gather only in our clearings.
In temples your offerings are in blazing cauldrons, Lord
In clearings ours are in bark buckets.
You go out wrapped in fine foreign silks, Lord;
We go out with our coarse waist-towels.
You go out adorned with sandal paste, Lord;
We go out daubed in mud...
Your domain ranges over several territories, Lord;
Our domain is the irrigation ditch...

You will come mounted on elephants' backs, Lord;
We will come mounted on buffaloes' backs...
Why, O Lord, do you rant over caste?
If you are stabbed will not blood flow?
If we are stabbed will not blood flow? ...
We will all one day gather in the temple of the Great One,
There you and we shall be together.
Then why, O Lord, do you rant over caste? (qtd in Freeman 208).

These impassioned lines seem to act out the complex possibilities of performance in its relation both to ancient myth and present human concerns. That they come from a character ironically named *Pottan* or “the Dumb” reveals both the possibilities and the politics of performance in its complex linkages both to lived trauma that strikes out experiential affiliations across time and the cleared, charmed circle of actual space with all its delimitations wherein the enactment enfolds.

In a similar vein, it is somewhat disturbing to listen to scholarly readings that explain away the potentials of even *Bhakti* poetry traditions¹⁹ as uniformly exemplifying high Sanskritic notions of the merging of the feminine *bhakti* (devotee) in the *paramatma* (supreme self) conceptualised as a male. Uma Chakravarti's engaging study of the *bhaktins* (female devotee poets) would tell us that unlike the cases of the male poets, the *bhaktins* retained their femaleness and that their hagiographies are filled with the many ways in which the young female body itself is negotiated at times through instant and wished for demonisation or a sudden visitation of old age or through actual ritual marriage to god (2006). Perhaps the 13th century poet, Janabhai explains the centrality of the body – in this case of a lower caste *dasi* (servant) female body— better than anyone else in the entire range of emotions signalled by *bhakti* thus:

Cast off all shame,
and sell yourself
in the marketplace;
then alone
can you hope
to reach the Lord.

Cymbals in hand,
a veena upon my shoulder, I go about;

who dares to stop me?

The pallav of my sari falls away (A scandal!);
yet will I enter
the crowded marketplace
without a thought.

Jani says, My Lord
I have become a slut
to reach your home (Tharu and Lalitha 83).

The god to whom Jana thus speaks is at once divine and human; he is a constant companion and helper who eases her domestic chores, makes the unwashed vessels gleam and even scratches her scalp when the lice bite her (82). There is hardly a need here to separate the everyday and the mundane from soul-stirring devotion. Moving from poet to performer, we may yet again see such intertwining of apparent opposites. Lakshmi Knight, the daughter of renowned devadasi²⁰ performer Bala Saraswati has this to say about her mother-teacher's approach; the *padam* she cites here was a prominent item in Bala's repertory and was composed by the 17th century Telugu poet Kshetravaya:

It has been so long since I last saw you.
My sari is soaked with tears; in my sleep I am weeping.
After dreaming of you, it seems you are here.
I wake seeing the curtains move and think it is you.
Feeling your presence, I thought I saw you in the shadow.
When I felt a breeze on my cheek I thought it was your breath.
A fragrance was only a flower.
And I arise, sensing your presence...
I haven't seen you, Krishna, for so many days...

That was Bala! When she was dancing or when she was in her room talking to me about this, she'd just forget herself. This is not devotion, not yearning for bhakti. But when she performed this, as a song, as an item, you would never think of it as a love song. The audience would not think that way. They would think we are all longing for the Great One to come and see her. That is how she projected such material . . . She transformed it into an altogether different subject (Knight 172-173).

Rather than attempting to see how far our performance traditions show fidelity to the emotional categories and explanations in ancient aesthetic texts, it can be a richer exercise to study how repertoires, written and performed, historically talk back to the old texts as well as keep alive the tensions experienced and archived on the bodies themselves. Such a critical scrutiny would differentiate itself from both the salvage ethnography of the colonial enterprise as well as UNESCO's reification programmes of "intangible heritages" of the Global South which are it seems, at least in practice, closer to the former than generally acknowledged. Charting out such a mutually dialectical framework and critical enquiry seems closer to the potentialities identified by Dr. Sneja Gunew in her insightful article (2009). Decolonising theories of emotions in that sense, may be seen as a viable and far reaching exercise.

NOTES

¹ The green face-paint in Kathakali typically refers to noble, upright heroic characters.

² Female characters in Kathakali tend to fall between two contrasting types: the beautiful, idealised, dutiful wives/virgins/lovers embodying the *satvika* (pure) quality and the dark-skinned demonesses who are portrayed as lustful, hysteric, ugly and dangerous and are *tamasa* (dark) in nature. Between these two categories figure the seductress *lalitha* who appears in disguise in the make-up otherwise meant for idealised heroines to entrap a noble hero and soon reveals her concealed demoness nature. Marlene Pitkow remarks that 'this role type is completely uncontrolled, always appearing alone, widowed or otherwise unmarried' (223).

³ *Kari* refers to the dark-skinned demonic female characters of Kathakali.

⁴ Sivakasi in modern Tamil Nadu has been a prime centre of India's printing industry; the calendars mass produced from its many printing companies helped in popularising a distinct visual idiom in the conceptualisation of Hindu gods and goddesses.

⁵ Ravi Varma (1848-1906) was a celebrated painter and artist from the erstwhile princely state of Thiruvitaamkoor in modern Keralam. The lithographs of his paintings based on figures from the epics and the *puranas* printed from his own press and elsewhere had a massive reach and somewhat standardised their visualisation.

⁶ *Krishna Jayanti* or *Janmashtami* marks an annual celebration of the birth of Krishna.

⁷ The name Bharatanatyam is of relatively recent origin and refers to the post-reformation form of the diverse kinds of dances that were performed in the temples of Tamil Nadu for centuries by devadasis or women attached to temples for ritual performances. Its earlier names include *Sadir*, *Chinnamelam* or simply *DasiAttam* (“dance of the dasis”). The current name is understood as linking it back to Bharata, the sage who is believed to have composed the ancient aesthetic treatise, *The Natyasastra*.

⁸ A dance performed by Nair women of Keralam that has gone through reformation like Bharatanatyam. Its genesis is traced back to the 16th century; the repertory of this dance still shows marked connections to the repertories of devadasis as well as to other performing traditions of Keralam. I have argued in my research dissertation that recuperates a history of the devadasis of Keralam that it is only through the performance practices of devadasis and what got carried over from their repertory to Mohiniyattam that any temple connection can be established for this dance and that critical readings that try to deny such associations do so from a felt need to distance Keralam’s performance heritage to any devadasi association.

⁹ The reformation, in particular of women’s performance practices, was a major part of the Indian nationalist movement. Starting in the early decades of the 20th century, this programme made its presence felt along with the disenfranchisement of devadasis, now cast under the blanket category of temple-harlots, as well as a puritanical bowdlerisation of the erotic content and kinaesthetic registers of particular dances. In Keralam, this programme marched along with the step by step dissolution of matrilineal connubial practices and the gradual shift to patriliney.

¹⁰ Swati Tirunal (1813-1846) was a ruler of the erstwhile princely state of Thiruvitaamkoor. He is also regarded as a celebrated musician and poet credited with hundreds of compositions.

¹¹ Slow lyrical songs mostly imbued in *sringara* (erotic) love.

¹² Both padams are addressed by the lady to her female friend and confidante; this is a typical tradition in Mohiniyattam and helps unravel the mind of the heroine. -”Oh, my

honey tongued forthright friend, /I'm suffering the agony of separation [from my lover] thus..."

¹³ "Oh, moon-faced girl, /Padmanabhan [the deity of the PadmanabhaSwamy temple Thiruvananthapuram] now has no mercy left for me..."

¹⁴ "Proclamation of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity 2001-2005", <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/proclamation-of-masterpieces-00103>, accessed in December 2015.

¹⁵ Literally "Song of Govinda", composed by the 12th century poet Jayadeva and depicts the love of Radha and Krishna, his frequent infidelity and eventual return to Radha.

¹⁶ *Yakshis* in mythologies obtained from the subcontinent are generally understood as counterparts of male *yakshas* and attendees of Kubera, the god of wealth who figure in some Hindu *puranas*. Mentions of *yakshis* have also been linked to ancient fertility goddesses and some early Buddhist and Jain monuments and texts; in certain tantric texts, they are depicted as voluptuous deities who are to be propitiated in order to get one's desires granted. However, in folklores of Keralam, they figure almost exclusively as malevolent, seductive demonesses who lure men with their charms and kill them. In most cases, *yakshis* are seen as victims of violent deaths and narrative conclusion mostly revolves around her taming by a male (mostly Brahmin) priest, who would conjure her into a stone or an idol and make her worthy of collective worship like any other dark power.

¹⁷ The debates concerning the reformation of both Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam sought to retrospectively differentiate "actual" *sringara* from what it designated as "obscenity"; such problematisation itself was imbricated in what behaviours could be allocated for female bodies within the incipient public sphere of the nation. In other words, the reprogramming of performing bodies paralleled the larger programme of gender streamlining as women were now asked to extend their domesticity and soft power to chosen domains designated for them in the public realm.

¹⁸ A ritual form of worship and performance at *kavus* (sacred groves) or open fields prevalent for centuries in the Northern districts of Keralam wherein the performer arrayed in colourful costumes metamorphoses through performance into the deity of a particular shrine.

¹⁹ The Bhakti tradition refers to a theistic devotional oeuvre that developed around particular deities spreading from the south to the rest of the subcontinent approximately around the 7th century. It is considered as having afforded an alternative individualistic path to spirituality and beyond the constraining ambit of gender or caste. Certain recent studies have questioned the rebellious readings made of the texts.

²⁰ A blanket term that refers to disparate communities of temple dancers, ritual priestesses, women who have historically been associated with temple service as employees, donors, patrons and so on.

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