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The resisting female body in India

by Nancy Boissel-Cormier

While “the mother” has been the symbol of the Indian nation since the 1920s, women choreographers in Tamil Nadu seem to resist this icon. In the 1930s, the classical dance *bharata-nāṭyam*, was recreated from *sadir* with new aesthetic and thematic standards. In a contemporary and globalised India, some artists reject this image of woman that the *bharata-nāṭyam* imposes on them: the female dancer must be “decent” and embody the image of a goddess. Chandralekha, a feminist activist, is one of the first to have challenged the *bharata-nāṭyam* in India. If the body is culturally constructed, how can artists or scholars disrupt or subvert existing regimes of representations? In this paper, we will tend to show how Indian choreographers and scholars are questioning the female body. Also, how and when this deconstruction took place whereas, in ancient texts and rituals, women seem to be free to move.

Historical context:

The *bharata-nāṭyam*, a classical dance from South India, has its roots in *sadir*, a dance-theatre perpetuated by the *devadāsī*, servants of the gods, and the *naṭuvāṇār*, dance masters and musicians. During the colonization by the British Empire, the *devadāsī* and *naṭuvāṇār* were driven out of the temples. Although the influence of Western thought and puritanism is very real because the way of life of women in temples differs from that of Westerners in India (Srinivasan

1988).

But the disappearance of *devadāsī* is not to be attributed to a single community or political movement, but, to a change in opinion, shaped by the internal sphere of the nation composed of an elite that allowed the nationalist bourgeoisie to imagine an intact kingdom, free of any colonialism (Weidman 2006). Paradoxically, the disappearance of the *devadāsī* is also associated with a feminist movement. Thus Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy was at the origin of one of the controversies that led to the abolition of temple dancing and the condemnation of the *devadāsī* way of life, under the influence of missionaries, but also, of Annie Besant, a young woman of the Victorian middle class, highly educated and feminist who fought for India's independence (Sarkar Munsī 2011). In 1932, Krishna Iyer created a space dedicated to performances where *devadāsī* would initially perform, until, according to Amanda Weidman, dance and music were taken over by women from respectable families, i. e. Brahmins. Art is now called *bharata-nāṭyam* and is recreated in the 1930s from the *sadir*. Thanks to its “redesign” by Rukmini Devi, *bharata-nāṭyam* meets new aesthetic and thematic standards.

But the “freezing” of the new so called “traditional” form of dance in the 30s sounds like a postulate. The dancer is idealized, and it seems that to make a career you must be young, pretty and embody the image of a goddess as she is represented in temples (Menon 1984). In a contemporary and globalised India, this can be a shock, and most contemporary dancers reject this image of woman that the *bharata-nāṭyam* imposes on them, and in which they do not recognize themselves.

Being a female artist in Chennai: what freedoms in the face of an icon “sculpted” by a patriarchal society?

The new aesthetic rules of *bharata-nāṭyam* are accompanied by a paradox between the image of the sculpted woman’s body and the moving woman's body. The gender issue is central, since the dancer’s appearance must correspond to an “ideal” that tends to be standardized. Contemporary choreographers, like Padmini Chettur and Preethi Atrheray, denounce this standardization as a way of exposing the woman’s body to a male gaze.

This ideal aspect corresponds to the woman’s body sculpted and still visible in temples or museums, the body of the goddesses. Judith Lynne Hanna points out the importance of the role of image in India, particularly in the representation of the female body. According to her, “This is the concept of *muti*, in which the deity is embodied in the human body which is therefore also divine (Hanna, 1988, p. 99).” These representations have no apparent connection with the image of contemporary women, whether emancipated or from a very traditional family.

Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, Professor in the Department of Aesthetics at J.N.U. University in New Delhi, was one of the first person to write in India about dance and the relationship between society and women’s bodies. She writes in an article that it is not only dance that has dictated what the body is allowed to do or not to do, but also cultural and family conditioning.

There has been a real desire since the 1930s and the transportation of dance on stage, to “match” these icons, the dancers must look like goddesses. Of course, nudity and postures illustrating the sexual act are not represented at all on stage. The puritanism that invaded India has gradually erased sensuality and sexuality in the representation of women, whereas before they were linked to worship and are in the ancient texts as *Sutras*. But according to Uttara Asha

Coorlawala, the influence of religions¹ and Christian duality have been strong, and India has become very moral.

During her presentation at the University of Jadavpuhr during the study days entitled “Embodying gender: Body and Dance in Social Context” on 28 and 29 March 2014, Ratnabali Chatterjee revisited the image of women in Indian art. For her, the categorization pushed the *devadāsī* out of their professional capacities. It raises the question of women's sculptures in India: when were these sculptures made and for whom? She also returns to the aesthetic canons: contours, hip stylization, etc. She also asks when religious worship begins in front of these statues. Does the eroticism that emerges from these statues still have a place? Ratnabali Chatterjee also points out that the art form changes with the arrival of the Moguls in India. The Mogul artists then had no iconographies in their worship and made paintings of everyday life. Women are represented in their work and in the services, they provide including prostitution. She notes that the more everyday scenes are painted, the less sexuality is represented in art.

In *bharata-nāṭyam*, there is a real desire to erase any sexual or sensual allusion, but by showing the image of the female goddess, which recalls that of temples. The curvature of the hips and a beautiful chest, even if it is covered, are criteria for a dancer's appreciation in Chennai. This is one of the consequences of the “Sanskritization” of bodies (Coorlawala 2005). Legitimation through “Sanskritization” and “Brahmanization” often recurs in articles that question the *bharata-nāṭyam* dance as it was recreated in the 1930s and its link to growing nationalism (Prickett 2007), for example. For Urmimala Sarkar Munsī too, the timeless image of the dancing woman cannot be attributed to tradition (Munsī 2011), but is a contemporary product created from scratch. The famous dancers of the 1930s have become examples for the new

¹ The Muslim, Christian, Jain, or Buddhist religions all convey a morality and a puritanism that has a large influence on all of India. The Hindu religion has also become very moral; it is in fact recent and has grouped together different beliefs and currents such as Shivaism and Tantrism for example.

generations.

Which costume and attitude for the “ideal” and “idealized” dancer?

Despite the freedoms that some dancers can take, her image is very important and decisive in her career. This is what Sadanand Menon denounces in his article, “Her large liquid eyes”, illustrated by the draw of Manjula (Figure 1). On this drawing we see a dancer in *tribhāṅga*² in a conventional costume. Her make-up is exaggerated and makes black marks instead of her eyes and lips. The artist writes on the costume words that describe the “ideal” dancer in the critics; “captivating,” “flexible,” “virtuoso,” “expressive:”

² *Bharata-nāṭyam* pose in which the lines of the body are observed as an “s,” bringing out the head, chest, and hips

to make this description with the idea that the goddess could correspond more to what she is experiencing. But first of all, she said that she wanted to make this description without trying to please anyone. She didn't want to reproduce the goddess on stage as the ideal woman:

For me somewhere the idea of a goddess being something extraordinary was not making sense. So, I felt that the image I had to have in mind was very much myself or the person who helps me to sweep and mop the house at home, when she is mopping the floor, how she moves....³. This show was not appreciated by her teachers. Professors and institutions play a very important role in reproducing the image of the “ideal female goddess” on the *bharata-nāṭyam* stage. It is interesting to note that today most teachers are women.

The Questioning of *bharata-nāṭyam* by the choreographer Chandrlekha: What limits in the expression of bodies?

An echo to this questioning by the Choreographer Chandrlekha, “*Where does the body begin... and where does it end ?*” (Chandrlekha 2) is well known. There is a clear gap between their daily life and what their art of dancing expresses. The “freeze” of the new “traditional” dance form sounds like a postulate imposed on dancers. In a contemporary and globalized India, this can come as a shock. Chandrlekha is one of the first dancers to question *bharata-nāṭyam* in India. She has become an icon for contemporary dancers, but has been strongly criticized by the dance community, especially in Chennai.

She was a recognized and talented *bharata-nāṭyam* dancer, and she wanted to break away from this form. One day, she asked herself why and for whom to dance, and refused to return to the stage until she had found an answer to this question, which took her about twenty years to

³ Preethi Athreya in (Boissel-Cormier 2017)

answer.

Chandralekha is a scholar and she studied Sanskrit texts. She also deepens the study of folk dances and martial arts and is interested in representing symbols with the bodies of the dancers on the stage, while in *bharata-nāṭyam* symbols are represented with the dancer's hands, by the *mudrā*. For example, the symbol of *śivaliṅga* which represents the non-duality of feminine/masculine.

Raga is a piece that refers to the symbols through the formation of a lotus drawn by the bow of the dancers' legs in red practice sari lying on their backs. Their heads are facing away from the audience. Their legs open at different levels form the petals. Their position offers the viewer a view of the dancer's pelvis, which, although hidden by the saris, suggests sexuality:

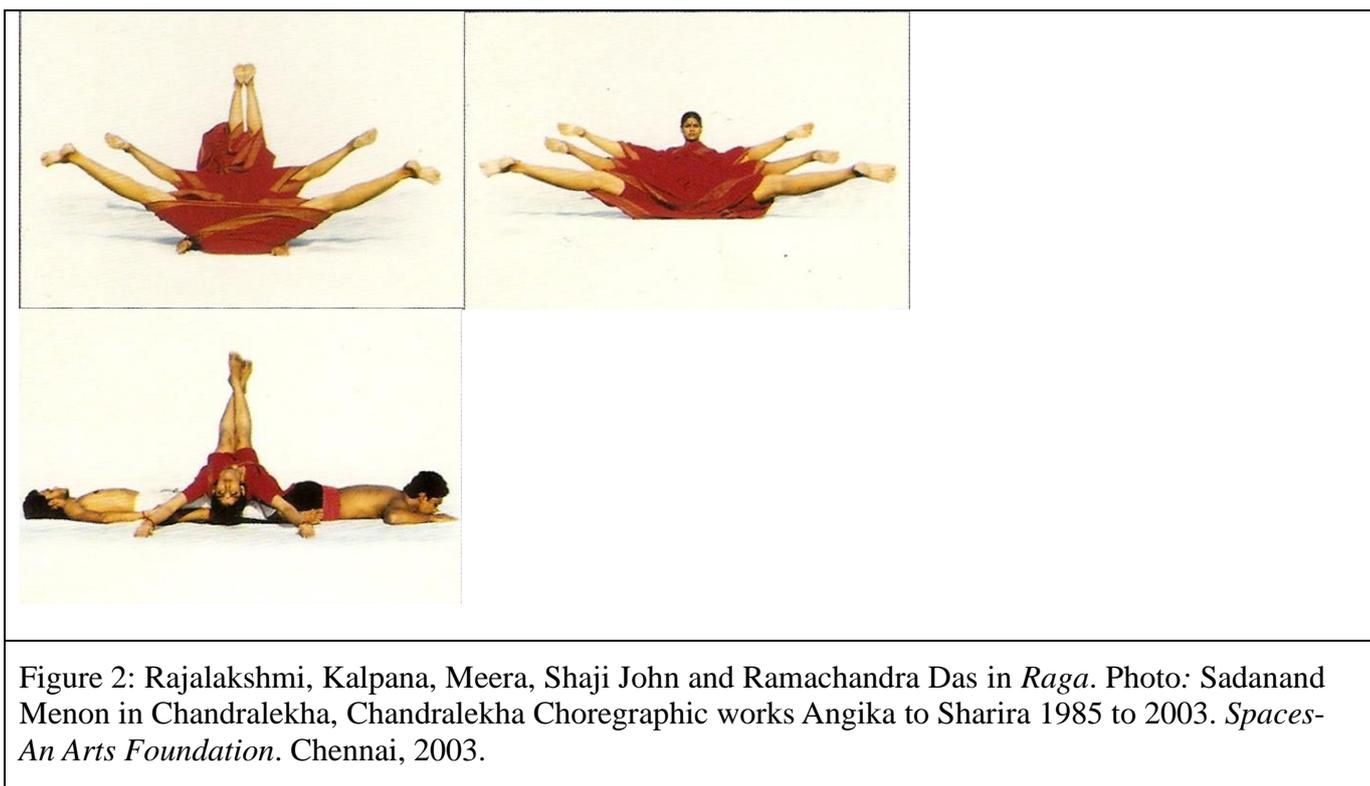


Figure 2: Rajalakshmi, Kalpana, Meera, Shaji John and Ramachandra Das in *Raga*. Photo: Sadanand Menon in Chandralekha, Chandralekha Choregraphic works Angika to Sharira 1985 to 2003. *Spaces-An Arts Foundation*. Chennai, 2003.

For Chandralekha, *Raga* is:

“An exploration of transformational areas of femininity in the bodies of men and

women, the slippage from states of solidity and discord to those of fluidity and harmony, the duality of the masculine and the feminine within the self, evoking an internal space in which the surge of the body defies the restraints of the mind-an elemental act of ‘becoming’” (Chandralekha 34).

In the annual review, *Attendance*, this show is considered the worst of 1998. The critic sees this creation as the only exhibition of the sexual act, apprehending this piece only at the first degree. It is understandable that the play has made the critics uncomfortable, preventing them from appreciating its aesthetics or glimpsing its symbolism. But it seems that the critic didn't read ancient texts. It is clear from the progression of criticism that it is the bodies that are disturbing. In *bharata-nāṭyam* dance, the dancers represent emotions through the *abhinaya*. Any subject can be evoked, and the spectator is transported into a sensitive experience related to his or her emotions. While Chandralekha will proceed exactly the opposite: only the bodies are called to represent the symbols, the faces of the dancers expressing nothing, displaying a perfect neutrality. She wishes to take the spectator into a universe that questions and upsets the audience, through the representation of primordial symbols and the shapes that the bodies draw in space.

According to Sadanand Menon, the choreographer Chandralekha wanted to restructure the bodies, considering that *bharata-nāṭyam* was disconnected from its origins. According to her, the dancers who were not concerned about these so-called origins did not inhabit their bodies, contenting themselves with learning without questioning it. Sadanand Menon reports that, for Chandralekha:

The dancers don't know how to stand, whose basic postures are all wrong, their spine is completely wrong”. She said: the young dancers who are coming to work with me, they might be graduated of Kalakshetra and all this, but their bodies are so weak, and their postures are so weak! I can't do the new ideas I have with this

kind of bodies; I need a new body. And the new body can happen only when the body learns to express its source of energy⁴.

To take the "opposite foot" of *bharata-nāṭyam*: freedom or resistance?

Choreographer Preethi Athreya is clearly in reaction to the image of the *bharata-nāṭyam* dancer to which she had to adhere for years. But for her, on the other hand, it is a question of building her own image, a singular identity. Thus, she does not wear jewellery or make-up. According to her, the dancer's body language is interfered with by ornament. Some other aspects of her dance are signs of resistance to *bharata-nāṭyam*. For example, she chooses to look the audience directly in the eyes in the Sweet Sorrow play.

In the piece *sweet Sorrow*, based on the text “*Douleur exquise*” written by French artist Sophie Calle, she also chooses to stay in a practice dance sari, a simple cotton fabric, under which she wears a blouse and shorts that does not cover her knees. In the last part of the piece, she makes passages on the floor: her legs reveal themselves and the sari is completely squeezed. I assisted her during the rehearsals when she was questioning this point, not really knowing how it would be perceived. She then made the choice to wear this suit.

Moreover, the choice of wearing the sari of practice for dancers can paradoxically shock the public who, seeing the dancers in an outfit normally worn to dance *bharata-nāṭyam*, will adopt postures that are not usual and that allow to glimpse or see parts of the dancers' bodies normally hidden.

She made the same choice as Chandralekha to keep this sari for costume, but her many movements on the ground show her legs (Figure 3) if she wears pants that are too short. She then

⁴ Sadanand Menon in Nancy Boissel-cormier, *Être artiste femme en Inde, à Chennai : Les nouvelles scènes du bharata-nāṭyam de 2003 à 2016*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Paris 8 University.

makes this observation about her choice, confident that she should certainly justify it to the audience. Because if floor passages are allowed nowadays in contemporary dance, they can disturb the audience if the dancer wears a sari⁵.



Figure 3 : Preethi Athreya in *Sweet Sorrow*, Chennai, 2010. ©Preethi Athreya.

In this photograph, we see that the movements made on the ground have the effect of lifting the practice sari, revealing the dancer's legs. In *Sweet Sorrow*, Preethi Athreya exits the stage in this posture, moving forward with her legs, leaving the rest of her body, head, and arms on the ground. In this particular case, the choreographer could not stay in the *bharata-nāṭyam* style to perform this movement. Indeed, the form does not allow you to "drag yourself down".

⁵ This ties in with Preethi Athreya's questioning of wearing the practice sari as she has a floor passage in *Sweet Sorrow*.

The gender issue:

The choreographer Chandralekha was politically engaged and part of a first feminist movement in India⁶. However, even if she was against the image conveyed by the *bharata-nāṭyam* dancer, she never tried to standardize the two genders. She has always distinguished them and highlighted their complementarity, which is highly present in Indian philosophy and in symbols such as *linga* and *yoni* for example.

On the other hand, choreographer Padmini Chettur does not differentiate between the male and female bodies in her productions. In her mixed creations, the viewer's view of the dancer is not a male view of women's bodies, since the costumes are neutral, and the choreographer positions the bodies in the same way in space. The movements are the same for all dancers and the neutrality it requires contributes to the fact that the gender is fading away. The spectator looks at bodies in space. She collaborates with male and female dancers for her two productions *Wall Dancing* as well as for the choreographic interventions within the *Pause/Play* project at Max Mueller Bhavan in Chennai on November 21 and 22, 2014.

Padmini Chettur took up some of the choreographed moments for the play *Wall Dancing* and worked on new sequences she called *animals*, with nine dancers, including herself. For this work, she was inspired by the work of sculptor Théo Jansen⁷ and imagined very slow dance paths, moving forward at the same pace to each other in different postures: standing on a staircase each on a step (Figure 4), on all fours, head to toe, in a corridor, or crawling flat on his stomach in an auditorium. The photos testify to the neutrality of the costume and the insignificance of the gender. All the dancers, three men and six women, are dressed in the same

⁶ On the work of Chandralekha, see the following writings: (Chatterjea 1998), (Bharucha 1995), (Chandralekha 2003).

⁷ Theo Jansen is a Dutch sculptor of the kinetic art movement, which is based on the art of movement through mobile works or optical illusions. His works are characterized by giant myriapods made of plastic tubes and (empty) bottles, moving thanks to the force of the wind.

way: blue jeans and a striped T-shirt. For the duo (Figure 5) that was also covered by *Wall Dancing*, Padmini Chettur choreographed for a man and a woman:



Figure 4 : “A group of dancers move in unison up the stairway,” Padmini Chettur. *Pause / Play*, Max Mueller Bhavan, Chennai, November 21st, 2014.



Figure 5 : “Two dancers negotiate the wall by moving in tandem”. Padmini Chettur, *Pause / Play*, Max Mueller Bhavan November 21st, 2014.

Conclusion:

Deifying a woman’s body is perhaps a way of making it “pure,” of removing any function linked to the flesh: if it is a sculpture in movement the woman can dance. But if it is a question of expressing oneself through the body in a freer way and without association to a deified image, it seems to be more difficult to make it accepted by a male public, the one that, according to many feminist studies, decides what will be danced on the contemporary scene in Chennai. The role of transmission is paramount in the ideas pointed out by some researchers such as Janeth O’Shea, Aishika Chakraborti, Urmimala Sarkar Munsu or Ananya Chatterjea to name a few. As dance has become a feminine universe, it is the women who seem to reproduce these codes themselves from generation to generation since the 1930s. Choreographer Chandralekha opened a new door for contemporary dance in India, followed by dancers such as Padmini Chettur and Preethi Athreya. Their works allow to think the body as lines, energy and dialogues between them and their contemporaneity, excluding the exclusive male gaze in the form.

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