“Beyond Bharatanatyam: Re-visions, Ruptures and Resistance in the Feminist Choreographies of Anita Ratnam and Mallika Sarabhai”

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Abstract

The South Indian neo-classical dance tradition of Bharatanatyam, a purposeful reconstruction of the temple dance tradition of by the bourgeois elite of society in Tamil Nadu in the 1930s, simultaneously fulfilled larger Nationalist, Orientalist and Anti-Orientalist objectives and typified the representation of the *Nayika* or heroine on the Indian performance stage. The traditional solo repertoire in Bharatanatyam performed almost exclusively by women, paradoxically renders the dancing female body invisible, and every emotion on stage is embodied as a heterosexual response of love and longing to an imaginary male character, usually a King or God. Further, every decision-maker in the construction of the *Nayika*, is predominantly male – the writers of the mythology, the storytellers, the *Gurus*, the composers, the choreographers, the critics, the musicians, the festival organizers and those responsible for funding decisions. Given this context, the Nayika becomes a disempowered figure, dancing to the desires (and tunes!) of a voyeuristic gaze.

In this thesis, I analyse the feminist works of two contemporary Indian performance-makers and dancers, Anita Ratnam and Mallika Sarabhai, whose choreographies occupy the charged space of the *beyond*. The political intertwining of gender and genre in Indian dance, constantly in a state of flux, becomes the liminal space of the *beyond* in their body of work, which stems from this web of significance as the base. Dwelling in the *beyond*, these dancers *re-vision* the dancing female body as a site of intersecting vectors of gender, race and nationality; *rupture* the imagined boundaries of form, structure, aesthetics, theme, content and scenography in Bharatanatyam; and perform an embodied *resistance* through a self-referential writing of the female dancer, allowing for her power and agency to be reflected on stage.

By means of an ethnographic inquiry, I read Ratnam's and Sarabhai's select feminist choreographies, conduct semi-structured interviews and adopt participant observation strategies to address how these artists contribute to a growing canon of contemporary woman-centric work. Their work is contextualised and critically framed drawing on discourses from dance studies, performance studies, gender studies, cultural theory, and postcolonial theory. In their performance analysis, I draw extensively on my own experience as a trained and practicing Bharatanatyam dancer in the field and the kinaesthetic models of knowing that underpin such training and practice. Through a subversion of the patriarchal (b)order of Bharatanatyam, I argue that Ratnam and Sarabhai negotiate a space for the rebellious dancing body in a postcolonial India to contest and map ideological notions of idealised Indian womanhood. As a result of an examination into how these

women are *choreographed by* culture, and how they in turn *choreograph* culture, a transformative politics of the racialized and gendered body begins to surface.

Statement of Authorship

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any University; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Dated: 17th September 2016

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Introduction

The inception of a contemporary dance movement in India was concurrent with the 20th century revival phase of Indian classical dance (Purkayashtha 2009). These 'classical' dance forms are themselves a neoteric construct, rightfully referred to by many academics, scholars and practitioners as "neo-classical" (Vatsyayan 1974; Meduri 1996; Chatterjea 1996). The purposefully invented 'classicism', re-imagined through an engagement with ancient Sanskrit writings in the transformation of a colonised India to an independent nation, is still highly revered in India and within the Indian diaspora. Several authors have pointed out that these classical dance forms are viewed as a traditional means through which one can understand their 'Indianness' and 'ancient' cultural heritage (Pillai 2002; Meduri 2008; Kumar 2011). It also fulfills the auxiliary function of fostering a sense of community. It is these modes of neo-classical expression that continue to dominate the dance landscape of India, and receive wide patronage and support. Indian contemporary performance praxis, in my view, largely remains the neglected sibling.

This thesis was initially motivated by an attempt to trace and theorise a genre of contemporary performance praxis in India today that drew upon the form, structure, aesthetics, theme, content and scenography in Bharatanatyam as starting as well as departure points for choreography. Being a Bharatanatyam practitioner myself, and having followed the works of Anita Ratnam and Mallika Sarabhai for decades, I was initially interested in studying choreographic processes, creative practices and aesthetic philosophies alone in the body of work of Ratnam and Sarabhai. My naïveté wore off quickly. My incisive analysis of their choreographies necessitated a study of interactions and relationships that existed between the aesthetic-cultural-social-political dimensions in the course of development of their unique performance praxis (Kassing 2007). This analysis redirected the course of my research as I began to unearth the radical body politics in their resistive choreographies that occupied the place beyond Bharatanatyam. Indeed, as Ratnam notes, their choreogra-

phies are considered “too classical for contemporary audiences and too contemporary for classical audiences” (2016, pers. communication). As a result, both women have come to occupy a middle ground charged by the influences available to them by the particular situation of their choreographies on the borderlands of Bharatanatyam. I was struck by the constant challenge to the strength of patriarchy in their repertoires, palpable in the performative ruptures of the Victorian-inspired values of harmony that form the bedrock of Bharatanatyam. These ruptures drew my specific attention to the intersections of gender and genre in their performance work and I became convinced of the need to re-vision the choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai through a feminist lens.

Chapter One: Setting the Stage

The objectives of the research, which will address existing gaps in knowledge, can be summarised as follows:

- Delineate the ways in which the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai are contemporary in relationship to the neo-classical, using the established syntax, grammar, vocabulary and modes of representation as starting as well as departure points for performance praxis
- Read the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai dwelling in the borderlands of Bharatanatyam with a specific focus on the dramaturgical devices and choreographic choices they make to shift, represent and embody contours of feminist consciousness
- Advocate an embodiment of resistive strategies in the contemporary dancing bodies of women of colour as a site for negotiation of gender-sensitive, gender-inclusive and gender-equitable spaces, on and off stage

I have specifically chosen to address the work of these two artists owing to a combination of reasons. I have drawn on the similarities in their approach to aesthetics and their individual choreographic signature to provide a framework for the reading of contemporary feminist choreographies that occupy complex 'in-between' spaces. Coming from a comparable caste-class-familial background, both women occupy relatively privileged positions in the dogmatic hierarchal classifications of Indian society. They have also been active in the dance circuit for comparable lengths of time and are committed to an embodied political commentary on the condition of Indian female

bodies in dance, in mythology and in society at large. Both women deploy a hybridised aesthetic and engage significantly with goddess mythologies. Unlike the Western accent of much contemporary dance in India, narrative remains an anchor in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. The linchpin of narrative is especially indispensable to the choreographies of Sarabhai as she models a brand of what I characterise as artivism that is concerned with using dance and performance to clearly communicate the need to create an equitable society for anyone othered in India on account of gender, caste, class, race, religion and/or their intersections. Although the combination of art and activism exists in visual, theatre and newly burgeoning performance art cultures in India, this merger is relatively rare in the dance landscape where themes, content and narratives exploring social justice are scant. Sarabhai has fashioned a paradigm for artivism through the re-imagination of the process, product and packaging of dance. On the other hand, Ratnam adopts more of an 'art for art's sake' approach and her signature *Neo Bharatam* aesthetic particularly draws on silence, breath, energies, stillness and the power of suggestion as counterpoints to the canon. I place these two women side by side so as to draw upon the parallels and divergences in their aesthetic philosophies, choreographic signatures and embodied politics in my argument for a hybrid, fluid and heterogeneous form of contemporary feminist performance praxis in India. Below there is a brief introduction to Ratnam and Sarabhai.

Anita Ratnam

Anita Ratnam is an actor, raconteur, dancer, performance-maker, cultural activist, curator and scholar. She has created her own organic style of contemporary performance praxis called *Neo Bharatam*, which she defines as her "own response to art and life from a singular and individual point of view" (2014, pers. communication). Ratnam (2003) labels herself as a "contemporary classicist", as her works retain an Indianness in temperament but remain distinctly contemporary in ex-

ecution. Her Neo Bharatam constantly evolves as her body's materialities and subjectivities respond to internal drives and external stimuli. Though most of her choreographies stem from a base in Bharatanatyam, Neo Bharatam is congenitally hybrid, drawing vocabularies/influences from multiple pan-Asian movement systems including, but not restricted to, Mohiniattam, Kathakali, Yoga, Kalaripayattu, Tai Chi, Butoh and Qi Gong. Widely known for her ferocity, she was proclaimed the "Trojan horse of feminists" by dancer Rajika Puri at the *Epic Women Conference/Performance Conclave* held in Chennai during December 2012. Women form the central motifs of all her hybridised performance work, and are analysed closely through the prism of performance, personal narratives and mythology.

Mallika Sarabhai

Mallika Sarabhai identifies herself as a "communicator", and this is the key characteristic that can be attributed to her multiple roles as dancer, choreographer, actor, writer, publisher, activist, politican and director of The *Darpana Academy of Performing Arts* in Ahmedabad, India (2014, pers. communication). Following in the footsteps of her mother, legendary dancer-activist Mrinalini Sarabhai, she is a crusader for social justice and champions the power of the arts to "change the world" (2009, *TED* talk). Her illustrious career as a dancer/choreographer spanning over two decades embarked with her critically acclaimed production *Shakti: The Power of Women* (1989). Prior to this, she spent the mid-1980's touring the world as the lead feminine/feminist character Draupadi in Peter Brook's The *Mahabharata*/Le *Mahabharata* and this tour was hugely influential in her return to dance after a long hiatus and commitment to the cause of female empowerment through the communicative power of her verbal/visceral performance works.

The first half of this thesis is dedicated entirely to contextualising the practice of Ratnam and Sarabhai through historicising Bharatanatyam and early experiments in contemporary dance in India, with a specific focus on the representations and negotiations of gender. I also spend a significant portion of time setting up the critical theories that inform my reading of the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. In Indian dance scholarship, there is a strong tendency to stay away from the subject of the dancing bodies itself. I hope my thesis will provide readers with a framework to fruitfully engage in a discussion about bodies, subjectivities and somatics in Indian dance. The latter half of this thesis is dedicated to a detailed dissection of four feminist choreographies each from the repertoires of Ratnam and Sarabhai. I clarify my choice of the select choreographies within the chapters in which they are discussed.

Chapter One unfolds by situating the perspective of the dancer-ethnographer and allowing the reader an access to her point of entry into the field. After setting out the research questions that frame this study, I set the stage by offering a herstoriographical overview of Bharatanatyam. This chapter traces the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam from the temple dance tradition of *Sadir* and examines the exclusion of the hereditary female practitioner from this transformation, along with the element of 'eroticism', later replaced by 'devotion'. In a circular fashion, the chapter also discusses the form, structure, aesthetics, theme, content and scenography of Bharatanatyam to enable the reader to make the connections of how the principles of Bharatanatyam have choreographed Ratnam and Sarabhai, and how the women in turn choreograph culture.

Chapter Two delves into the methodology, method and research design of the study and sets up the theoretical frames that substantiate the framework that follows in Chapter Three for reading the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. These theoretical frames provide particularly useful ways of addressing the verbal and the visceral in hybridised performance and have often illuminated processes at play that are not immediately apparent in the aesthetics of Ratnam and Sarabhai on initial viewing. Additionally, they have provided ways to discuss, analyse and interpret

such performance-texts within the domain of language by consciously paying heed to both the symbolic and the semiotic.

Chapter Three serves as a literature review, tracing early experiments of contemporary performance-makers in India whose aesthetics find resonances in the choreographic signatures of Ratnam and Sarabhai. In this chapter, I firmly situate the choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai in the contested space beyond Bharatanatyam by drawing on frames from postcolonial theory. I also clarify my use of the term *feminist choreographies* in the context of Indian dance and conclude this chapter by proposing an original framework for reading the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. I hope this framework will have applications in larger fields of choreographic inquiry in non-Western contemporary dance in the future.

Chapter Four dives into the poetics and politics in the art and activism of Mallika Sarabhai. I weave in details from my participant-observation on fieldwork at Darpana in the situation of the Sarabhai family within the wider context of the social, cultural and political milieu of Ahmedabad. I offer an interpretative analysis of four select feminist choreographies from Sarabhai's repertoire: *Sita's Daughters* (1990), *In Search of the Goddess* (2000), *The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya* (2001) and *Colours of the Heart* (2003). A portraiture of Sarabhai's transformative politics of hope emerges as a result.

Chapter Five investigates the contemporary classicism, feminist consciousness and transnational modernity of Anita Ratnam and her signature *Neo Bharatam* aesthetic. By paying detailed attention to process in the four select feminist choreographies from Ratnam's repertoire: *Ma3Ka… The Triad Supreme* (2009), *A Million SITA-S* (2010), *Avani - A Handful of Dust…*(2011) and *Padme* (2014, 2016), I discuss the subversive strategies of Ratnam in her embodied exploration of an aesthetic based on the materialities of the female body and the subjectivities of her selfhood.

Chapter Six concludes on an unorthodox note, much like the choreographies of the women I discuss, and I re-vision the conclusion as a persuasion for contemporary performance praxis in India

to serve as the breeding ground for gender equality through re-visions, ruptures and resistance of the master narrative in a society so deeply influenced by its cultures, myths and symbols.

1.1 There is a *Nayika* in my Mirror – An Autobiographical Narrative

A question I am often asked when I meet new people is "Ooh you sound so interesting! Where are you/is your accent from?", or variants of the same, accompanied with a puzzled facial expression. Sometimes, this is followed by speculation, a guessing game of sorts that brings up obscure propositions as diverse as Mexico, London, New York, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, Fiji and Malaysia. Truth be told, I hate these awkward exchange of interrogative introductions when you meet someone new. I think this is because they make me spell out my own internal dilemma. For the politics of location is never as straightforward as it may seem and is often complicated by factors such as, but not limited to, birth, race, nationality, border-crossings, and the effects of globalisation. The question of my accent leads me on to a larger crisis: what are the intersecting vectors that inform my identity and selfhood?

I have been told that the very beginning is a very good place to start, so let me rewind a couple decades. It was a cold dark winter's night in the year of 1989, with severe weather conditions typical of desert climate. On the 6th of October, I was born as the clock struck ten minutes past two in the morning at Adan Hospital, Kuwait. Prior to this, during a scan, my parents were informed that they were to have a baby boy. Along I came, altering their expectations and perceived reality, the first of what would eventually be many, many times to come. I grew up in a diasporic community, with my parents being actively engaged in community-based organisations within Kuwait that promoted the 'culture' of our country and state, and fuelled our spirit with national pride. I was also enrolled, like a good Indian child from a respectable Indian family, in every extra-curricular and co-curricular course that was on offer in the neighbourhood.

One such occasion was my first initiation into Bharatanatyam. I was a disciple of Ms. Sujatha Rajendran, herself a student of the legendary dancing couple, The Dhananjayans. Bharatanatyam in this day and age remains one of India's largest cultural exports, only second to the film and entertainment industry Bollywood. Diasporic communities all over the world send their little girls to dance class, for they believe it will teach their daughters all about India's 'rich cultural heritage and traditions', foster a sense of community and establish a class identity. Further, Bharatanatyam is largely viewed as a 'rite of passage' for young Indian girls transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. For many Hindu families, Bharatanatyam also becomes a means of religious education where stories from Hindu mythology, particularly the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, are passed on in the oral tradition and inform the theme, content and narratives of the traditional choreographies.

Sujatha Aunty painstakingly moulded my nimble hands and feet until the grammar of Bharatanatyam became part of my muscle memory. As I progressed, the anti-feminist ideologies that underlie the traditional Bharatanatyam repertoire were unintentionally passed on to me by my *Guru*, and became deeply embedded in my pores that exuded drops of sweat. These essentialised ideals of Indian femininity were imprinted on my growing body and consciousness. Since these ideologies were representative of the society that surrounded me—Kuwaiti women were only granted the right to vote and run for office in 2005—I neither questioned the monolithic representations of the passive woman in these mythological stories nor challenged their extreme objectification for the voyeuristic gaze of the male spectator on the performance stage. Not yet, anyway.

Fast forward to 2003. Kuwait is in a state of political instability owing to the invasion of Iraq by combined troops of major world leaders in an attempt to overthrow the rule of Saddam Hussein. With a heavy heart, I was forced to move to a (foreign) homeland in a matter of weeks, bidding goodbye to the only home (foreignland) I had known. Upon my return to India, it was immediately clear that despite my uncanny physical resemblance to the peoples of the state, I did not feel

like I belonged. Having felt like an insider-outsider in Kuwait all along, I was surprised at feeling the exact same way through this circumstantial displacement. It was then that the real split in my construction of 'I'dentity struck me for the first time, and it is an issue I have grappled with ever since. I was immediately enrolled in a private Christian high school and continued with my dancing lessons. I performed my *Arangetram* (solo debut) on the prestigious stage of The Madras Music Academy Mini Hall to a packed auditorium of family, friends and well-wishers, publicly acknowledging my 'rite of passage' much to the joy of my NRI parents.

Following this, I came under the tutelage of my current *Gurus*, Ms. Krishnakumari Narendran and Ms. Bragha Bessell, and performed widely in festivals across the state and country, both as a solo artist and as part of a touring ensemble. Being situated in Chennai (formerly Madras), I was fortunate to be based in the homeland of modern neo-classical Bharatanatyam and hence had the opportunity to attend numerous performances, festivals, performance conclaves and conferences. It was here that I extensively encountered the choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai and I was drawn to their hybridised aesthetic, layered metaphors/motifs and embodied politics. Particularly, I was struck by their fascinating representations of women—as subjects capable of restoring their voice, redeeming their vision and reclaiming their visibility. It led me to closely follow their performance works, public image and online presence for the following decade before I embarked upon doctoral study, and it is an engagement that I am sure will continue to live on for the rest of their dancing/choreographing careers.

I moved to the UK for a Masters degree and, for the very first time, I began to consider my own practice as a *Sishya* and dancer, i.e. how I was choreographed by culture and how I in turn performed culture. During the coursework for the MA, I had to complete a mini-dissertation and this was an eye-opener for me as it brought to bear the lack of theoretical, historical and critical methods of instruction and reflection within the pedagogical practices of Bharatanatyam within India and the diaspora. The project also made me question the politics of the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam

from *Sadir*, or devotional dancing within the temple, the intentional eradication of erotic and sensual elements from its repertory, the form's newly conferred 'classical' status, and above all, the identity and representation of the *Nayika* or heroine within the *Margam*.

Upon graduation, I worked with the Leeds City Council in the capacity of 'Project Assistant' on a multi-site, multi-art festival called *Light Night*, modelled after *Nuit Blanche* in Paris. The event programming involved a range of mainstream and alternative art forms that were conceptualised in collaborative and interdisciplinary ways. All the events curated were site-specific, and got me thinking about *performance site* and *body as site* in Indian dance and the complex network of relationships between these two places of performance. This exposure to transnational, avant-garde and contemporary forms of performance around my travels convinced me of my already-held speculation that Bharatanatyam vocabulary has immense potential for meaning-making, abstraction, cross-cultural dialogue, activism and social change in contemporary contexts.

Just as my accent has picked up hints from everywhere I have lived, owing to displacement, migration, educational choices and travel (physically and through the world accessible on the internet), I similarly believe that kinaesthetic traces and cultural codes are imprinted on the body and consciousness through our experiences in transnational spaces and through transnational encounters. As Hetherington notes, "Identity is about both similarity and difference. It is about how subjects see themselves in representation, and about how they contrast differences within that representation and between it and the representation of others" (1998, 15). Hence, identities are never fixed but are continuously in the process of *becoming*, as they are shaped and re-shaped by the interactive forces of the self and the society. All these factors work together to constitute our identity and it is to be understood as a *fluid* construction.

I borrow the term "cosmopolitan patriot" from cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah to understand my identity, an identity I have made peace with over the years (2008). He states, "I have been arguing, in essence, that you can be cosmopolitan – celebrating the variety of human cultures;

rooted – loyal to one local society (or a few) that you count as home; liberal – convinced of the value of the individual; and patriotic – celebrating the institutions of the state (or states) within which you live" (2008, 106). I also use this term as a way to construe the identities of the selected practitioners I am examining. Whilst I do acknowledge that their intersecting identity vectors inform the embodied politics of their body of work, I am not concerned with their in-depth identity politics *per se*. Rather, I am interested in how female identities are represented within the bounds of traditional Bharatanatyam and how Ratnam and Sarabhai *re-vision*, *rupture* and *resist* these identities in their *feminist choreographies* that dwell *beyond Bharatanatyam*.

1.2 Research Questions

In this thesis, I am committed to analysing how the constructs of gender and genre inform each other in contemporary dance discourses in India, particularly in the feminist choreographies of Anita Ratnam and Mallika Sarabhai. I locate the dancing bodies of these women of colour as sites of intersection of nationalism, transnationalism, postcolonialism, classicism, modernism and feminism, and I examine their repertoires as embodiments of a transformative politics. My primary research question is:

How can the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai be situated in relationship to Bharatanatyam within the landscape of Indian dance discourses?

I endeavour to answer the following subsidiary questions through a detailed reading, analysis and interpretation of a representative body of work of Ratnam and Sarabhai that I encounter and engage with during the process of ethnographic inquiry:

- How can Indian contemporary dance be understood on its own terms, without the translocation of concepts, such as classicism, modernism and postmodernism, used in the context of Western dance discourses?
- What is a possible framework for re-visioning the transgressive bodily writings of Ratnam and Sarabhai?
- How do Ratnam and Sarabhai rupture the imagined boundaries of form, structure, aesthetics, theme, content and scenography to map and contest ideological notions of idealised Indian womanhood?
- What are the resistive strategies adopted by Ratnam and Sarabhai to subvert the representation of the *Nayika* on stage as passive object and re-imagine her instead as active subject?
- What might be the wider implications of this study to issues concerning the condition of women in Indian society today?

1.3 Bharatanatyam: A Herstoriographical Overview

Previous research by dance history scholars has established that the past and the present are constantly in conversation, shaping and reshaping each other repeatedly at every moment in time (Berg 1999). This section attempts to position Bharatanatyam historically, culturally and *au courant*. The problematic nature of the breadth of this positioning is duly acknowledged and this section will provide an overview of the social, political and historical events that underpin the framing of Bharatanatyam and its aesthetics. This sketch of Bharatanatyam is imperative to making sense of the readings of Ratnam and Sarabhai in the flow of this thesis. Lopez Y Royo (2003) asserts that the experiences of an Indian dancer's training and quest for roots are entwined. Hence, my personal

engagement with Bharatanatyam as a performer informs the critical commentary of this analysis, in conjuction with views of scholars and practitioners.

The government-funded national academy of the arts in India, *The Sangeet Natak Academy*, identifies eight Indian dance forms as 'classical', namely Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Mohiniyattam, Odissi, Manipuri and Sattriya. Although no documentary evidence exists on the basis for this classification, there is widespread consensus within India and in the diaspora on the recognition of these forms as classical. The Sanskrit texts on Indian theatre are identified as the common base on which these forms are built. The nucleus for all the aforementioned Indian 'classical' dance forms can be traced to The *Natyasastra*. The *Natyasastra* is an all-encompassing treatise on Indian drama, dance and music believed to have been written between the 2nd Century BC and the 2nd Century CE (Vatsyayan 1996). The authorship of the text has been ascribed to Sage Bharata. Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana,* an important post-Bharata discourse, tracing its roots to the 2nd Century CE, is also regarded as an exhaustive manual on Indian stagecraft. Although it is speculated that strict adherence to this canonical literature on stagecraft is what qualifies an Indian dance form as 'classical', the reality is far more complex.

The three fundamental elements that serve as a common denominator to all the classified Indian classical dance forms and significantly inform the hybridised practice of Ratnam and Sarabhai are:

i. *Nritta* – Pure/abstract element. Limited to the interpretation of rhythm through the execution of specific combinations of *adavus* (basic stepping patterns), *jathis* (sequences of adavus) and sculpturesque poses
ii. *Natya/Abhinaya* – Emotive element. Leads to the conveyance of an idea, theme, emotion or event to the spectator through a combination of hand gestures and facial expressions

iii. *Nritya* – Dramatic element. Achieved through a synthesis of *Nritta* and *Natya/Abhinaya* and aimed at the narration of a story

Bharatanatyam is the most popular amongst the Indian classical dance styles today, and is widely practiced in India and within the Indian diaspora located around the globe. In fact, Bharatanatyam is recognised as one of the potent cultural exports of Asia into the Western world.

Aspects of oral training and performance aesthetics that are characteristic of Bharatanatyam are widely adopted in the West, resulting in fusion forms such as 'Tap Natyam', 'Hip Hop Natyam' and 'Bfusion'. Bharatanatyam also features in Bollywood, where gestures, footwork and glances from the repertoire find their way into catchy tunes and glamorous routines. Even more problematically, Bharatanatyam is available for appropriation as it makes its way through global borders, featuring in Western music videos such as *Hymn For The Weekend* by British soft rock band Coldplay and American singer/songwriter/producer Beyoncé. Watching Beyoncé wear a flower crown and perfectly form the *Hamsasyo Mudra* with her index finger coming into contact with her thumb, whilst the other three fingers remained stretched out gracefully as Chris Martin crooned of his angel in the music video left a deep impression on me for the excessive exoticism and 'poverty porn' of the video. With a long history of shifts and remodeling that the reader will encounter in this chapter, it is not astonishing that Bharatanatyam is considered a dynamic art form (Pillai 2002, O'Shea 2007). However, by and large, Bharatanatyam in India and the diaspora today remains heralded as a 'classical' dance form, a timeless tradition and a cultural artefact to be 'preserved'. The preferred venue for the performance of Bharatanatyam in the present era is the proscenium theatre stage, but this has not always been the case.

The dance tradition has its roots in the dance of the *Devadasis*, literally translated as 'servants of god'. *Devadasis* were a particular sect of women of a traditional hereditary lineage attached to temples and royal courts prior to the late 19th/early 20th century (Meduri 1988; Sarkar

Munsi 2011; Soneji 2011; Weidman 2008). The *devadasis* were usually highly educated, propertied and married to the deity of a particular temple. This unusual social set up allowed them to practice free sexual relations. The ritualistic dance tradition performed by this sect of women was termed as *Sadir* (alternatively known as *Dasi Attam*).

Sadir was practiced as a solo dance form and was safeguarded by the *devadasi* community. This dance form was fostered and nurtured within the Indian temple walls, which were considered an archive of the treasure of arts, particularly music, dance and sculpture, that flourished in India prior to the colonial period. This is best illustrated through an example. The Chidambaram temple in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu with *Lord Nataraja* (Shiva in the form of a cosmic dancer performing the *Ananda Tandava* or Dance of Bliss) as its main deity is a living and breathing archive. Myth has it that Shiva and his consort Kali engaged in a dance battle on the very site that this temple was built. Myth also has it that Shiva performed the *Urdhva Tandava* where he stood on one leg and lifted the other vertically above his shoulder. Owing to modesty of wearing a skirt as a woman, Kali could not follow suit, leaving Shiva the winner of the battle. The *gopuram* (outer hall) of this temple is ornamented with the statues of the 108 *Karanas* (units of dance formed by the co-ordinated movements of the head, torso and limbs) in chronological order, accompanied by relevant passages from the *Natyasastra*. In ancient times, the Chidambaram temple housed *devadasis* of the hereditary lineage. Today, the temple is also the venue of the Chidambaram *Natyanjali*, the premier religious classical dance festival in India. The walls of this temple are the sole witnesses of generations of dancers, and it is worth thinking about the incapability of the archive to capture the embodied experiences of the dancing bodies moving through this space in different periods of time (Taylor 2003). Scholarship in dance and performance studies has recognised the importance of paying attention to this muscle memory in the recent era. Just as previous research has showed us that the transition of *Sadir* to Bharatanatyam has offered key insights on the colonial and nationalist processes at play in the elimination of the *devadasi*, I also believe that the transition illuminates patri-

archal processes that were effected in this process of 'reconstruction'. I argue that the repertoire of Ratnam and Sarabhai is an embodied rebuttal of sorts to this 'reconstruction' and their choreographies deserve careful consideration.

Sadir also received tremendous royal patronage in Southern India. A key moment in the history of *Sadir* in Tamil Nadu is the development of the *Margam* (a concert format of performance) for the *devadasis*, evolved by *The Tanjore Quartet*[1] under the aegis of King Serfoji II (1777-1832). The *Margam* was an important antecedent to the reconstruction and revival of Bharatanatyam (Puri 2003). The complexity of this reconstruction and revival will be discussed in length at a later part of this chapter. The *Margam* was translocated in the transition from *Sadir* to Bharatanatyam as the ideal format for performance on the proscenium theatre stage. However, the *Margam* went through a 'cleansing' process so as to eradicate elements of sensuality, sexuality and erotica from its arc of performance. Instead, these elements of *Sringara* (erotics) were replaced with *Bhakti* (devotion) so as to maintain the 'dignity' of the dance. The *Margam* is a repertory structure beginning with the invocatory item called *Alarippu* and culminating with the concluding item called *Thillana* performed by a solo dancer, traditionally female. The *Margam* takes anywhere between 90 and 150 minutes to perform, and dominates the classical dance landscape even today as the primary choice of public performance. The majority of dance pieces within the *Margam* are centered on mythical narratives from Hindu Mythology. Coupled with these facts is the widespread notion that the performance of a *Margam* is the true test of a dancer's mettle. The conventionally practiced format of a *Margam* is as follows:

1. *Pushpanjalai* – Literally translated as 'an offering of flowers'. The dancer initially pays her respects to the almighty, her *Guru* and the audience. The dancer also pays her respects to the ground she performs on, offering her sincere apologies for stamping on Mother Earth

[1] Four brothers who contributed significantly to Carnatic music and structured a concert format of performance for *Sadir* in 19th century South India. The brothers were Chinnaiah, Ponniah, Sivanandam and Vadivelu.

2. *Alarippu* – Literally translated as ‘blooming flower’, as this illusion is created in the choreography. It is a preparatory segment where the dancer uses *Nritta* as a form of warm-up of the mind, body and soul
3. *Jathiswaram* –A *Nritta* item set to tune in a specific rhythm. There is no underlying narrative or mood, and the purpose of this dance piece is the production of aesthetic pleasure. *Jathiswaram* is a creative illustration of the musical patterns
4. *Shabdam* – A dance piece in praise of a deity/ruler. It is the piece in a *Margam* where *Abhinaya* is introduced for the first time. The movements are graceful and limpid, using a combination of pure footwork, literal word–by–word translation of lyrics and methods of story-telling
5. *Varnam* – Central and most elaborate piece of the repertory. It is considered the *piéce-de-résistance* of the traditional recital and is inclusive of diverse techniques of Bharatanatyam movement vocabulary and choreography concepts. The *Varnam* has a central narrative and weaves *Nritta, Natya* and *Abhinaya* around this narrative. Within a traditional structure, the *Varnam* provides plentiful opportunities to maximise the creative potential of the choreographer-performer
6. *Padam* – Centered around the theme of love, *Padams* are monologues where the character of the heroine, the friend and the hero are performed by the solo artist. *Sringara Bhakti,* or the ‘purest’ form of love that unites the mortal with the immortal, forms the core of a *Padam*. *Padams* are highly suggestive and allow for a wide range of emotions, expressions and feelings to be explored. *Padams* are sung in a slow tempo and use movements that meander with the imagination of the viewer
7. *Keerthanam* – Dances of devotion to specific gods/goddesses. The aim is to evoke utter reverence amongst the body of audience to a particular god/goddess by dancing of his/her glories, as outlined in Hindu mythology

8. *Javali* – Portray nonchalant aspects of love in a light-hearted manner. As opposed to the intensity of *Padams*, *Javalis* convey messages in an almost playful, lighter vein
9. *Thillana* – Primarily a *Nritta* item where nimble movements are performed to an array of rhythmic structures interspersed by frozen poses, resembling those of temple statues. The *Thillana* is a dance of sheer joy and forms the concluding item in a solo dance recital
10. *Mangalam* – Immediately following the *Thillana*, a short prayer to the family deity is offered where the dancer prays for the well-being of the supporting orchestra and the audience

This repertory structure is a format for public performance by a solo dancer, and is reflective of the different stages of the dancer's consciousness. The dance pieces in a *Margam* are highly structured, following from *Carnatic Music* (classical music of South India) compositions to which they are choreographed. They all have a *pallavi, anupallavi* and *charana,* literally signifying a beginning, middle and end (Banerjee 2005). In speaking on the *Margam*, the legendary exponent of the *devadasi* style, T. Balasaraswati, observed in her presidential address at the 33rd Annual Conference of the *Tamil Isai Sangam*:

> The Bharatanatyam recital is structured like a great temple: we enter the gopuram (outer hall) of Alarippu, cross the ardhamandapam (halfway hall) of Jatiswaram, then the mandapam (great halls) of Sabdam, and enter the holy precinct of the deity in Varnam. The varnam is a continuum which gives ever expanding room to the dancer to delight in her self-fulfillment, by providing the fullest scope to her own creativity as well as the tradition of the art.
>
> Padas now follow. In dancing to Padas, one experiences the containment, cool and quiet of entering the sanctum from its external precinct. Then the Thillana breaks into movement like the final burning of camphor accompanied by a measure of din and bustle. In conclusion, the devotee takes to heart the god he has glorified outside; and the dancer completes the traditional order by dancing to a simple devotional verse. (1984)

Celebrated NRI dancer Mythili Prakash expresses the view that the *Margam* is a repertory structure that exhibits the varied features of the dance form in an intrinsic arc that complements both the physical and emotional exploration of the performer over the duration of the performance (2011, pers. communication). Veteran dancer and *Guru* V P Dhananjayan advocates the scope and flexibility of the *Margam*, stressing its potential to include male-centered performance and broader thematic content (cited in Rajan 2011). He is of the opinion that changing audience tastes and new themes can be accommodated within the format of the *Margam*. An example of this view put into practice is Srinidhi Chidambaram's choreography *Chennai – A traditional Margam* (2009), where pieces from the repertory structure were composed to include verses that revelled in the beauty and spirit of the city of Chennai, rather than compositions in praise of a male deity. Many classical dancers, especially within India, have affirmed this widely believed timelessness and contemporary relevance of the *Margam*. However, other artists and performance-makers contest the relevance of the *Margam* in India today, including its long and unwieldy structure, lack of choreographic freedom, religious themes, antiquated narratives, linear progressions and gender representations. For instance, Anita Ratnam claims that the *Margam* is not suited to today's times, as it is lengthy and unwieldy for both performers and audiences. She does acknowledge the *Margam* as "a genius construct for its time", but emphasises the dire need to revisit the *Margam* (2011, pers. communication). South Asian dance scholar Avanthi Meduri articulately captures this ideology:

> As long as Shiva's theoretical dancing snake continues to frame Indian dance, its mesmerizing power, which resides in the Indian heart, will, I believe, overpower and negate the contemporary performance phenomena. The practice of Bharatanatyam has for a variety of secular reasons broken the bounds of ancient theory. I think we need a post-colonial aesthetic, a theory that can describe and evaluate the secular reality of dance in all its marvelous multiplicity. (1988, 20)

The *Margam* is still the cardinal reference point for a Bharatanatyam dancer and forms the core of his/her training, choreography and performance engagement with the movement vocabulary. N Pattabhi Raman, Editor in Chief of *Sruti* magazine, a monthly magazine on Indian Performing Arts, questions the central issue that still looms large when he asks whether Bharatanatyam is a comprehensive movement vocabulary or a coherent array of compositions (cited in O'Shea 2007).
The feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai contribute to the development of this post-colonial aesthetic that Meduri calls for, and I attempt to theorise their individual trajectories to this "marvelous multiplicity" by addressing paradigmatic concerns, frameworks for analysis and re-visionary readings of their repertoires, which are a far cry from the traditional structure of the *Margam*. Nonetheless, a detailed analysis of their feminist choreographies finds resonances, deconstructions and subversions of the *Margam* in ways that suture the text and heal the flesh in Bharatanatyam.

The revival of Indian classical dance is set within the larger framework of the nationalist phase in the early 20th century in India, and the concept of 'dancing woman' became deeply tied with an exotic and spiritual identity of the Orient (Chakravorty 2000). It is crucial to note that the upper-class Victorian-educated aristocrats, as a way of 'purifying' the art form, spearheaded this revival. The aim was to contextualise, textualise, canonise and codify the art form, thereby pronouncing it as 'classical' and elevating it to a 'high' art status, much like the image attached to Ballet in Western societies (Bharucha 1995; Meduri 1996; O'Shea 2007). The purposeful re-imagination of the dance form by the bourgeois elite, set against the backdrop of colonisation, stigmatised the role of the *devadasi,* who was completely removed from this process. Thus, many scholars and practitioners rightfully refer to Bharatanatyam as a "neo-classical" dance form, given the double bind of its renaissance (Vatsyayan 1974; Meduri 1996; Chatterjea 1996; Lopez Y Royo 2003; Purkayastha 2014).

The nominal and structural transformation of *Sadir* into Bharatanatyam and the complex aesthetic, social, cultural and political tensions surrounding this transformation have been the subject of much scholarly attention (Coorlawala 1992, 2004; Gaston 1996; Meduri 1996; Soneji 2011; Srinivasan 1983). The *anti-nautch* (literally, anti-dance) movement led by the British missionaries worked tirelessly with the support of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi (who interestingly hailed from the *devadasi* lineage herself) to abolish dance, as it was widely looked down upon by the nationalists and the imperialists (Rahman 2001). Reddi was a medical practitioner, social reformer and legislator and was committed to uplifting women. She was convinced that the *devadasis* were oppressed as prostitutes and presented a bill in the national assembly in the year 1930. The hereditary practice of the *devadasis* received a severe blow when the bill was passed into law in 1947, thereby outlawing *Sadir*. There was significant opposition to this criminalisation of *Sadir* by members of the Indian National Congress, one of the two major political parties in India, governing on the basis of its stated commitment to secularism, pluralism, and multiplicity. This intersection of colonialism, anti-colonialism and nationalism forms the backdrop against which the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam took place with vigor in a deliberate effort to construe the dance form as a 'classical' art. Certain eminent figures at the heart of this Bharatanatyam revival are E. Krishna Iyer, V. Raghavan, and Rukmini Devi Arundale. O'Shea (2007) also acknowledges the role played by American modern dancer Ruth St. Denis, Russian prima ballerina Anna Pavlova and Indian modern dancer Uday Shankar in this renaissance, suggesting they brought widespread attention to neglected Indian arts.

The disjunctures of the Indian classical dance renaissance will always be striking because, on the one hand, Bharatanatyam was re-conceptualised as a sign of cultural identity reflecting India's 'Sanskritised' Hindu spirit and, on the other, the traditional practitioners of this art were forced out of practice, thereby driving them into acts of prostitution and other desperate means of livelihood. T. Balasaraswati was the only performer of the *devadasi* lineage to successfully perform on a concert stage post-revival phase. The *devadasi* is what Taylor refers to as a product of "cultural

memory", her body projected by racialised and gendered conventions of both unique and unified identity (2003). Natarajan (2011) in her thesis titled *Another stage in the life of the nation: Sadir, Bharatanatyam, Feminist Theory*, refers to the body of the *devadasi* as the centralised site of ritual, art and economics. To demonstrate this, Natarajan provides illustrations of the links between cultic ritual, Carnatic music, and concubinage through which the *devadasi* was able to map her body as a site of religious devotion, creative artistry, and monetised sexuality. It is fascinating to also keep in mind that the *devadasis* were typically a matriarchal and matrilineal sect of society, which placed them in stark contrast with the patriarchal values of Indian Nationalist frameworks and British Orientalist ideologies. As stated earlier, these women were educated, propertied and married to the deities of particular temples, which allowed them to practice free sexual relations in society. Hence, it is clear that their marginalisation was a deliberate act of politics in the wake of Indian independence and the construction of the woman as an embodiment of a particular type of idealised Indian femininity. Therefore, gender, genre and politics have been inextricably entwined since the renaissance of Bharatanatyam.

The male mentors trained the *devadasis* in *Sadir* exclusively through the oral tradition. However, the transformation of *Sadir* into Bharatanatyam took place through a revisitation of the ancient treatise the *Natyasastra*, commonly considered the fifth Veda. Elements from the accounts of post-Bharatha commentators, such as Nandikesvara (2nd Century CE), Abhinavagupta (10th Century CE) and Sarangadeva (13th Century CE) were also employed in what Bharucha terms the "invention" of Bharatanatyam (1995). This invention, as previously noted, also included the deliberate eradication of elements deemed as inappropriate or vulgar. Rukmini Devi Arundale's pursuit to incorporate *Bhakti* (devotion, which she believed was the highest form of love) as *Sringara* (the flavor of love), in place of the sensual essence of *Sringara* in Bharatanatyam, was considered by many to be her biggest contribution to this emerging neo-classicism. South Asian dance scholar Avanthi Meduri is critical of this transformation, "Dance in the early twentieth century, both in the temple

and outside of it, was being defined; it seems to me, in the shabby clothes of 'respectability', but not its autonomy, and definitely not for its own sake" (1988, 7). Sadly, in the undercurrent of a right-wing political environment in twenty-first century India and nostalgic imaginations circulating within the global diaspora, these clothes of respectability have continued to further layer Bharatanatyam to the point of suffocation. Burdened by the weight of commandments of creed, harking back to histories and pressures to remain 'unpolluted' as female dancing bodies of colour occupy transnational and global spaces, Bharatanatyam has become a prisoner of its own ideologies.

In the early twentieth century, while Rukmini Devi Arundale took it upon herself (with the assistance of her Brahmin peers) to 'purify' the art form, T. Balasaraswati sought tirelessly to maintain the 'purity' of the art form. T. Balasaraswati, a contemporary of Arundale from the *devadasi* lineage, was the only successful hereditary practitioner to make the transition to a concert stage and consistently reiterated her stance that the portrayal of love in dance was not salacious, but a mere representation of life itself (Knight 2010). She was determined to retain the inherent traditional elements of the form that had been passed down through the repertoire of her *devadasi* lineage and emphasised the innate divinity of the form, claiming that there is nothing to be purified (Meduri 1988). The two dancers were presented on national and international stages as prime examples of India's culture, but approached the treatment of Bharatanatyam from divergent philosophical and ideological perspectives, and these seemingly divergent perspectives subjected them to the scrutiny of many scholars (Allen 1997; O'Shea 1998; Meduri 2004).

Though Rukmini Devi Arundale regarded tradition as the doctrine of Bharatanatyam, she incorporated innovations wherever she felt necessary, especially in her role at the helm of affairs at *Kalakshetra*, an arts institution she founded in 1936, still the premier institution for education and performance of the Kalakshetra style of Bharatanatyam in Chennai. Samson (2010) reminds the reader of this in her biography by providing instances where Arundale adapted *Kootambalam* (a

traditional Kerala theatre) to the contemporary needs of performance at Kalakshetra and introduced women to the practice of conducting, i.e. wielding the cymbals—until then the sole domain of the men. She also pioneered the composition of dance-dramas in Bharatanatyam which, in her opinion, arose from established tenets of art and beauty (Ramnarayan 1984). Having been an ardent lover of Ballet and even a brief student of Pavlova and prima ballerina Cleo Nordi, these tenets of art and beauty were no doubt influenced by the formalism of Ballet that Arundale encountered on her many international travels. Bharatanatyam, as it emerged from the practices framed by Rukmini Devi Arundale, has a highly codified language and system of aesthetics that is passed down through the transmission of oral practice and embodied knowledge in the *Guru-Sishya* (master teacher-disciple) format. Customarily, tutelage is commenced at a very young age under the counsel of a *Guru*. Sally Ann Ness captures the basal complexity of the variegated uses of gestures and symbols in Bharatanatyam:

> Bharatanatyam tradition includes an expressive, interpretive tradition that is explicitly symbolic, and even conceptual in character. The gestures of Bharatanatyam express discrete, intelligible, linguistically equivalent terms to an understanding audience. Its gestures may express term – relational symbolism to its audiences as well, often in simultaneous combination with narratives being articulated in vocal music. (2008, 19)

The detailed structure of movement techniques and conventions of practice are taught step-by-step through the transmission of a gestural vocabulary involving *adavus* (stepping/movement patterns), *mudras/hastas*[2] (hand gestures) and *Abhinaya* (facial expressions). All these elements are further classified into numerous sub-divisions. For example, the category of *mudras/hastas* alone are further classified into 28 single hand gestures, 23 double hand gestures, 16 gestures denoting gods/goddesses, 9 planetary gestures (to denote the Navagraha or the nine deities/nine planets that re-

[2] Refer Appendix A for a detailed account of the single hand gestures in Bharatanatyam, useful for the non-specialized reader to follow the descriptions and analyses of the choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai

volve around the sun), and 10 incarnation gestures (to denote the ten *avatars* of Lord Vishnu). Each hand gesture has various purposes and applications, termed *Biniyogas*, which must be grasped in totality by the *Sishya*. Ratnam and Sarabhai often deconstruct and alienate the gestures in their feminist choreographies in an effort to push form to the edge of the possible.

In her critically acclaimed translation of Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana*, Coomaraswamy (1917) characterises gestures based on the original Sanskrit text as *angika* (bodily), *vachika* (vocal), *aharya* (ornamental) and *satvika* (emotional). The bodily gestures are further categorised as gestures of the limb, gestures of various parts of the body, and gestures of facial features. Ketu H. Katrak (2008) delineates the multifarious and myriad uses of gestures in Bharatanatyam as *expressive* (gestures that inform the *Nritta* vocabulary)*, representative* (gestures employed for the purpose of story-telling from Indian mythology) and *emblematic* (gestures that construe the frame of mind/emotions of the character being portrayed). All these gestures are indispensable to the modes of production of Ratnam and Sarabhai and the gestures themselves become elements for interrogation in their focus on the productive apparatus of form.

There are two modes of representation in Bharatanatyam: *Lokadharmi* or realistic representation and *Natyadharmi* or theatrical representation. It is worth noting here that, despite their differences, Rukmini Devi Arundale and T. Balasaraswati both evidence their preference for the precedence of *Natyadharmi* over *Lokadharmi* (Meduri 1988). Rather than a literal translation of the narrative, they believed in improvised sections that drew out the sub-text of the compositions and allowed for metaphorical interpretations. This was achieved through focusing on the emotion of the music over the phrasal aspect of the composition, which in turn brought out a plethora of emotions in the performance (Banerjee 2005). Ratnam and Sarabhai, on the other hand, extensively employ *Lokadharmi* or realistic representation in postmodern ways, as will be detailed in Chapter Three.

The discourses on Indian classical dance, following on from the treatise of the *Natyasastra*, also clearly demarcates *Tandava,* the masculine aspect, and *Lasya*, the feminine aspect of the form.

The *Tandava* aspect consists of movements that are hard, strong and palpable and the *Lasya* aspect consists of movements that are soft, fluid and graceful. A *Sishya* is trained in both aspects of the form and frequently has to alternate between the gender binaries, but because of the extensive use of the *Lasya* aspect within the *Margam,* intangible codes of behaviour are imprinted on the bodies of female dancers that are later replicated in social interactions. Even more problematic, in India a Bharatanatyam dancer is expected to 'behave' a certain way in society at large—the unwritten rules, palpable in society, expect them to don traditional attire, possess a graceful gait, fall on the feet of older dancers/seasoned artists/*Gurus* to seek their blessings, and a host of other such prescribed etiquette. These only further oppress the minds/bodies of dancers and eliminate spaces for critical thinking and interventions.

The Bharatanatyam dancer in India and the diaspora today performs his/her *Arangetram*, commonly known as a solo debut, to a body of audience comprised of family, relatives and friends after several years of rigorous training. The theatre stage has a presiding deity, usually *Lord Nataraja* (Lord Shiva in the form of a cosmic dancer) and, prior to the performance, fruit, flowers and incense, along with the dancer's *Salangai* (ankle bells), are offered to the deity in prayer. A live orchestra supports the dancer with the dancer's *Guru* as the head, conducting the performance. A *Margam* is performed for the *Arangetram* and seasoned artists are invited to bless the dancer and speak a few words on the performance. Food is always served to all the guests post-performance. This 'rite of passage' marks the graduation performance of a dancer, exhibiting the dancer's bodily strength, mental endurance and spiritual awakening. The preparation and execution of an *Arangetram* has often been compared to the ceremonial traditions of a Hindu marriage. It is important here to accentuate that *Arangetram* is only the first step in the journey of Bharatanatyam, and not an exhibition of mastery.

From novice techniques to advanced choreography, the *Sishy*a impersonates the *Guru* and imitates every nuance of their seniors. The *Sishya*'s skill is honed through repeated daily practice of

even the most elementary techniques, until they are converted into one's body knowledge—accessible for use "unthinkingly" (Zarrilli 2011). Sklar concurs with Zarrilli, expressing the view that the "virtual gesture" of Bharatanatyam slowly shifts into a lived reality for the dancer and accumulates as part of their embodied memory, thereby becoming instinctively available for choreography and creation (2008, 90**).** This embodied and cultural memory is accessed for the making of performance works, albeit within the scope of the *Margam*, when the *Sishya* is directed by a rehearsal director in the studio and/or ventures into choreography. The *Sishya* is also slowly mentored to actualise the *Bhava/Rasa* aesthetic that is central to the aesthetics of artistic practices in India.

The *Rasa* theory in its most basic interpretation identifies the performing artist as someone who depicts *Bhava* (the state of being/doing) with complete awareness of every moment in the context of theatre. The *Rasa* refers to a reflection on the part of the spectators with tasteful sensibilities that will result in a state of aesthetic bliss (Coorlawala 2010). Interestingly, Ratnam and Sarabhai adopt a body-based *Rasa* as a counterpoint to the *Rasa* born out of pure facial expression in classical dance. I will discuss their specific orientations to *Rasa* in Chapter Three. The states of *Rasa* annotated in The *Natyasastra*:

i. *Shringaram* – Eroticism
ii. *Hasyam* – Laughter
iii. *Raudram* – Fury
iv. *Karunyam* – Compassion
v. *Bibhatsam* – Aversion
vi. *Bhayanakam* – Terror
vii. *Veeram* – Heroism
viii. *Adbhutham* – Astonishment

Abhinavagupta added a ninth state of *Shantam* (Tranquility) to this list in his 10th century commentary on the *Natyasastra*. Each of these aforecited states of *Rasa* has a corresponding *Bhava*, elucidated in The *Natyasastra*:

i. *Rati* – Love/Delight
ii. *Hasa* – Laughter
iii. *Krodh* – Anger
iv. *Shoka* – Sorrow
v. *Jugupsa* – Disgust
vi. *Bhaya* – Fear
vii. *Utsaha* – Valor
viii. *Vismaya* – Wonder

The *Bhava* that would correspond to the ninth *Rasa* of *Shantam* is *Shanti* (Peace). The cause-effect relationship of *Bhava* and *Rasa* is not as clear-cut as it may seem. The internalisation of every nuance is a necessary precursor to evoke *Rasa*. India's leading classical exponent, Malavika Sarukkai (2006), stresses that internalising something is not just the outcome of practice; rather it is a deliberate unison of mind and body. The Abhinaya Darpana provides reference to a *Shloka* (hymn), which acts as a guideline for the realisation of this aesthetic:

> Where the hand goes, there the eyes should follow
> Where the eyes go, there the mind should follow
> Where the mind is, there the expression should be brought out
> Where the expression is, there the *Rasa* or flavour will be experienced
> (Coomaraswamy 1917, 36)

I shall return my discussion to the way *Rasa* is re-imagined in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, and the way it provides the seasoned spectator possibilities of emancipation in the theatre through a kinaesthetic engagement at a later stage.

With the help of European designers, Rukmini Devi Arundale introduced a new dance costume for Bharatanatyam, during the phase of its revival. The new costume drew inspiration from the temple sculptures of India (Samson 2010). Today, a traditional silk saree that is cut and tailored into a blouse, a detachable drape, a *pyjama*/skirt, a pleated fan and a separate piece surrounding the hip, called a backseat, is the most widely used costume. The main accessory of the dancer remains the ankle bells, made of brass and padded on brown leather or red cloth and available in lines of three, five or seven to enhance the rhythmic footwork of the dancers. Hair is worn either in a long plait or a neat bun. The ornaments are made of gold and pearls, set with precious/semi-precious stones in white and red, resembling diamonds and rubies respectively. Hair ornaments include a thin string of pearls or gems/ an elaborate jewelled headband that frames the forehead, a sun-shaped jewel on the right side of the head, a crescent moon-shaped jewel on the left side of the head and a jeweled back-head circular ornament worn in the hair. Neck ornaments include a choker necklace with a pendant and a longer 'mango' or 'coin' garland. Ear ornaments include a bell-shaped earring and an intricately designed piece that attaches the earring to the tip of the earlobe. Nose ornaments include a nose stud on the right nostril, a large semi-circular nose ring on the left nostril and a beaded droplet that hangs from the tip of the nose. A plain gold or studded hip belt ties the different parts of the costume and the plait together. Bangles are worn on both wrists (Devi 2002). This excess constructs the dancer as an image of the exoticised Orient and parts of her body, like her tiny waist, long hair and large eyes, are accentuated to ensure that the dancer subscribes to dominant orders of femininity and subjects herself to the workings of the male gaze.

I have spent a significant amount of time in describing the form, structure, aesthetics, theme, content and scenography of Bharatanatyam in this non-linear overview as it helps to situate how the

feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai offer critical ruptures to those areas of Bharatanatyam in their contemporary performance praxis. I have also demonstrated the inherent politics of gender and genre in Bharatanatyam from its very birth, highlighted in the removal of the *devadasi* in its reconstruction; eradication of elements of sexuality, sensuality and erotics; and the representation of the *Nayika* or the female dancer in the Bharatanatyam repertoire. I will analyse this representation of the *Nayika* in greater detail in Chapter Two. Given the complex background and sophistication reflected in the classical dances of India, the resistance against transitioning away from key features in these forms by traditionalists is, to some degree, understandable. As postcolonial feminist scholar Una Narayan points out, it is easy to understand the attraction of conservatism and fundamentalism, as well as the political nostalgia for mythic national and cultural pasts, especially in an age of rapid globalisation, planned and unforeseen displacements and hovering insecurities (1997). Yet, this conservatism poses a real danger to the autonomy of the Indian female dancing body, and the genres birthed out of their embodied experiences at the borderlands of Bharatanatyam. This thesis aims to contribute to the growing body of scholarship that settles the score.

Chapter Two: Methodology, Method, Critical Approach and Research Design

In this chapter, I focus on the grounding of the anthropological applications by devoting time and consideration to the ethnographic methodology, allied methods and research design. I also further introduce the interactive forces of politics, society and culture to illuminate how Ratnam and Sarabhai are choreographed by culture, and how they in turn choreograph culture. To demonstrate the integrity of the research design, I also address the issue of ethics, articulate what this research does not do and offer avenues for further thought.

2.1 Left Leg In, Right Leg Out: Return to the Field

The Sanskrit texts, as pointed out in Chapter One, were the bedrock in the 'invention' of Bharatanatyam, and the muscle memory and personal histories of the *devadasi* were purposefully far removed from this process. A closer examination of the exotic appropriation of otherness of the *devadasi* revealed that her performing body and her ritual practice were curtailed by larger political agendas of the time. However, her kinaesthetic traces heavily influenced the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam and she was given no credit for the same. Modern dance history in the West also has a part to play in this unacknowledged appropriation. This appropriation is assayed in the work of dancer and scholar Priya Srinivasan in her re-imagination of dance as transnational labour through a re-visitation of 19th century American newspaper archives. Through her authorial and artistic reflexivity, Srinivasan makes the case for the supposition that the pioneer of modern dance in the West, Ruth St. Denis, borrowed freely from the gestures of the nautch dancers whom she encountered at Coney Island, USA in 1904. These kinaesthetic traces can be glimpsed today in the

'spins' and 'whirls' of the modern dancer, an essential characteristic of the nautch dancers and the neo-classical Indian dance form of Kathak (2011).

The marginalisation of the *devadasi* bears a striking resemblance to the works of contemporary dancers/choreographers in India, who have been sidelined by cultural policy makers, public/private arts organisations, classical dancers, critics and audiences at large within the country. This marginalisation is reflected in the academy as well, where relatively little scholarship on the history, development, structure and scope of this parallel movement of Indian dance exists. Although this situation is slowly changing, with the contributions of Bharucha (1995), Lopez Y Royo (2003), Chatterjea (2004), Grau (2007, 2013) Munsi (2010, 2011), Katrak (2011), Purkayastha (2014) and Mitra (2015), research projects that pay attention to contemporary performance practitioners in the context of Indian dance are still hard to come by. This research project aims to add to the discourse on contemporary dance in the subcontinent from an explicitly feminist perspective.

The principle at the core of this research project is stepping beyond the bounds of Bharatanatyam. The transgression of form, structure, content, aesthetics, scenography and representation in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai are an embodied resistance to the oppression of Indian women in public and private spaces across the nation. In Chapter One, I have briefly traced a herstoriographical overview of Bharatanatyam. Even though the reconstruction project of *Sadir* to Bharatanatyam has been the subject of much previous scholarly attention, I believe a re-visitation is important in understanding the particularities of the injustices against the woman dancer in India: the removal of the *devadasi* in the project of classicism; the eradication of sensuousness and its replacement with devotion as an act of cleansing; the construction of the identity of the female solo dancer as passive, submissive and docile in a dominant patriarchal order; and the extreme objectification of the female dancer through the codes prescribed in the ancient treatises of the *Natyasastra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana*. I also locate the autobiographical I/eye in the field through an auto-ethnographic inquiry to allow the reader a point of entry into my interest in the

work of these two women, my arrival at a specific set of questions with regard to their repertoire, and my experience as a dancer that enables me to draw upon my own kinaesthetic awareness in unpacking their performance work. As Ruth Behar notes, asserting myself as a woman of colour, a feminist, a Bharatanatyam dancer and a cosmopolitan patriot requires

> …a keen understanding of what aspects of self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world…. Efforts at self-revelation flop not because the personal voice has been used but because it has been poorly used, leaving unscrutinized the connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed. (1996, 13-14)

The idea, then, is to challenge the male gaze with the oppositional gaze of the feminist spectator/performer of colour armed with the kinaesthetic empathy that resides in her body as a trained and practising Bharatanatyam dancer. It is precisely for this reason that I offer a detailed description to situate the authorial identity, voice and body in Chapter One, as I believe it aids the reader to locate my oppositional gaze. This complex method of viewing allows the feminist spectator of colour, as I will elaborate in a later part of this chapter, to draw on her multiple senses in meaning-making. Behar continues that this vulnerability of the observer, "can lead the reader not into miniature bubbles of navel-gazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues" (1996, 14). The serious social issues here refer beyond a detailed analysis of the major works of two women of colour, and speak to the impact of representations of the other in mythology and performance and its realtime effects on society at large.

My research methodology is based on a critical ethnographic model of inquiry that involved participant-observation strategies in the field at *Darpana Academy of Performing Arts*, Ahmedabad and *Arangham Dance Theatre*, Chennai. The interpretative framework is developed through a feminist criticism predominantly informed by the *feminist poststructuralist theories* of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, and the method of analysis is a contemporary visceral critical the-

ory titled *(Syn)aesthetics* proposed by Josephine Machon. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the analysis, my thesis also draws upon dance studies, performance studies, gender studies, cultural theory and postcolonial theory in contextualising the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. Select feminist choreographies from the body of work of Ratnam and Sarabhai are re-visioned through field notes gathered during ethnographic fieldwork that consisted of both participatory and observational methods, i.e. watching the performances live; re-watching the taped performances on DVD; accessing the archival material including photographs, reviews, articles and program notes; participating in classes, rehearsals, workshops, conclaves and conferences conducted by the two women; conducting semi-structured interviews with Ratnam, Sarabhai, collaborators, company members, family members, dancers and audiences; and maintaining personal communication with Ratnam and Sarabhai through the course of the research project. This personal communication has richly impacted the thesis text and allowed for the inculcation of the voice of the female dancer/ choreographer in the discourse on her dance.

The analysis of their feminist choreographies has necessitated a *(Syn)aesthetic* reading that allows the ethnographer to draw on the *kinaesthetic empathy*[3] generated in her body as a trained and practising Bharatanatyam dancer. Hence, my reading of their repertoire takes into account the context in which such contemporary feminist choreography is produced; the theme, content and narrative analysis of the performance-text; the productive apparatus of its process and product; and the material writings of the racialised and gendered body itself. I am also indebted to Jill Dolan's concept of *critical generosity* in my readings of the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai (2012). What I mean here is that whilst I have attempted to engage critically with the work in the ways detailed above, I have tried to refrain from assessments or appraisals of their body of work in

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[3] A theory proposed by influential dance critic John Martin in 1939, based on the idea that even when spectators are sitting still, through an active engagement of the senses, an "inner mimesis", enables them to experience the movements of the performer within their neuromuscular paths and participate in the emotions and ideas evoked on stage/in the performance space (1939).

my descriptions, interpretations and analyses. Toward this end, I have regarded considerations of their choreographies over evaluations of their dance. Dolan thoughtfully pens:

> To be critically generous means to be responsible for a deeper knowledge of the work you engage; means that you take into account its production context and resources; its history and goals; and that you consider its players and producers as people laboring to create meaning with the materials at hand. The terms *good* and *bad* have no purchase here. Feminist criticism still isn't about facile value judgements or consumer reporting; it doesn't arbitrate taste. It strives to consider what theatre and performance might *mean*, what it might *do*, how it might be used in a world that requires ever more and better conversations about how we can imagine *who we are and who we might be*. (Dolan 2012, xxxvii)

To me this critical generosity is important, as I discovered in my unearthing that a major portion of the national newspaper reviews in India on the work of Ratnam and Sarabhai concern themselves with placing value judgements on the performance work. At most, the numerous newspaper reviews trace the narrative, hint at abstraction and/or provide detailed descriptions of the scenographic elements. The writings, by and large, do not take into account the considerations Dolan writes of and hence fall short in any useful analysis of the works of these artists. Further, the Indian reviewers writing for leading national newspaper columns and magazines targeting puritan traditionalists are largely gendered and/or classicists themselves and thereby do not possess a vocabulary to interpret the in-between choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. Hence, this critical generosity becomes especially important in addressing the choreographies of these artists.

I am conscious here of the fact that I draw upon predominantly French feminist poststructural theorists in my critical framework. Writing about choreographers and dancers who occupy a postcolonial space, I am acutely aware of this translocation and I grappled with the question of why I did not use postcolonial feminists in my critical framework instead. Despite being women of colour, it is important to note that Ratnam and Sarabhai are products of an aristocratic family background featuring businessmen, institution builders, and freedom fighters, and thus occupy an in-

credibly privileged position in the caste and class hierarchies of Indian society. Hence, drawing upon the writings of postcolonial feminists which largely speak to the intersecting vectors of race, caste and class seemed tangential in an analysis of their dance and their bodies. In fact, it is their very privilege that affords them the freedom to conceptualise, create and challenge the hegemonic order without being constrained by the status quo. Although their choreographies manifest differently, in both their performance works, the body becomes a site of resistance to problematise the exclusion of the female dancer, the female goddess, the female human and the female other. In this sense, their ruptures of the epistemes, codes and bounds of Bharatanatyam through image, text and body lend themselves rather well to the critical frameworks of *écriture féminine, semiotic chora, genotext* and *phenotext,* as set out by these French feminist theorists. Despite the problematics of cross-influences in theory, I firmly believe that the reading of their dances as bodily writing or *écriture féminine* open up possibilities to more deeply consider and analyse the embodied politics of their feminist choreographies. I would also like to qualify that both the women work in transnational contexts and their own feminist choreographies often grapple with cross-influences of movement vocabulary, abstraction, aesthetics, production methods and dramaturgical devices that inhibit lands beyond Bharatanatyam, including influences from the West. Hence, while I acknowledge that a similar cross-pollination of theory does not certainly come without problematics of its own, I would also like to highlight that it serves to counter the limiting effects of policing borders of applied critical frameworks. Lastly, much postcolonial feminist theory has emphasised the text over the body, and I was careful to avoid such a scriptocentric approach in the discussions of their dance. However, I have drawn upon the work of postcolonial theorists to position their feminist choreographies in the borderlands of Bharatanatyam.

Preceding the analysis of their feminist choreographies is a literature review that situates the repertoires of Ratnam and Sarabhai beyond Bharatanatyam. Here, I deploy concepts from the writings of postcolonial theorists Avtar Brah and Homi Bhaba, not only to make sense of the transgres-

sions (as mentioned at the start of this chapter), but also to refer to the cultural hybridity between Indian neo-classical and Indian/pan-Asian psychophysical forms[4] and the liminality between the sacred and the secular in the body of work of these women. This is followed by a brief genealogy of contemporary experiments that stemmed from a base in neo-classical dance. Although there were other practitioners that were involved in these experiments during the time of transition from colonial to postcolonial India, such as Manjushree Chaki Sircar, Ram Gopal and Maya Rao, I only concentrate my discussion on four of the pioneering choreographers who experimented with modernity and feminism simultaneously, and/or whose approaches to making performance also find resonances in the contemporary choreographic signatures of Ratnam and Sarabhai.

2.2 Critical Framework

I further detail below my applications of the three theoretical frameworks in the practice of a feminist critical ethnography and analysis. I re-emphasise the vigilance paid here to the translocation of theory produced by predominantly European white women. However, I stand by the opinion that this translocation does not aid the re-colonisation of the dance of Ratnam and Sarabhai through theoretical domination, but rather liberates their bodies from the histories of silence produced by the interactive forces of imperialism, orientalism and nationalism. The aim is not to re-imagine the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai as universal but to destabilise the border patrol of Bharatanatyam.

2.2.i Écriture Féminine and *Sexual Difference*

[4] Forms of movement, meditation and martial arts from East Asia and South Asia that combine external form with an internal awareness and activation and view the physical and psychological as inseparable.

> I wished that that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst - burst with forms much more beautiful than those which are put in frames and sold for a stinking fortune. And I, too, said nothing, showed nothing; I didn't open my mouth. I didn't repaint my half of the world. I was ashamed. I was afraid, and I swallowed my shame and my fear. I said to myself: You are mad! What's the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts? (Cixous 1976, 876)

In the latter half of the 20th century, Hélène Cixous wishfully penned her desire for women to proclaim their unique empires. I read the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai as a direct response that grants this wish. Their body of work overflows beyond Bharatanatyam and the women repaint their half of the world, to adopt Cixous's rhetoric, through the rupture of form, structure, content, aesthetics, scenography and representation (of the self). Both women recognise the limitations of female objectification in neo-classical representations of Bharatanatyam and choose instead to inscribe their femininity in their own feminist choreographies. By not denying the female body the "fantastic tumult of her drives", both women project their selfhood and intersubjectivities in their feminist choreographies through the reinterpretation of goddess mythologies enriched by personal narratives (Cixous 1976, 876).

In her influential essay "Laugh of the Medusa", originally printed in French in 1975, Cixous calls attention to the rarity of these exceptions in writing, a phenomenon mirrored in the choreographies moving around the circuit of Indian dance today, which predominantly operates against a patriarchal backdrop. Nonetheless, sleuthing for these exceptions does yield rich and heterogeneous results, albeit infrequent, in the borderlands of Bharatanatyam (and other neo-classical dance forms, particularly Odissi and Kathak). These engagements with the neo-classical in contemporary bodily writing operate in a field dynamised by the dialogic interaction between nationalism, transnationalism, spiritualism, secularism, modernism and feminism in complex and complicated ways. As Cixous rightfully notes, "It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an im-

possibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded - which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist….It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automations, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate" (Cixous 1976, 883). Ratnam and Sarabhai are re-visioned in this thesis as the peripheral figures to whom Cixous refers. By dancing in the borderlands of Bharatanatyam, their feminist choreographies escape territorial bounds, imagine infinite possibilities and produce multivalent performance texts. Despite the identification of common threads in their embodied feminist approach to process, poetics and politics, their contributions to the contemporary landscape of dance in India manifest in discrete ways. In this thesis, I attempt to locate the overarching similarities in their slant on aesthetics and cultural production, whilst drawing out the different specificities between the body of work of these two women.

Écriture féminine, or feminine writing, as advocated by Hélène Cixous, understands feminine writing as a bodily writing that is figurative, cyclical, fluid and incomplete, as opposed to masculine writing that is literal, linear, stable and definitive. The two theorists also point out that the involvement of a female writer does not automatically make for a feminine writing, and vice-versa (1977). After all, despite the heavy involvement of women in the reconstruction project of Bharatanatyam and the subsequent practice of Bharatanatyam dominated by dancers/choreographers, the representation of women still operates within the workings of scopophilic structures. By critically framing the speaking/dancing female body as a site of resistance, both Ratnam and Sarabhai, empower the women on their stage through a layering of breath, energies, ritual, silence, speech, movement, myth, design and touch. This layering and re-layering is a strategy adopted to counter desire, agency and power that is solely represented in phallogocentric terms. Irigaray articulates the experience of female sexuality in her ground-breaking essay "This Sex which is Not One", originally printed in French in 1977. In arguing the stance that women's relationship to logic and language (and movement, if I may add) is other to the symbolic order, Irigaray notes, "Woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere…one can say that

the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle than is imagined - in an imaginary centred a bit too much on one and the same" (1981, 103). In their embodied re-visionings of women's bodies through dance, Ratnam and Sarabhai embrace a playful pluralism by taking "a long detour by the analysis of various systems that oppress her", a journey that Irigaray deems as necessary (1981, 105). Thus, by manner of this analysis, they are able to seek a voice and visibility for the Indian female dancer by having recourse to neo-classical systems of movement, whilst simultaneously dismantling the indigenous practices of domination embedded in its very frame. This analysis of the various systems also allows for a de-colonising feminist strategy that seeks to subvert the representation of women of colour through the communicative effects of colonisation, nationalism and patriarchy. In allowing Bharatanatyam to enrich their own feminist praxis, Ratnam and Sarabhai use mimesis in the manner suggested by Irigaray, as a tool to "try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" (1985d, 76). Through making this conscious choreographic choice to use Bharatanatyam to purposefully alienate the audience, both women immensely frustrate the classical readers of their performance texts, who attempt to consume their feminist choreographies in a similar vein to which they view a traditional Bharatanatyam recital. I subscribe to Susan Kozel's conclusion that the mimetic strategy is potent, provided the pitfall of the traditional trap can be avoided (1996).

In thinking through the problematics of application of the conceptual and corporeal in her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, originally printed in French in 1984, Irigaray also configured the concept of the *sensible transcendental* (1993). The sensible transcendental indicates a conversation between the spiritual and the somatic. Irigaray prescribes an eroticisation of spirituality, which is often reflected in her own writing. This means of authorship lends itself perfectly to the analysis of the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, where the mind/body/spirit are woven to-

gether in a mesh of complex relationships. Sarabhai, in talking of the connection between sexuality and spirituality, writes on her blog:

> In most parts of Hindu India the body was adored, admired, worshipped. As a creation, perhaps the supreme creation, of the Divine. Look at our sculptures. Read our poets of two or three thousand years ago. Look at ancient paintings. The body is in full view, described in words of wonder and beauty. And Hinduism had no concept of sin, of mental or spiritual dirt. (Sarabhai 2009)

This idea of sin and shame is characterised by Sarabhai as an import that needs to be re-evaluated in her feminist choreographies, and in society at large. Further, the sensible transcendental allows for a re-inscription of the *devadasi*'s corporeality, where the divine and the venereal were never recognised through a Cartesian duality but instead made sense of through the togetherness afforded by the traces of the flesh. In fact, Ratnam specifically uses the term "feminine transcendental" in speaking of her choreographic signature in the program notes of her solo operatic creation *7 Graces…the many hues of Goddess Tara* (2005).

Perhaps in what is her most remarkable contribution of all, Cixous sets down that if one dares to look Medusa in the eye, women will not be subject to the fear-mongering of hierarchal hegemonies and may re-vision Medusa instead as beautiful and laughing (1976). It is this haunting image that draws me to *écriture féminine* as a critical framework in the analysis of dance as discursive practice. Despite the allegations of essentialism, fundamental difference and lack of practical application against the framework, I have sought to distance the respective approaches of Cixous and Irigaray from its blanket criticisms and employ instead a fruitful method of engaging the critical framework in the analysis of the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. By answering the liberatory call of Cixous, "we are black and we are beautiful", Ratnam's and Sarabhai's feminist choreographies inhabit the borderlands of Bharatanatyam (1976, 878). Their female (and male) dancing bodies of colour emphasise their senses, subjectivities and scapes of the interior. For, as I

demonstrate in the analysis of their select choreographies, these two women dare to look her in the eye—the goddess, the object, the disabled, the tribal, the monstrous, the victim, the *devadasi*, the woman, the reflection.

2.2.ii Semiotic Chora and Genotext/Phenotext

> The language of art, too, follows (but differently and more closely) the other aspect of maternal *jouissance*, the sublimation taking place at the very moment of primal repression within the mother's body, arising perhaps unwittingly out of her marginal position. At the intersection of sign and rhythm, of representation and light, of the symbolic and the semiotic, the artist speaks from a place *where she is not, where she knows not* (emphasis added). (Kristeva 1980, 242)

Julia Kristeva's pioneering contribution to the field of feminist critical discourse can be argued to be the two concepts of the semiotic and the symbolic. By distinguishing poetic language from everyday speech, Kristeva effectively makes the case for the importance of the return to the semiotic in poetic language. Aligning the symbolic with the patriarchal order, Kristeva situates the semiotic vis-a-vis the "archaic, instinctual and maternal territory" (Kristeva 1980, 136). In discussing the semiotic and the symbolic in his book, Jon Cook defines the terms as "one, the 'semiotic,' the mobile patterning of instinctual drives within the infant prior to the acquisition of language proper; the other, the 'symbolic,' the domain of articulate language, discriminating between subjects and objects, signifiers and signifieds, and concerned with propositions and judgments" (2004, 437).

In the writings of Kristeva, it is clear that she believes that the integration of the semiotic and the symbolic are necessary to the process of meaning-making. Despite identifiable strands of the semiotic and the symbolic in Bharatanatyam, as with any signifying practice, the form has fallen trap to its own grammar, rules and syntax. This is hardly surprising, as the reconstruction project, as evidenced in Chapter One, concerned itself with the invention of classicism by seeking formal connections to theory through the interpretation of authoritative texts. Hence, consciousness is dis-

tanced from flesh in Bharatanatyam, resulting in the relatively monovalent, singular and fixed reception of meaning through excessive reliance on *Natyadharmi* or theatrical representation. In contrast, the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai engage with the semiotic in fresh and exciting ways by refiguring *Lokadharmi* or realistic representation in Bharatanatyam through interrogating the physical body and its connections to the self/other. As a result, form itself is continuously becoming in their body of work, as is the connection of the dancing female body to its own materiality.

The difficulty, ironically, in the resistance of the symbolic means entering into the realm of language whilst acknowledging the lack within its dominant fold in the making of meaning. This enunciation of word that enables signification is the "thetic phase" (Kristeva 1986). Kristeva expounds the aforementioned hardship in her theorisation of the *semiotic chora*, which is both a definition and the reflection of that which escapes definition. Of the semiotic chora, Kristeva articulates, "[The] semiotic chora is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him" (1986, 95). This continual generation and negation of the subject "ensuring its infinite renewal" means the subject is always becoming (Kristeva 1998, 134). The organising principle of the semiotic chora thus facilitates the subject-in-process in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. Their repertoires are indeed characterised by this "multiplicity of ex-pulsions" in verbal, visual and visceral modes (Kristeva 1998, 134).

Kristeva's concepts of *genotext* and *phenotext* are markedly useful in a Kristevan reading of the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. Kristeva uses the term *phenotext* "to denote language that serves to communicate", construing it as a generated structure that aligns itself with the symbolic and "presupposes a subject of enunciation and an addressee" (1986, 121). On the other hand, the *genotext* is a generative process, "a process, which tends to articulate structures that are ephemeral (unstable, threatened by drive charges, 'quanta' rather than 'marks') and non-signifying

(devices that do not have a double articulation)" (1984d, 86). Both Ratnam and Sarabhai attempt to access the "repetitions, rhymes and rhythms" of the genotext within their feminist choreographies, often situated within the phenotext of Bharatanatyam (1986). Interestingly, phenotext ultimately triumphs in the feminist choreographies of Sarabhai where her particular brand of neologism concerns itself primarily with communication. By contrast, genotext consistently generates infinite possibilities in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam where her play with process is imbued with what she terms a "feminist consciousness" (pers. communication, 2014).

Whilst I largely address both the semiotic and the symbolic in the body of work of these two women, I remain particularly sensitive to the articulations of the phenotext in Sarabhai's body of work and the pulsations of the genotext in Ratnam's body of work, so as to respect the integrity of their agendas and celebrate the diversity of their feminism(s).

2.2.iii Syn(aesthetics)

> To experience means to perceive the details corporeally. (Machon 2009, 17)

(Syn)aesthetics is a new critical discourse and approach to artistic practice, put forth by Josephine Machon, in an attempt to theorise a contemporary critical framework that "embraces a fused sensory experience" (2009, 14). Machon characterises the (syn)aesthetic performance style in the following ways: a merger of creative conventions, forms and methods and the transmission of sensation to the body of audience affecting their kinaesthetic awareness through "visual, physical, verbal, aural, tactile, haptic and olfactory means" (2009, 14). By placing an emphasis on discerning the minutiae of a performance work corporeally, (syn)aesthetics opens up a field of interpretation through multisensorial engagement. Alexander Luria speaks about the breaking down of borders between imagination and reality as a central feature of the neurological condition of synaesthesia (1969). The stepping beyond reality to imagination is a particularly useful way to experience the feminist chore-

ographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, especially in the construction of dreamscapes in their performance worlds.

As Ratnam and Sarabhai adopt an interdisciplinary mode of experimentation, their performance works require a rigorous model of meaning-making that draws on the semantic, somatic and technological connectedness of live experience. While it is now widely acknowledged in scholarship in the arts and humanities that response to artistic work is indeed subjective, the value of an individual's intuitive response is still undermined in favour of the intelligible. If applied to the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, a cerebral response would provide a reductive reading at best and a pronounced irritability at worst. On the other hand, a (syn)aesthetic model of analysis does not privilege a singular mode of knowing, but favours an individual's perceptive and productive response in the creation and criticism of any artistic work. Speaking in Nietzschean terms, "(Syn)aesthetics is a Dionysian mode of practice and analysis as it prioritizes sensual perception and imagination yet engages cerebral power of cognizance, measured Apollonian reflection, in an embodied way" (Machon 2009, 37). This individual response based on intuition and reflection enables the practical application of *Rasa theory* in the contemporary feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. (Syn)aesthetics allows for the extension of the application of *Rasa theory* beyond the realms of strict classicism in Indian dance. In fact, Ketu H. Katrak, in her book *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora* (2011), effectively draws upon *Rasa* as methodology in her discussion of a genealogy of a new language of dance in the subcontinent and beyond. Emboldened by Katrak's framing, I suggest the usefulness of the postcolonial applications of *Rasa* as a tool to de-colonise the master narrative of Bharatanatyam.

The hybrid nature of (syn)aesthetic performance and analysis places an emphasis on the linguistic as a mode of transgressive communication. In clarifying the meaning of (syn)aesthetic *play*-texts, Machon writes

> It is a practice of *play*writing produced from the *play* with the possibilities of live performance. This is apparent in the formalistic experimentation with image, movement and physicality which is woven into the very fabric of the *play*text itself…It is writing that requires a rich and versatile performance style and asserts a fluid and shapeshifting form that contravenes categorization. (Machon 2009, 32)

In the consideration of the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, the written and spoken word is of special significance, in a manner that is alien to the neo-classical dance forms in India. Despite an excessive dependence on narrative and musicality in Bharatanatyam, the female *Nayika* herself is painted as a passive and silent object. In contraposition, speech becomes a strategy of resistance to create a gender-inclusive stage for dance beyond Bharatanatyam. The writings in the *play*texts of Ratnam and Sarabhai defy the tenets of traditional theatre writing; challenge the representations of women as other; produce verbal/visceral responses in the body of audience; embrace the possibilities of shock, pleasure and empathy; infuse movement, music, light and technology in interactive ways with the spoken word; and couple breath, energies and silences to create disturbatory effects in the delivery of cyclical texts.

Machon also traces a feminised style in practice that gifts (syn)aesthetic inheritance:

> First, the experimentation with transgressive forms and content which includes active exploration of hybridized practice, incorporating film, video and aural technology into the work, alongside innovative experimentation with writing practice in form and content; second, an explicit use of the body in performance; and lastly, the prioritizing of a discursory position which locates critical theory firmly within artistic practice. (2009, 26)

By choosing to foreground the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai through the critical frame of (syn)aesthetics, I am able to read their experimentation with transgressive forms and content as ruptures; re-vision their dancing bodies as a site of intersecting vectors of gender, race and

class; and investigate their dancing female bodies as sites of radical resistance, especially through the inculcation of an embodied auto-ethnography. I am committed to (syn)aesthetic practice and application, especially since I find it particularly adaptable to transnational performance works, evident in Machon's own application of reading the subversive works of people of colour and ethnic minorities, such as Akram Khan, Kwame Kwei-Armah and Marisa Carnesky. In both experiencing the ephemeral and recounting the lived experience in a (syn)aesthetic manner in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, I interrogate, interpret and extol the articulation of a transformative politics in their body of work.

2.3 Gender/Genre Politics

> Of all the evils for which man has made himself responsible, none is so degrading, so shocking or so brutal as his abuse of the better half of humanity; the female sex (not the weaker sex). (Gandhi 1921).

Nearly a century later, Gandhi's words sadly hold true and the treatment of women as objects and others pulsates across India. In this section, I offer a tripartite deconstruction of injustices against women: in society, performance and Hindu mythology respectively. The threads that run through these sub-sections exemplify the need for *performative transformation* in Indian dance and an analysis of these performances through macro-political and micro-personal readings. Additionally, the thesis will fill gaps in scholarship on the muted history of contemporary performance praxis in India and contribute to discourses on Indian dance, postcolonial feminism, political and cultural studies.

2.3.i Women in Society

On 16th December 2012, a 23-year-old female physiotherapy intern, Jyoti Singh, was sexually assaulted and brutally gang raped on a bus in the southern part of New Delhi, the capital city of India. Her male companion, who was travelling with her during the time and tried to come to her aid, was physically assaulted. There were six other male members on the bus (one of them a minor), including the driver, who were all involved in raping the girl. Amongst other atrocities, an iron rod was penetrated into her vagina. She suffered multiple injuries in her abdomen, intestines and genitals, and died exactly 13 days later, just before the wake of the new year, while receiving emergency treatment at Singapore's Mount Elizabeth Hospital. The aftermath of the incident was sensationalised in the media and through User Generated Content on social network platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Mourning and protests were witnessed across the country by NGOs, university students, women's rights activists and the urban middle-class public in general.

Prior to her death, the victim provided a statement that was verified by her male companion on the bus. The leading national newspaper, *The Hindu*, reported that the victim and her male companion were harassed before the assaults, and were specifically asked "what they were doing together so late in the night" (2012). It was only 09.30 pm and they were returning from watching the recently released film 'Life of Pi', a fact that should have been irrelevant. The six members on the bus, including the minor, then decided that it was their right to 'punish' the woman by teaching her a lesson that involved each of them forcing themselves on her. One of the accused was found dead in Tihar Jail, the minor was handed a pitiful three years in a juvenile detention centre, and the others were given the death sentence.

According to figures published by the National Crime Records Bureau, the rate of reported rapes in India is one every 22 minutes. The rate of conviction for these rape cases is a meagre 25 percent. Even more alarmingly, it is estimated that over 90 percent of the rapes occurring in India

go unreported. A poll conducted by Thomson Reuters Foundation of 370 gender experts around the world, listed India as the worst place to be for a woman amongst the G20 countries, ahead of Saudi Arabia, Indonesia and Mexico. Rape is just one of the many heinous injustices to women in India, some of which have been legally abolished in the country but continue to plague society. These injustices include, but are not limited to, sexual assault, marital rape, acid attacks, murder, sex/labour trafficking, slavery, *dowry* deaths, domestic violence, child marriage, female foeticide, and rare incidents of *sati*. The UN special rapporteur on violence against women, Rashida Manjoo, quoted one of the women she encountered on her field investigation, as saying violence against Indian women spans the "life cycle from the womb to the tomb" (2014).

Evidently, a deeply ingrained societal problem exists. Hence, the performance stage becomes a space for the development of social awareness and the performing body becomes a site for the re-writing of political consciousness. This ideology is certified in the performance repertory of The Sarabhais who champion the cause of the arts for social and political activism. In fact, Mallika Sarabhai's mother Mrinalini Sarabhai produced the dance-drama *Memory is a Ragged Fragment of Eternity* in 1963 with its pivotal focus on the societal problem of *dowry* and violence against brides by their in-laws. The performance work sparked the interest of the then Finance Minister of Tamil Nadu. Following this, he commissioned the first enquiry into *dowry* deaths that consecutively led to numerous reforms of *The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961* (Sarabhai 2009). This is a stark example of how contemporary feminist performance praxis through the use of revolutionary narrative functions as a catalyst for social change. It is interesting to note here that even though Mrinalini Sarabhai's performance work remained largely in the classical and folk vocabularies of Indian dance, she was awarded by *The Sangeet Natak Akademi* for her contribution to 'creative and experimental dance', rather than for her contribution to classical dance (Grau 2013). Kathak-based contemporary performance practitioner Aditi Mangaldas recently faced a similar situation, and responded by declining the award and writing an open letter to the academy that questioned the grounds for the categorical

terminology adopted by the academy. She also urged debate and discussion by practitioners and scholars, which she believes will help inform the nomenclature and classification utilised in Indian dance discourses (2013). The politics of gender and genre in Indian dance have a complex set of inter-relationships, ergo they need to be analysed in context for an advanced understanding of how each construct informs the other.

2.3.ii Women in Performance

Every psychological state of being of the woman in Bharatanatyam is constructed as a heterosexual lovelorn response to an imaginary man/king/lord. This particular classification is challenged in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, who offer alternative representation strategies for women to embody their power, agency and desire on stage. The performative sensibilities of these artists dramatically redefine the concept of femininity and this process deserves attention and analysis.

Bharatanatyam, as delineated in Chapter One, embodies the underlying worldview of Indian orthodoxy, carrying with it repressive views of women, sex and sexuality. The previous chapter also outlined in detail the marginalisation of the *devadasi* and her subsequent exclusion from her performance practice and role in society. Just as the *devadasi* was relegated to the fringes, a similar pattern can be observed in the modern history of contemporary feminist performance practitioners.

The *Ashtanayikas* or 8 heroines, classified by Bharatha in the *Natyasastra*, who are the central characters in all emotive dance pieces within the *Margam*, bear witness to this fact. The *Ashtanayikas* are classified as follows:

- *Vasakasajja* – The excited heroine dressed up and eagerly awaiting her union with her lover

- *Viraholkhandita* – The grievous heroine suffering the unbearable pangs of separation from her lover
- *Svaadeenapathika* – The confident heroine who has her lover completely under her control, and is the subject of jealousy of all her peers
- *Kalahandtharita* – The quarrelsome heroine who is aware of the questionable antics of her lover, and confronts him on his infidelity
- *Khandita* – The sorrowful heroine who is insecure and deeply disturbed by the marks of another woman on her lover
- *Vipralabdha* – The disillusioned heroine who pines for her lover despite being outwitted by him
- *Abhisarika* – The skilful heroine who goes after what/who she wants and is not shy or secretive about it
- *Proshithabharthruka* – The crumbling heroine who is not able to cope with the leaving of her lover to a faraway land

I challenge the dominance of this tiresome classification in Indian neo-classical dance today where the female body is constructed only to serve the narrative of a phallogocentric order. Bharatanatyam, while pretending to be a celebration of womanhood, is anti-feminist in its myriad manifestations. The dominant model strengthens essentialised gender tropes and reinforces this behaviour in the social world. By constantly feeding our cultural narrative with troubling notions of femininity, a great disservice is done to young girls, for they often become blind to their own oppression.

The two authoritative texts on Indian dance, The *Natyasastra* and The *Abhinaya Darpana,* also prescribe essential qualities that a female dancer must possess. In the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam from *Sadir*, these two texts were the primary sources that formed the bedrock of the

project. It is hard to ignore the unapologetic policing of the female dancing body prescribed in the texts.

The *Abhinaya Darpana* states:

> It is understood that the Danseuse (nartakī) should be very lovely, young, with full round breasts, self-confident, charming, agreeable, dexterous in handling the critical passages, skilled in steps and rhythms, quite at home on the stage, expert in posing hand and body, graceful in gesture, with wide-open eyes, able to follow song and instruments and rhythm, adorned with costly jewels, with a charming lotus-face, neither very stout nor very thin, nor very tall nor very short. (Coomaraswamy 1917, 15-16)

The *Natyasastra* spells out the necessary qualities of the female dancer too:

> Women who have beautiful limbs, are conversant with the sixty-four arts and crafts, are clever, courteous in behaviour, free from female diseases, always bold, free from indolence, inured to hard work, capable of practising various arts and crafts, skilled in dancing and songs, who excel by their beauty, youthfulness, brilliance and other qualities all other women standing by, are known as *narthaki* (female dancer). (Ghosh 1951, 206)

The above descriptions *demonstrate* the extent to which women have been objectified throughout the 'his'tory of Bharatanatyam. Feminist scholar Sandra Bartky describes this as "part of the process by which the ideal body of femininity – and hence the feminine body-subject – is constructed; in doing this, they produce a 'practiced and subjected' body, that is, a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed" (2003, 33). Thus, contemporary performance praxis becomes a space to stage interventions by the Indian female choreographer/dancer. These interventions challenge dominant discourses of representation in classical performance practice, and perform agency through the construction of a contemporary feminine/ist identity/ies on the theatre stage. Through the use of altered temporality, spatiality and presence, both Ratnam and Sarabhai counter the rulebooks of classical dance through their unruly dancing bodies. They adopt cyclical narratives and juxtapose ab-

stract movement with spoken word, silence and stage design. They invoke goddess mythologies, as a counter narrative, to the colourless *Nayika* on the Bharatanatyam stage. They often represent the other and situate the self in much of their work. In sum, they de-familiarise this 'practiced and subjected' body in their feminist choreographies, thereby negotiating a space for the Indian female dancing body to reconfigure herself.

2.3.iii Women in Hindu Mythology

The spirit of the *Bhakti* movement, the cult of devotion, scourges the form of Bharatanatyam. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha* are the two major Indian epics from which the Bharatanatyam *Margam* derives content for its choreography. As Lopez points out, mythology in India depicts women as "devoted, submissive, chaste, religious, benevolent and with a great capacity for self-sacrifice" (2006, 201). However, these conceptualisations of kinship and gender relations that are often presented on the performance stage have little/no relevance in urban India today.

The heroine of The *Mahabharatha*, who is responsible for a major turn in events, is Draupadi. Even though in the *Swayamvara* (competitions assigned by the girl's father to find a suitable groom for his daughter), Prince Arjuna, disguised as a Brahmin, wins Draupadi's hand in marriage, she is forced to wed all the *Pandavas* (Arjuna and his four brothers). This is because the *Pandavas* are instructed to share everything they have amongst themselves by their mother Kunti, whose words they never disobey. Hence, poor Draupadi pays the price, even though her heart belongs with Arjuna. She is forced to spend one year at a time with each of the brothers, and bears a son with each one of them. In a game of dice against the *Kauravas,* one of the brothers Yudhisthira put everything he had at stake. Upon losing all his material wealth, his kingdom, his brothers and even himself, he does not accept defeat. Yudhisthira places Draupadi as the final bet in the gamble, and is

defeated by the Kauravas. Following this, Draupadi is dragged from her chamber into the heart of the royal court.

Draupadi stands in the heart of the court and questions the moral right of Yudhisthira to stake her when he has lost himself, his freedom and, as a consequence, does not possess anything/ anyone. The court remains silent, with nobody able to provide a satisfactory answer. Following this, Duryodhana commands his younger brother Dushasana to disrobe her of her saree in front of the entire court. A helpless Draupadi prays to Lord Krishna, and according to Vyas' epic, is helped in a miraculous incident by *Dharma* (just morality, commonly interpreted as a metaphor for Lord Krishna—the god of morality). As Dushasana tirelessly tries to strip her, layers and layers of her saree spin off her in an endless cycle, thus never unveiling her naked body. Duryodhana further provokes the brothers, by asking them to detach themselves from Yudhishtira's rule and take their wife back. However, they do not condemn their allegiance towards their eldest brother. Thus, she is wronged time and again for no fault of her own. Her end comes as the most shocking, when all the brothers retire from the world and make their way to heaven and she is the first one to fall. To this, the cheeky Yudhishthira, who staked her on a game of dice in the first place, reasons "Though we were all equal unto her, she had great partiality for Vijayan (Arjuna). She obtains the fruit of that conduct today."

The story of Draupadi is often performed as dramatised segments in numerous *Varnams* and *Padams* that are composed and choreographed in praise of Lord Krishna. However, the performance-text always depicts Lord Krishna as the hero who comes to her rescue by providing her with unending yarns of saree. The injustices done to her and the complexity of her responsive emotions are never extolled in these traditional choreographies. In contraposition, Sarabhai played Draupadi in Peter Brook's seminal 1985 play T*he Mahabharata/Le Mahabharata.* She spent five years touring the world with the production in English and French and often remembers the controversial dramaturgical choice that she adopted to re-vision Draupadi through a feminist lens. Sarabhai

speaks of the monumental influence of this experience in convincing her that the dance needed gender sensitisation and the arts were a conduit for social change. Draupadi does not quite leave Sarabhai and is explored in her solo performance work, *In search of the Goddess* (2000), discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

The heroine of The *Ramayana*, Sita, commonly cited in Hinduism as the pious, chaste and courageous wife of Prince/Lord Rama, the utterance of whose very name is believed to ensure women a multitude of blessings, also suffered numerous injustices in the progression of Valmiki's epic and its subsequent versions. Soon after her marriage to Rama, she follows her husband into exile in the forest with his brother Lakshmana. But, she is abducted by the demon King Ravana and jailed on his island. Sita resists all of Ravana's advances and dedicatedly waits for her husband to come to her rescue. Sita is finally reunited with Rama, after a battle in which Rama slays Ravana.

Sita's hell, however, has only just begun. She is made to endure the *Agnipariksha* (fire test that determines the 'purity' of a woman), and passes it and is deemed pure and returned to Prince Rama, whom she accompanies to Ayodhya. However, on further baseless accusations on her faithfulness and chastity from the local public of Ayodhya (specifically a washerman), she is banished from the kingdom and sent to live in the forest. The then-pregnant Sita takes refuge in Sage Valmiki's dwelling, where she gives birth to her twin sons Lava and Kusha. Once her sons have been accepted by their father, in a dramatic turn of events, she lets the womb of 'Mother' Earth swallow her, as she is unable to bear the pains of this world (the pains of being a woman). In a useful analysis of what Bhatt terms the *Sita Syndrome*, she informs the reader of how such narratives and performance texts, passed through the oral tradition, construct racial and gender identities in local and diasporic Indian communities as "Sita becomes the marker of ideal womanhood" (2008, 155).

It is these very narratives that are catechised by contemporary performing bodies today. The mother of contemporary feminist performance praxis in India, Chandralekha, spent her dance career attempting to demystify Bharatanatyam, and to understand the form as a language in its own right

(Menon 2005). She worked to free it from the tiresome *Nayaka-Nayika* relationships, god/goddess narratives and what Sircar refers to as the "veil of religiosity" (2003, 92). Her primary concern remained with a deep investigation of the spatial and temporal aspects of the form, and a re-imagining of a secular body in performance.

Ratnam, on the other hand, works in and through mythology, to embody contemporary progressive values. She stages interventions that sublimate mythic narratives and re-appropriate tradition in a manner that is relevant in the here and now. For instance, in her solo Neo-Bharatam production *a million SITA-s* (2010), Ratnam explores the protagonist Sita through her intricate relationships with the other (under-represented) women in the myth; Surpanakha, Ahalya, Manthara and Sabari. Through this approach, she creates a concoction of images that sketch Sita's 'million' roles as a mother, friend, scholar, lover of nature, goddess and ultimately an "undaunted woman who choses her own way" (Saranyan 2011). Thus, through a contemporary re-reading of myth in present day Chennai, Ratnam's performing body becomes the prism for the symbolic refraction of multi-layered images of women in mythology. The sub-texts in her performance work also draw parallels between these mythical *goddesses* and the real woman in contemporary India. A detailed analysis of *a million SITA-s* follows in Chapter Five. Sarabhai too has re-visioned Sita in her most iconic work to date, *Sita's Daughters* (1990), as a contemporary woman who fights the hegemonic forces of patriarchal oppression. *Sita's Daughters* is analysed in detail in Chapter Four. Sircar is right to remind us:

> Deconstruction of the classical and traditional dance ideologies reveals an oppression of women, class and/or caste exploitation and patriarchal Brahminical discrimination. Neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism pressure the dance economy to remain in a self-contained bubble of nostalgia, to maintain the appeal of the exotic and pseudo-erotic, thinly disguised by a veil of religiosity. (Sircar 2003, 92)

There exists a clear need to transgress these modes of representation and narrativisation that position women as the objectified other. In a re-visioning of the performing bodies of Ratnam and Sarabhai as feminine writing, I attempt to bring them from the periphery to the centre stage, where their bodily texts can be examined under the spotlight. As Baumgardner and Richards reason, "Testimony is where feminism starts. Historically, women's person [performance] stories have been the evidence of where the movement needs to go politically, and furthermore, that there is a need to move forward" (Manifesta, 20). The performance motives, choices, aesthetics, processes and presentations of Ratnam and Sarabhai that I will analyse, are embodied evidences of this "need to move forward". With the right-wing BJP government at the helm of affairs in India at present (after their landslide victory in 2014 securing the right to form majority government for the first time since the 1984 general election), and its open commitment to a Hindutva nationalist ideology and sectarian politics, there is a palpable trend of returning to the cult of *Bhakti* in Bharatanatyam. Thus, I believe that it has never been more pressing than now to read the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai as an embodied politics of protest and a transformative site of hope in the territory beyond Bharatanataym.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The ethnographic inquiry and fieldwork approaches adopted in this research include performance analysis, archival research, semi-structured interviews and participant-observation methods. All these methods have been evaluated as 'low risk' research involving human participants, in accordance with the policies of the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. I have obtained ethics approval from the committee, and have taken every care to uphold my liability as a student researcher to the University, to the dance community and to the participants in the research project.

Being an Indian Bharatanatyam dancer myself, and having lived in Chennai for around a decade, I am culturally competent and have interacted with professional performing artists and scholars on numerous occasions for research, learning and personal correspondence. This situated me in an advantageous position for ethnographic inquiry and fieldwork, which took place at the two metropolitan cities of Chennai and Ahmedabad in India. The first interview conducted with Anita Ratnam took place on January 4th 2014 at her studio-cum-residence in Chennai, and the subsequent interview took place on June 20th 2016 at the same venue as above. The first interview conducted with Mallika Sarabhai took place on July 15th 2014 at her office in *Darpana* in Ahmedabad, and the subsequent interview took place on July 13th 2016 at the same venue as above. Throughout the course of the research, I have been in touch through email, phone conversations and other exchanges with both the dancers/choreographers and these personal communications have been inculcated, with permission, to add value to the research.

2.5 Limitations of the Research

Due to the significance and scope of the research, and owing to restrictions of time and space, I set borders of the research that I attempt not to transgress. The research specifically focuses on contemporary feminist performance praxis as a continuum of the neo-classical tradition of Bharatanatyam; conceptualised, choreographed and performed by two women from a similar race-religious-caste-class background who occupy privileged positions within Indian metropolises.

A significant body of contemporary performance work has been developed and performed by artists with a hybrid identity in diaspora communities of the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom. An examination of these performance sites and bodies as sites, including the politics of naming, have been addressed by practitioners and scholars such as Coorlawala (1994;

2008), Jeyasingh (2010), Katrak (2012), Lopez Y Royo (2004), Meduri (1988; 2004; 2008) and Roy (1997), and provide viable areas for further avenues of research.

Similar analysis of the classical, the contemporary and the relationships between the same in the context of Kathak, have been examined in thorough detail in the works of Lakhia (2003) Chakravorty (2008) and Mitra (2015). Within India, the performance texts and bodily repertoires of practitioners such as Aditi Mangaldas and her *Drishtikon Dance Foundation*, Madhu Natraj and her *NatyaSTEM Dance Kampni*, and dancing couple Vidha and Abhimanyu Lal may also be of interest to researchers attracted to kinaesthetic traces of conformity and departure from the traditional structure of Kathak. In the context of Odissi, *Nrityagram Dance Village*, founded by Protima Gauri and currently headed by Surupa Sen and Bijoyini Satpathy, is engaged in the creation of some very thoughtful performance texts and repertoires that are receiving global critical acclaim. These experiments are brimming with promise and a detailed analysis of their performance aesthetics and audience reception have much to offer scholarship on contemporary Indian dance in the 21st century that is being made, performed and circulated by women of colour within the subcontinent.

Chapter Three: Of Contested Terrains, Early Transgressions and Fertile Territories

In this chapter, I have opted to follow an interdisciplinary approach to illuminate the major issues being investigated in this thesis, i.e. the politics of gender and genre in Indian dance, particularly in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai that I situate in the borderlands of Bharatanatyam. It seems to me that such an interdisciplinary reading is the more useful norm in dissecting contemporary dance and drama, and I draw on theory from an array of allied fields, namely dance studies, performance studies, gender studies, cultural theory and postcolonial theory. I map the choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai in the charged space beyond Bharatanatyam, set out the features and functions of the works of pioneering contemporary choreographers who have influenced the cultural production methods and choreographic processes of Ratnam and Sarabhai, and put forward a framework for reading the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. These three aims of the chapter will necessarily incorporate a review of the related literature. Since I attempt to situate, trace and write about choreography with the rigour and insight of practice, I have refrained from labelling the chapter as a literature review, but the integration and analysis of relevant literature enables this section to serve the functions of a literature review.

In locating the embodied politics of Ratnam and Sarabhai beyond Bharatanatyam, I advocate a heterogeneous genre informed by gender, rather than advancing a homogeneous syntax, unified aesthetic and/or express codification. I also aim to contribute to the reader's understanding of earlier experimentations in these borderlands, particularly in the works of modern pioneers Rabindranath Tagore, Uday Shankar, Chandralekha and Mrinalini Sarabhai (legendary dancer/choreographer and mother of Mallika Sarabhai), so as to recognise the patterns of continuum in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. In the concluding section of this chapter, I reflect on

what choreography means in the context of Bharatanatyam, and in the body of work of these two women. By means of this reflection, I am able to read below the lines of their *adavus* and beneath surfaces of their *Abhinaya* to generate a framework for interpreting the feminist choreographies of these two women based on shared dramaturgical devices, mutual overlaps of process, and commonalities of embodied sociopolitical commentary. The framework I have generated takes into account past and present literature and is organised in a thematic, rather than a logical or chronological, order.

3.1 Beyond Bharatanatyam: Bharatanatyam and its Borderlands

In recovering aspects of the politics of the female body in motion, Ratnam and Sarabhai have evolved a contemporary feminist choreographic praxis in the borderlands of Bharatanatyam. I theorise the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai in the charged space of the beyond. Bhabha characterises this space as follows:

> The beyond is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past…. Beginnings and endings may be the sustainable myths of the middle years; but in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words au-delà - here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth. (Bhabha 1994, 2)

Both artists adopt a hybridised aesthetic that draws upon their lived reality to embody a political stance to provide a scathing critique of power differentials set out in a gendered binary in the Hindu mythological texts of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. This mythology is transmitted widely through oral traditions and acted out in the linear narratives of solo and ensemble Bharatanatyam

performances. As was addressed in the preceding chapter, the master narratives of culture seldom operate in isolation, but interact with sociopolitical forces to reflect the same invisibility of the female body and reinforce antiquated ideas of the Indian woman in the social order. Due to the nature of 'in-betweenness' in the repertoires of Ratnam and Sarabhai—evidenced in the manner in which the women adapt traditional Bharatanatyam movement vocabulary, invoke and subvert the canon of Hindu mythology, inculcate images and motifs of ritual with interrogations of the form itself, harness energies from meditative and martial traditions, and incorporate adaptations of the literary avant-garde in their work—I argue that their artistic choices negotiate the multiple strands of the indigenous and the modern in compelling ways. In Chapter Two, I also elaborately mapped their feminist choreographies as multi-sensorial experiences as they refuse to privilege the sense of sight in the creation of their performance works, opting instead for an integrated approach to the senses. This interweaving of the semiotic and the symbolic activates the sensory perceptions of the spectator and requires an embodied engagement in the making of meaning. Such contemporary choreographies do not exist as isolated experiments, but are part of a movement of heterogeneous disrupted progressions that began to surface parallel to the construction of neo-classical dance forms in modern India.

The orientation of Indian performing artists to contemporary dance is distinctive to the approach adopted in the West, for it does not imply the desertion of traditional creative practices and classical movement vocabulary. The contemporary in Indian dance can be understood through both its similarities and differences from the classical, and is inherently plural in its manifestations. In the context of Indonesian dance, Murgiyanto refers to this as an "approach to dance creation", rather than an evolution of a specific style (2009, 207). This remains a useful way to understand contemporary experimentation that goes beyond Bharatanatyam. Since this progression was not homogeneous and/or linear, the term contemporary in the context of Indian dance is laden with

frailties. Undoubtedly, what these approaches do share in common is the articulation of the body as a site for intervention in the present moment. As Bhabha goes on to explain:

> Being in the 'beyond' then is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell 'in the beyond', is also, as I have shown, to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe a part of our cultural contemporaneity; to re-inscribe our human, historic commonality; to touch the future on its hither side. In that sense, then, the intervening space 'beyond', becomes a space of intervention in the here and now. (Bhabha 1994, 10)

The commonality in the choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai is the commitment to contemporaneity of expression as an intervention of what Bhabha refers to as the here and now. This intervening space allows them to participate in a revisionary time through subversive strategies that counter the representations of women in the canons of Hindu mythology and Sanskrit treatises of performance; oscillate between the muscle memories of traditional ritual, classical dance and contemporary lived experience that rearticulate their alternative modernities; adopt pan-Asian aesthetics and transnational methods of production that reference a certain universalism; and provide a glimpse of utopia through the advocacy of a transformative politics. Each of these commonalities will be examined in greater detail in the final section of this chapter.

In the context of Indian dance, Chatterjea remarks on the "absence of a fully theorised contemporary genre" (2004, xii). In further discussing the difficulties of terminology, Sarkar Munsi points out that the Western contexts of terms such as *modern* and *contemporary* complicate the usage and understandings of the terms within Indian dance discourses, but nonetheless she supports the use of the term contemporary in the context of Indian dance that defies the rigid categorisations of *classical, modern* and *folk* (2010). Katrak adopts this point of view as well, and reminds us of the legacy of nearly two hundred years of colonial rule and its lasting effects on Indian culture and, by extension, discourse (2011). Further, innumerable subaltern theorists have challenged the Eurocen-

tric version of modernity which proclaims the West as the maker of modern history. Purkayastha questions the assumed Euro-American prerogative to modernity over other cultures, and challenges the 'not-yet-modern' view of India's dance works, even as early as the 1930s (2014). Lopez Y Royo warns us about the dangers of a dichotomous perspective:

> The dichotomous perspective of 'modern' versus 'anti-modern' carries a perverse logic of which we need to be wary: modernity is assumed to be western, a western legacy or a western import, ruinous according to some (but welcomed by others), seen as going fundamentally against the very fabric of Indian culture and society. This is an insidious view, an entrapment which locks mind and prevents us from seeing the entanglement of separate networks of power which make up contemporary dance discourses in India today. (Lopez Y Royo 2003, 154)

She posits contemporary dance in India as "post-classical", not in the temporal sense, but in the approach to dance creation and choreography. Lopez Y Royo writes that contemporary dance aimed to settle the score with neo-classical dance through "conservation, preservation, revival and painstaking reconstruction" on the one hand, and through "tension, rupture, dynamism and subversion" on the other (2003, 155). Delanty (2004) also draws our attention to the multiplication of theories of alternative modernities, global modernities, hybrid modernities, and entangled modernities, to put forward for consideration the idea that a Eurocentric singular notion of modernity has expanded to make room for the multiplicity of modernities.

It is this multiplicity of modernities that is the common thread amongst contemporary experiments in Indian dance that dwell in the beyond (of Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi) and find a home in their borderlands. I espouse Brah's definition of borders:

> Borders: arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where fear of the other is the fear of the self; places where claims to

> ownership - claims to ‘mine’, ‘yours’ and ‘theirs’ - are staked out, contested, defended and fought over time. (Brah 1996, 198)

History bears witness to the fact that change is the only constant, and this is especially true given the volatile nature of politics and society and its tangible and intangible effects on culture. By limiting herself to the “social, cultural and psychic” borders influenced by her geography alone, the Indian female Bharatanatyam dancer/choreographer is subjugated by the single master narrative and dominated by the phallogocentric order (Brah 1996, 198). However, Ratnam and Sarabhai are neither concerned with an obedient passivity in remaining fully within the borders of Bharatanatyam, nor a violent rebellion in completely exiling themselves from the dividing lines of classicism. Instead, they operate in the beyond, with their left leg in and their right leg out, allowing for their multi-locationality to inform a melting pot of influences in their body of work.

Early experiments, such as the alternative modernities in the dance-dramas of Tagore, the transnational methods of production in the repertoire of Uday Shankar, the postmodern aesthetics in the choreographies of Chandralekha, and the woman-conscious characteristics in the ensemble productions of Mrinalini Sarabhai, are examples of the projects of modernity in dance against the backdrop of a colonial and/or postcolonial and newly independent India. Dwelling in the borderlands, the space beyond Bharatanatyam, these experiments used Bharatanatyam (and other allied neo-classical or folk forms in the case of Tagore and Shankar) as both a starting and departure point for their choreographies. In doing so, they compounded and challenged our constructions of classicism, encountered cultures within and beyond the realms of India and formulated embodied responses that were refreshing rather than reactionary. Brah reminds us that “there is no a priori reason to suppose that cultural encounters will invariably entail conflict. Conflict may or may not ensue, and instead, cultural symbiosis, improvisation and innovation may emerge as a far more probable scenario” (Brah 1996, 41). Much of the hybridised aesthetics of these artists that I discuss in the

following section are referenced in the above statement, and find echoes in the choreographic signatures of Ratnam and Sarabhai.

Katrak (2008) enumerates the pros and cons of contemporary expression in South Asian performing arts. She states that the positive experiments of contemporary expression involve the "generation of new movement material, including traditions adopted from other movement systems, as well as thematic differences that draw upon various social and political issues" (Katrak 2008, 218). Katrak (2008) signals the loss of *Bhakti* (devotion) as elaborated in the *Natyasastra* as the predominant downside. Whilst I largely agree with all of the points listed above, in the final section of this chapter, I devise a framework through which I read, analyse and interpret the performance works of Ratnam and Sarabhai. In doing so, I try to illuminate a range of arguments that complement Katrak's enumeration of the pluses of contemporary expression in Indian dance. However, in the particular way that Ratnam and Sarabhai dissolve boundaries of the sacred, the secular and the profane, I disagree with the idea that their feminist choreographies signal a loss of devotion, choosing instead to articulate how *Bhakti* is re-figured through an Irigarayan exploration of the sensible transcendental in the work of these two women. I regard this re-figuration in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai as profound, for they open up confined notions of *Bhakti* and allow it to assume polyvalent relevance in the present moment. In the work of Ratnam, her contemporary expression manifests as a tunnelling of feminist consciousness, an invocation of goddess mythologies, and the incorporation of silence as an act of radical resistance. In the work of Sarabhai, her contemporary expression manifests as an invocation of goddess mythologies (both women share this dramaturgical device in their embodied politics), a tool of communication for social and political change in her unique brand of artivism, and a feminist approach to the economics of dance circulation. At the heart of both women's choreographies is a sense of the transfinite. Kristeva proposes, "The transfinite in language, as what is 'beyond the sentence', is probably foremost a going through and beyond the naming. This means that it is going through and beyond the sign, the phrase

and the linguistic finitude." (Kristeva 1992f, 190). As I noted in the grounding of the critical framework in Chapter Two, Kristeva's semiotic chora nods to the significance of going beyond the verbal, i.e. to the visceral element, an intangible influence on an individual's making sense/sense making response. As Irigarary asserts, "form is never complete in her", and it is this process of eternally becoming that allows the feminine/feminist writing to continually shape-shift, making the way to become "something else at any moment" (Irigaray 1991, 55). This, in my view, is the single most important subversive power of the contemporary expression of Ratnam and Sarabhai. In attempting to reclaim and render feminine subjectivity on the performance stage, Ratnam and Sarabhai push their work into the realms of the abstract and contaminate their choreographies with perception, sensation and emotion. Like Kristeva, Douglas refers to all borderline states as scenes of conceivable pollution (1980). I therefore do not attempt to disguise the 'contaminants' in analysing the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, but champion the infinite possibilities embraced by the transgression of the thetic phase in their body of work. It is in these borderlands of Bharatanatyam that the blood, sweat and tears of these women are brimming with potential to reconstruct the female dancing body through an introspective synthesis of the genotext and phenotext.

The landmark 1984 gathering, the *East-West Encounter*[5], organised by Georg Lechner, the then Director of Max Meuller Bhavan (an institution named after comparative religions scholar Max Müller and promoting a wide spectrum of cultural events with the aim of presenting German culture in contemporary contexts) in association with the National Centre for Performing Arts, Mumbai, opened up important conversations about transnationalism and modernism in Indian dance, and has been dissected in the writings of Katrak (2011) and Purkayastha (2014). Whilst there is no need to revisit the contributions of dancers and scholars in detail again here, it bears noting that Lechner observed that there were two types of contemporary practitioners in the audience at the

[5]The East-West Encounter initiated in 1984 by the efforts of Georg Lechner was a historic moment for contemporary dance in India, for it initiated dialogues between Indian and European dancers and choreographers on new directions in Indian dance. Lechner repeated the encounter in 1985.

1984 gathering. He differentiated dancers who "redeemed from oblivion earlier, forgotten and distorted dance elements" from dancers who "ventured forth into the realm of dialogue between eastern and western dance forms" ("Dance Encounter", 7).

In some sense, Ratnam's and Sarabhai's feminist choreographies fall into both and neither category. On the one hand, they both have consistently spoken of going back to the *Natyasastra*, where strict boundaries between the different art forms of dance, music, theatre, painting and sculpture did not exist. On the other hand, Sarabhai creates from a distinctly Indian aesthetic and Ratnam engages a pan-Asian aesthetic, but both women attempt to refrain from the adoption of identifiably Western choreographic elements, despite being influenced by Euro-American literature and methods of production. Both Ratnam and Sarbahai create performance works that encounter "newness" in the manner suggested by Bhabha:

> The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (Bhabha 1994, 10)

I find this conception of Bhabha's "borderline work of culture" useful in unpacking the performance works of Ratnam and Sarabhai. For neither is their body of work a product of organic evolution in Bharatanatyam, nor is it an outright rejection of the traditional tenets of classicism. Their feminist choreographies therefore can only be conceptualised as re-visions; ruptures; and acts of resistance in the space beyond Bharatanatyam.

Like the choreographies of their predecessors, Ratnam and Sarabhai labour to challenge the multiple othering of the contemporary Indian female dancer, "trapped forever in the gap between image and experience, objectivised in performance, erased or generated only within the boundaries

of current dominant symbolic discourse, marked by gender, nationality and global powers" as will be witnessed in the (syn)aesthetic analysis of their select feminist choreographies (Coorlawala 2011, 65). The following section will address how the preoccupations of modernist choreographers with a pan-Asian aesthetic, transnational methods of production, postmodern explorations of subjectivity, woman-conscious themes and, above all, the reframing of gender and sexuality in dance, were exemplified in the choreographic choices of Tagore, Shankar, Chandralekha and Mrinalini Sarabhai. The artistic work of these four choreographers set the stage for contemporary expressions of Ratnam and Sarabhai in the decades to follow, and I choose to focus my discussions on Tagore, Shankar, Chandralekha and Mrinalini Sarabhai based on a single aesthetic philosophy of each of the artists respectively that has been deeply influential in the feminist choreographies of both Ratnam and Sarabhai.

3.2 Modernism and Its Transgressions

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and Uday Shankar (1900-1977) were the pioneers of a modern dance approach in an Indian context, a silenced movement that ran parallel to the renaissance of Indian neo-classical dance. Indian dance can only be analysed within the broader skeleton of Indian nationalism and, as Chakravorty (2000) notes, Indian classical dance was a by-product of the celebrated national ideology of India, formed by the convoluted discourses of the 'east' and 'west,' which had the effect of dancers self-exoticising their dancing bodies and performance texts. Two centuries of colonial rule had led to an internal colonisation of sorts through the hegemonic dominance of Brahminical codes and aligned penetration of Victorian values. The nature of this movement, with the emphasis it placed on 'classicism'—essentially a return to ancient texts with an agenda to infuse religious spirituality and gender codes on stage in an attempt to maintain

'purity'—ensured that the neo-classical forms of the era presented a linear, sacred and unquestioned connection with the past.

This style of presentation, with its 'pure' lineage and 'sacred' content was widely circulated within India and beyond its borders by touring, migration and displacement. By contrast, anything modern carried with it the notion of 'impurity' and was denounced, for it did not result from a tradition seen as 'unbroken', nor did it bear the identifiable signature of the exotic Orient, a virtual requirement for work created during the years coinciding with the rise of Indian nationalism. Both Rabindranath Tagore and Uday Shankar were invested in choreographic work that defied rigid categorisation within accepted dance forms of the time, although they did not receive the same level of financial support nor the same welcome reception as reconstructed classical dance forms did (Lopez Y Royo 2003).

Fast forward a few years and Chandralekha (1928-2006) and Mrinalini Sarabhai (1918-2016) contributed significant efforts to answering the 'woman question' in choreographies created in postcolonial India. They were amongst the first female practitioners to have specifically trained in Bharatanatyam, and to find ways of questioning, subverting, traversing and transgressing the representation of the *Nayika* in Bharatanatyam. Below I address the contribution of these four practitioners in the specific ways that they have affected the aesthetics of Ratnam and Sarabhai.

3.2.i Rabindranath Tagore: The Search for an Alternate Modernity

Rabindranath Tagore was a poet, writer, philosopher, musician, artist, educationist and social reformer whose educational institution in *Shantiniketan*,[6] founded by him in the year 1902 in West

[6] Shantiniketan was a small town in West Bengal where Tagore founded an educational institution based on an open-air learning environment and embracing an intuitive and inclusive concept of holistic education. The school itself is often referred to in common parlance as Shantiniketan, the name of the town. Later, the institution went on to become an autonomous University Visva-Bharati, where higher education incorporated study of the religion, literature, history, science and art of Eastern and Western traditions.

Bengal, endorsed a pedagogical system that was not mainstream, but instead embraced the possibilities that are born out of collaboration within and across the borders of mainland India and through the ideologies of pan-Asianism and universalism. This was the place of origin of some of the most prominent cultural and creative ventures of modern India (Purkayastha 2009). The political temperament of the early twentieth century offers insights into the directions taken by the institution during its gilded age, including the environment in which Tagore's eclectic *Nritya-Natya* or dance-drama, based on his dramatic texts were born.

Bengal was the then powerhouse of nationalist ideology in India. In order to dilute the strength of this movement, Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India at the time, recommended a partition of Bengal (Bandyopadhyay 2004). This was in line with the *Divide and Rule* strategy that the British adopted in a deliberate effort to bolster the Raj. In response to this, the *Swadeshi* or *Be Indian, Buy Indian* movement was born in 1905. The movement involved the mass boycotting of British products and campaigning for the manufacture and consumption of domestic produce (Gonsalves 2010). Tagore's positioning in relation to this movement is interesting, for at the outset he was a supporter of the *Swadeshi* movement but later denounced nationalism altogether, opting for a liberal ideology of universalism instead. Despite his close friendship with Gandhi, a keen supporter of the *Swadeshi* strategy to achieve *Swaraj* or self-rule, and other such nationalist frames that reflected the collective psyche of the Indian people at the time, Tagore subscribed to a different school of thought. He was a forward thinker and propagated ideals of universalism, as evidenced by the motto "Where the world finds its home in one nest" of the *Visva-Bharati* University founded by him in 1921 within the environ of *Shantiniketan*. At his school, he stressed the interconnectedness of the art forms of India with Asia at large, and sought to unearth a pan-Asian aesthetic, whilst being open to Western influences for free communication between seemingly opposite hemispheres.

In 1913, Tagore was the first Asian to be awarded a Nobel Prize in Literature, largely for his collection of poems *Gitanjali*. Multiple verses from the *Gitanjali* provided the inspiration for Rat-

nam's *Avani - A handful of Dust…* (2011), and I examine the performance work's artistry in Chapter Five. It was just prior to this that Tagore composed *Jana Gana Mana* and *Amar Shonar Bangla* which went on to become the post-independence national anthems of India and Bangladesh respectively. This series of events, along with his literary and artistic endeavours, as well as documented communications, give us a glimpse of his viewpoint on nationalism, transnationalism and universalism.

As mentioned previously, the surrounding political climate and Tagore's individualised responses through his art and activism set the stage against which Tagore's *Nritya-Natya*, or dance-dramas based on his literary work, were born. He encouraged a unique receptiveness to movement systems originating in the East and West, and found creative ways to incorporate them in his performance works, that were an outlet to increase public awareness of issues that were important at the time, such as poverty, illiteracy, gender discrimination and caste politics. His work also questioned the boundaries of dance, music and theatre. In so doing, he engaged with an alternate modernity that was not solely influenced by Western liberalism. Rather, it was birthed out of his universalist ideals as an Indian intellectual living in colonial India and widely influenced by pan-Asian aesthetics encountered on his travels, whilst also being open to the possibilities of knowledge imbibed through interactions with the West.

Purkayastha points out that Tagore's dance-dramas ruptured the existing models of Indian dance by striking "a fine balance between the complexity of stylised representational movements and the simplicity of expression of those very movements" (2014, 38). The extensive viewing of performance works on his travels through Indonesia and Japan allowed for an adaptation of technique, tradition and textual analysis for stage through an imaginative engagement enabled by these international encounters, reflected through his process and product. That he favoured abstraction to realism was no secret, and was evidenced in the body of work he produced for the stage. Sarkar Munsi notes:

> The role of Tagore in creating a platform for dance with space for both the male and female performers is understood looking at the texts he created for stage performance. The thematic content always ensured equal participation of both sexes on stage, while the text inevitably conveyed a secular, modern message of the changing times and when performed they displayed a visual representation of the new changing era that was fast approaching. His female characters were strong, versatile, undaunted by male hegemonistic presence and taking on social and cultural challenges in a manner equal to the male counterparts. (2010, 220)

His three most popular dance dramas, *Chitrangada, Chandalika* and *Shyama,* choreographed along with his students in the 1930's, conceptualised women and their selfhood through a gender-sensitive perspective that is far removed in much of the neo-classical Indian dances that circulate the theatre stages even in the present era (Sarkar Munsi 2010; De 2011; Purkayastha 2014). Although the subject of much scholarly attention, I briefly trace how these performance works provided the foundation for form, theme, content and narratives that transgressed boundaries of nationalism, classicism and gender codes in Indian dance. I analyse how Tagore's sensitivity to expressive dance as a dramaturgical device for embodying the text and his commitment to classical and folk dance movement vocabulary as a pedagogical tool for communication function in the analysis of his three most popular dance-dramas in the sub-sections that follow.

Chitrangada (1936)

The central character of *Chitrangada* is a female warrior princess who shapes the course of the plot by exerting her own agency. By controlling her physicality through summoning the god of love, Chitrangada, shape-shifts from her masculine and unappealing appearance and demeanour into an ethereal, female figure. Arjuna rejects Chitrangada's advances, stating that he wishes to remain celibate and save himself for marriage. Chitrangada is suspect of Arjuna's initial rejection of her

sexual forthrightness on the grounds of celibacy, convinced instead that he is rejecting her advances because he is not attracted to her physical appearance and seeks to consummate her union with him. Transgressing the sexed body of her birth, Chitrangada takes her sexuality into her own hands and ultimately wins the attention of Arjuna. Giving into her sexual allure, Arjuna and Surupa (the shape-shifted Chitrangada) indulge their primal desires for each other. On realising the shallow and indulgent attraction for each other, they question their own motives in the relationship. In the meantime, Arjuna hears of the bravado of the warrior princess Chitrangada and hopes to meet her in person. Only too keen to gain her identity and selfhood, Surupa reveals herself as the real Chitrangada. In her translation of Tagore's verse, Pukrayastha draws our attention to the closing lines, "I am Chitrangada, a royal princess. Not a goddess, not an ordinary woman. I am not someone you can put on a pedestal and worship. Nor am I someone you can ignore or leave behind. When you have me by your side in fair times and foul, when you agree to let me be your partner in hardship, only then can you truly recognise me. Today I present myself - I am Chitrangada, a royal princess" (2014, 40). Her demand to be considered an equal is of no small significance. Further, Arjuna is not validated through the prism of patriarchy, but rather refracted as a flawed human who did not uphold his morality but gave in to his moment of weakness.

In his staging, Tagore cast the already promising and upcoming Bharatanatyam dancer, Mrinalini Sarabhai, who was then a student at the university at *Shantikniketan,* as Arjuna. It is the heaviness of the stamping, power of rhythm and dynamism of movement that influenced Tagore's choice of Bharatanatyam to depict the movements of Arjuna. He wished for Mrinalini to be autonomous in her choreographic choices. He used cross-casting and cross-dressing as a theatrical device in an effort to challenge the constructed roles of gender and their associated binaries. This calls to mind Dolan's suggestion that cross-casting is an effective device for the stage as "a proper place to explore gender ambiguity, not to expunge it cathartically from society, but to play with, confound and deconstruct gender categories" (Dolan 1992, 8). Tagore often explored the transgressive potential of

this practice in his dance-dramas as a dramaturgical device that controversialises modesty in clothing, grace in demeanour, and dichotomy in gender categorisation for the female dancing body. In this manner, he dismantled power structures inherent in neo-classical dance forms and adopted mimetic strategies to push the limits of exploring femininity in Bharatanatyam and beyond.

Chandalika (1938)

Chandalika was originally conceived as a short play in 1933, and later reworked as a script for a dance-drama. Drawing on a Buddhist legend from Nepal from the source text *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* (Mitra 1882) which places a monk as the central character, Tagore's adaptation re-visions Prakriti, a girl from the 'untouchable' caste, as the protagonist in the play. In the original text, Prakriti's carnal attraction for a Buddhist monk, Ananda, who passes by for water leads her to employ the sorcery of her mother, Maya, resulting in the monk landing up at her door at night. The monk prays for forgiveness to Lord Buddha, who weakens the black magic of the mother and the narrative culminates with Prakriti being made 'pure' again through renouncing her worldly pleasures for sainthood.

In counter-position, Prakriti's obsession with Ananda is accredited to Buddha's acknowledgement of her as a living being. As a woman of the untouchable caste, she has felt invisible her whole life. Her validation by another human being, especially by a man of a higher caste, as is the case in Tagore's adaptation, is introduced as her initial awareness of her body's materiality and sexuality. It is through the act of "just a sprinkling of water" that Prakriti is first awakened to her self-worth, and made consciously aware of her burgeoning womanhood (Purkayastha 2014). Tagore continuously returns to this metaphor in his choreography, thereby drawing the attention of the audience to the intersecting vectors of gender, caste and class in Prakriti's body. Through the portrayal of Prakriti as a female body of colour overcome with a desire to possess Ananda, Tagore intention-

ally reverses the gaze. Drawing on the powers her mother possessed as a high priestess, Prakriti brings back a dishevelled Ananda, his spiritual powers failing to combat the forces of magic unleashed by her mother. It is interesting to note here that her mother, Maya, is not portrayed as evil, as is predominantly the case for female sorcerers, black magicians and witches of lower birth, but rather re-imagined by Tagore as a woman with immense power who is willing to use that agency for the fulfilment of her daughter, an innate, albeit essential, maternal instinct. It eventually dawns on Prakriti that Ananda is now only a shadow of who he used to be, and she requests her mother to reverse the damage by returning him to his previous self (Purkayastha 2009).

Purkayastha (2009; 2014) draws our attention to the many political figures who viewed the show, including Gandhi, whose sociopolitical stance on untouchables and relentless fight for their freedom from the binding forces of tradition that place them at the bottom of the hierarchal structures of caste and class, heavily influenced the staging of *Chandalika.* In Tagore's dance-dramas, content dictates form, as opposed to the case in neo-classical dancing. In the staging of *Chandalika*, this is evidenced through the use of Bharatanatyam by Mrinalini Sarabhai who played the role of the mother, Maya. Mrinalini's daughter Mallika Sarabhai also maintains that content dictates form in much of her work, and not the other way 'round (2014, pers. communication). In sum, like Tagore, Sarabhai curates dramaturgical devices and movement vocabularies that serve her primary aim of communication to the audience. The choice of Bharatanatyam allowed for the embodiment of an empowered womanhood, through the isolated movements of the muscles of the face, head, arms and hands and their corresponding relationships with the grounded stance of the *araimandi* and intricate stepping patterns in formations of *adavus* that interact with pulsating rhythmic structures in complex ways. Purkayastha (2014) notes through her interactions with Mrinalini that, once again, she was given choreographic agency. This allowed for her body to be rendered visible in the repertoire of Tagore's work and in the bodies of dancers that are trained in Tagore's expressive dance. It also had a profound impact on Mrinalini's democratic process as a choreographer in her

later avatar as founder, director, choreographer and dancer at *Darpana Academy of Performing Arts,* Ahmedabad.

Shyama (1939)

The source of the narrative of Tagore's work *Shyama* is also the same text from *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* (Mitra 1882, 135) that was drawn upon for the writing of *Chandalika*. Whilst Tagore largely adheres to the source text in the progression of his narrative, he departs from the source by replacing the protagonist of the male semi-divine Buddha with the female courtesan Shyama. Occupying the lead role of the play, Shyama makes an active but erroneous choice to sacrifice Uttiya, a banker's son, who is lovelorn with the beautiful Shyama. She does this to rescue the subject of her romantic interest, Vajrasena, a horse-dealer mistaken for a thief, from the capital punishment he has been sanctioned by the state. Learning of the sacrifice of another's life, and Shyama's agency in making that happen, Vajrasena expresses disapproval of her choices and leaves her. Shyama is left alone with her thoughts, deeply conflicted with profound guilt at the willing sacrifice of someone who loved her, and filled with despair at being abandoned by the man she loved. Shyama is embodied as a fragmented figure, fraught with the frailties of being human. The lack of resolution or closure in the narrative calls upon the active engagement of the audience, who are traditionally used to a beginning, middle and end. Purkayastha analyses:

> As his final dance script, Shyama underscores Tagore's commitment to writing about a reality fraught with tension, an idea that was at the foundation and shaped so many of his works, especially his later plays, poetry and novels. It may not be too far fetched to note that in creating the beautiful yet flawed character of the courtesan who is rebuked in the end, Tagore through Shyama perhaps reflects the traumatic narrative of those real dancing women, banished from temples and failed by patrons, who were denied legitimacy during the reformist movement of India (Purkayastha 2014, 45)

Tagore's continuous commitment in the critique of embodiment, identity, and representation of the constructed classicism and womanhood of the Indian dancer is emphasised in Purkayastha's analysis. Parsing out the elements of his work help us unpack their personal and political significance in the particularised historical moment of its production(s). Placing women in central roles that move the narrative, and enabling them to reclaim their power, agency and desires revolutionised the female performing body on stage.

It is important to realise just how radical Tagore's dramaturgical devices and choreographic choices were, especially against a backdrop where the parallel construction of femininity in Bharatanatyam embodied through the *Nayika* would not have even passed the rudimentary Bechdel test![7] Sadly, this monolithic construction of femininity continues to scourge Bharatanatyam even today, repressing the power, agency and desires of the female dancing body and offering her labour instead as an ode to the patriarchal hegemonies of passivity and heteronormativity. In a political environment where the *devadasi* was wronged by the leaders of the nationalist movement, Tagore made space for the emancipated heroine, a provocative figure that refused to be marginalised on his page or his stage. She was rebellious within the narrative and liberated on the stage. Chaki Sircar, founder of the dance form *Navanritya,* India's first modern dance form to be expressly codified, writes of Tagore's women:

> All his narratives and lyrics are free from the conventional religiosity; they are inspired by what can be termed as 'spiritual humanism'. Tagore's women are not moulded in the form of classical nayikas. There is no attempt to glorify with the religious aura of Shakti, the female energy. Such glorification often blurs the basic issue of women's human rights. Tagore's women are self-respecting, self-reliant and sensuous human beings. (Sircar 2005, 35)

[7] A test applied to a film or show named after cartoonist Alison Bechdel, creator of the comic strip *Dykes to watch out for,* that asks if a film involves at least two women who converse with each other and talk about anything other than a man/men. If the answer is no, the film or show is said to have failed the Bechdel test.

Universalism reigned supreme over cultural specificity in Tagore's works. Rather than viewing transcultural interaction as a one-way passage between the dominator and dominated, he viewed such exchanges as cyclical, embracing the free flow of exchange and information between cultures. The eclectic dance-dramas of Tagore paved a way for artists to suffuse their guilt around the inculcation of a non-linear narrative, exploration of alternative themes, hybridisation of movement vocabulary, and articulation of an alternate modernity.

By attempting to surpass the geographical, social and psychic borders that Brah refers to as arbitrary dividing lines founded over time, as fleshed out in the preceding chapter, Tagore's dance-dramas explored the intersection of gender, sex and sexuality to imagine anew sacred written texts in secular embodied re-visions. His three major dance-dramas studied above can be read as verbal/visceral responses to the demarcation and patrol of borders reflected in the *Divide and Rule* strategy of the British Raj. Fischer-Lichte deduces that the artists reconceive the concept of borders, accentuating "moments of transgression and transition", as opposed to "division and partitioning" (2008, 204). It is in these moments of confluence and rupture of the verbal/visceral, sacred/secular, divine/carnal, classical/folk that Tagore's creative choreographies thrived.

3.2.ii Uday Shankar: The Introduction of Transnational Methods of Production

Uday Shankar's foray into a dancing career was no planned professional path, but rather the consequence of a chance encounter with ballerina Anna Pavlova. Shankar turned out to be a gifted dancer and assisted and accompanied Pavlova on her choreography, production and subsequent touring of the works *Radha-Krishna* and *Hindu Wedding* in 1923. Like Rukmini Devi Arundale, Shankar was also an educated Brahmin hailing from an elite background and was encouraged by Pavlova to take up dance and unearth the performing arts traditions of his own country. Following her advice, he began his journey as an Indian dancer/choreographer, leaving behind his primary career as a visual

artist, and is largely credited with bringing Indian dance to the West, performing extensively in Europe and America.

Shankar, like his contemporary artists and intellectuals, returned to India after spending a decade in England, the USA and France in the year 1930, touring the country extensively and familiarising himself with the architectural sculptures of regional temples, daily life of rural India and movement vocabularies of Indian neo-classical and folk traditions (Katrak 2011).

Khokar notes that Shankar's return to his roots was instigated by Pavlova's challenge to "bring something to show us. There are such wonders in your country and you want to try our things. Never, never, never" (1984, 36). Shankar never looked back, borrowing "ways of presentation, stage techniques and choreographic methods for group presentations" from his interactions with the West, but looking homeward for a language of performance situated in Indian aesthetics and culture and not "subjugated to the west" (Sarkar Munsi 2010, 221). Shankar's transnational methods of production allowed him to situate his fluid choreographies akin to those of professional dancers in the West, and he extensively toured the major cities of Europe throughout his career. In situating Indian dance on the global stage, Shankar returned to India after a two-year tour of Europe between 1936 and 1938 with his ensemble from India that placed him firmly as an international dancer of repute.

Upon his return in 1938, under the guidance of Rabindranath Tagore himself, he founded the *Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre* in Almora, a city located in the present day state of Uttarakhand in India. Training was imparted in Indian classical music, classical dance styles of Manipuri, Kathakali and Bharatanatyam and allied arts at the centre, which soon became a breeding ground for artistic and intellectual activity during the time. Sarkar Munsi (2010) notes that Shankar, unlike Tagore, consciously or subconsciously prescribed to prevalent gender codes of movement, building his repertoire of male movements from the rigorous masculine tradition of Kathakali and female movements from the fluid feminine tradition of Manipuri. The centre was also the home of his per-

formance troupe, which featured Shankar himself as the principal male dancer. Aside from transnational methods of production, his time in the West clearly informed the system of pedagogy Shankar endorsed in his school.

Sarkar Munsi (2010) provides us with a snapshot of the daily routine at Almora. The students were exposed to multiple neo-classical dance forms, i.e. Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and Manipuri, by experts in the respective fields who Shankar invited to teach at the institution. They also studied theory, including aesthetics, psychology and literature. The intense awareness of everyday movements and its subsequent inculcation into dance, first championed by Tagore, was carefully cultivated in the muscle memory of the students at Almora. They were not trained to internalise a body of work, as is the case in the reconstructed classical dance forms, rather they were encouraged to come into their own as dancers. In addition to technique classes, the students were also supported to choreograph and improvise as part of their rigorous training methodology. Much of the aforementioned transnational methods of process and production embedded in his pedagogy are mirrored in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai.

Although Shankar, unlike Tagore, did not possess a distinct commitment to re-vision the role of women at the heart of his practice, Sarkar Munsi encourages us not to discount his contribution to the Indian and global stage for the advancement of female practitioners (2010). Indian women were engaged in his centre as students, teachers and performing artists in his dance troupe. Given the political background of the time, this raised the status of female dancers in society, elevating the standard of Indian dance as a viable profession and an honourable hobby (Sarkar Munsi 2010). Sarkar Munsi (2010) also notes that these women came largely from middle class family backgrounds and almost none of them came from a lineage of temple or court dancers. The women in his rehearsal rooms and on the performance stage were not bound by the shackles of religiosity that provided them the permission to be there, but they were there in their own right as trained bodies performing *professionally* as part of a touring company. This move by Shankar to involve women in

the mainstream theatre contributed in no small measure to changing the cultural perception of female dancers as second-class citizens. However, as Sarkar Munsi (2010) writes, their roles largely involved that of a female counterpart to Shankar for the creation of a complete theatrical world that moves the narrative forward in a relatively linear fashion where he often performed the role of the male protagonist.

Despite heavy support from the Indian freedom-fighters toiling for independence from the British Raj and key personnel of the time, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and Rabindranath Tagore, the centre was shut down in four years due to lack of funding, which Sehgal, a principal instructor at the centre, associated with the timing of World War II and a steep fall in funds from foreign patrons (Sarkar Munsi 2011). The shutting down of this centre at Almora was a huge blow to the history of modern dance in India as Shankar's pioneering pedagogical system fast disappeared, alongside funds for the circulation of his creative choreographies.

It is a shame that in the archive only traces exist of his most significant choreographies *Rhythm of Life, Labour and Machinery* and *Eternal Melody*, primarily through photographs and reviews. Sarkar Munsi (2011) has written a useful essay on the analysis of the only film made by him in 1948, *Kalpana*. As noted by her in the essay, the film, with its progressive outlook on society and the integration of interdisciplinary arts, is a valuable text that can be re-visioned in multiple ways. The film took several years to complete, and Shankar was assisted by Amala, his professional and personal partner, on the production and performance of the film. The film's dance sequences are possibly the most detailed documentation of his choreographic process and product, and string together choreographies including mythical representations of gods and demons, folk traditions from various regions of India and dances that highlight social messages including, but not limited to, the problems of gender parity, themes of female empowerment and the distress of the dowry system. As Purkayastha writes, "through *Kalpana* Shankar unwittingly managed to re-cast himself as the maker of one of the most iconoclastic art-house films ever made in India" (2014, 70).

Shankar utilised a largely hybrid method in his performance works, and borrowed freely from different Indian high and low art traditions, as well as inculcating everyday movements witnessed in his travels and local surroundings (Katrak 2011). In the absence of detailed documentation, it remains difficult to discuss his choreographies. This is regrettable, as the dramatised ensemble ballets, incorporating classical and folk movement vocabulary, localised pedestrian gestures, modern scenographic elements and socially-conscious content and narratives, would have lent themselves well to a (syn)aesthetic analysis. Erdman (1987) provides a useful alternate reading of Shankar's performances as "cultural translations", bridging the gap between the source culture and the target culture. According to Erdman, Shankar bridges this gap through "universality in theme; particularisation in costume, movement, music and story; and choice of theme and style to reach and appeal to audiences already enticed by the spirituality, exoticism and romantic allure of the east" (1987, 80). She questions the use of pre-performance explanation as a tool that meets the requirement of translation, as is the case in Bharatanatyam, where the dancer provides a gist of the narrative to follow in the choreography accompanied by hand gestures so audiences can make connections between the dance, music and performance-text. Instead Erdman illustrates how Shankar was responsive to "marked and unmarked" symbols and gestures in different cultures and manifested this sensitivity through a conscious translation of his performance work from one culture to the audiences of another culture (1987, 80). She explains that translation for Shankar was more than just a metaphor, it was a meticulous charting of the performance syntax from an Indian to a Western culture (1987).

Purkayastha points out that Tagore and Shankar "do not follow a rule book, or a set pedagogic structure - there is no documented or set way of performing the original repertoire - although a discernible 'house style' emerges if one encounters or embodies their dances today" (2014, 176). More than half a century later, the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai reflect similar features, where a prescriptive approach is abandoned altogether in favour of a hybridised fluidity.

Tagore and Shankar attempted to re-vision the role of the woman dancer and her dance against the political backdrop of a transitional period from colonial to postcolonial India. They strived to contest and challenge the gendered representation of the female dancer seared into the collective psyche of a changing India by the interaction of nationalist, imperialist and anticolonialist agendas. Although their work brings with it problematics of its own, their contribution to creating a space for the female dancer and exploring a modern movement vocabulary that was quintessentially Indian cannot be removed from a fruitful discussion on the politics of gender in Indian dance. Their work did not come to be living traditions of movement, but did present critical ruptures, as early as the 1930s, to what Chandralekha referred to as "a fossilised form" in the 1980s, thereby paving the path for future performance-makers like Ratnam and Sarabhai to subvert the role of the woman dancer in a dialogic interaction between the verbal and the visceral.

3.2.iii Chandralekha: The Arrival of a Postmodern Aesthetic

Chandralekha, often referred to as the foremother of contemporary dance in India, was the first Indian female dancer/choreographer who attempted to re-vision Bharatanatyam from what I view as a distinctly materialist feminist perspective. Chandralekha recalls the turning point in her approach to dance creation and choreography. In the *pièce-de-résistance* of her *Arangetram* in 1952, staged as a charity concert to raise money for the *Rayalaseema Drought Relief Fund,* she was dancing to *Mathura Nagarilo*, lyrics that extolled the ebb and flow of the River Yamuna. The composition choreographed in the codified idiom of Bharatanatyam by her *Guru* was a body-based expression of the sensuous quality of water, the river's bountifulness and water's abundance and imagined representations of the everyday that the water witnesses in her path, such as the camaraderie of *sakhis*[8].

[8] A female friend to the heroine in the Bharatanatyam repertoire, particularly in *Varnams, Padams* and *Javalis,* who lends an empathetic ear to her friend, acts as a messenger between the heroine and lover, and provides a shoulder for the *Nayika* to cry on.

Chandralekha's fluid body in motion suddenly froze, refusing to be compliant, conscious in and through performance to the lived reality of a drought on the other side of the constructed world of a proscenium theatre stage. The dance became a lie, a portrayal of the plenitude of water and a stark contrast to the disturbing images of the earth cracked from starvation, that Chandralekha recalled from the newspapers. She reflects, "Art and life seemed to be at conflict. The paradox was stunning. For that split second, I was divided, fragmented into two people." (cited in Bharucha 1995, 29). Upon her return to choreography and dance in 1984, her initial choreographies were a critical response—albeit embodied—to the form, structure and content of Bharatanatyam, through a re-visioning of older works, and a project of recovery of the spiritual and sacred through an exploration of the sensualities and sexualities of the dancing bodies. In the following year, with the choreography *Angika* (1985) discussed further below, Chandralekha had truly arrived on the contemporary dance scene in India.

Chandralekha allowed her choreographies to access movement from the Indian meditative form of Yoga and martial form of Kalaripayattu. She also did away with the Hindu mythology inspired narratives in Bharatanatyam and concentrated her efforts instead into understanding the bodily ways of knowing breath, energies, rhythms, space and shapes that emerge from placing the movement vocabulary of Bharatanatyam in a dialogic interaction with Yoga and Kalaripayattu (Bharucha 1995). Her thematic choices highlighted an approach that did not see the body's corporeality, sensuality and spirituality as distinct, but favoured instead a holistic re-visioning of the body and its energy centres. A significant contribution of Chandralekha remains her continual workings of the articulation of the spine in her body of work. Locating the origin of the body's power in the spine, Chandralekha draws upon the flexions, extensions, hyperextensions, abductions, reductions and rotations of the spine to choreograph a scathing critique of the condition of women in Indian society. As Chatterjea notes, "The comment contains its own looping critique: the image of contemporary women with broken spines in their labored walk challenges the silences of the very past,

from which she has drawn, about the suffering women must have endured even then, about the patriarchal hegemonies with which the past is ridden" (2001, 393). The author also draws our attention to the same way she uses a reworked articulation of the sideways glance from Indian classical dance "to convey a mood unrecognised in the realm of classical dance: women's fear of imminent assault, clearly recognisable in the context of the hideous attacks on the women's movement in contemporary India" (2001, 393).

An incredibly self-reflexive practitioner, Chandralekha infused her dance with a response born of pain and oppression of the female body in Indian society. As a non-conformist, she was quick to defy rigid categorisations, but she did identify herself as a feminist (Ganesh 2015). In creation and execution, her process was largely collaborative and this enabled her to work across genres, with painters, sculptors, musicians, filmmakers and activists. She did not care for labels, laurels or accolades, and refused to title her unique choreographic approach, codify her movement vocabulary or construct a pedagogical system. Instead, she understood her dances as ephemeral, and invested her time in deconstructing the bodily ways of knowing within Indian embodied movement, martial and spiritual forms (Bharucha 1995). She rejected artifice and did away with decorative elements, i.e. the *Aharya* aspect of expression in Bharatanatyam. Instead, she suffused her dance with a minimalism atypical of Bharatanatyam performance. Of dance, Chandralekha mused:

> I see dance as a visual, tactile and sensual language, structured with a specific vocabulary and idiom, with space-time, with organic bind, principles and, most importantly, related to the dynamics of energy and flow with a capacity to recharge human beings. The internal relation between the dance and the dancer and the external relation between dance and society are questions that cannot be taken lightly. (Chandralekha 1998, 74)

It is striking to note that the internal relation between the dance and the dancer is the principal concern of Ratnam's repertoire and the relationship between dance and society is the principal concern

of Sarabhai's repertoire, and I argue that both dancers/choreographers have been hugely impacted by the work and words of Chandralekha.

Chandralekha's choreographies, the highlights of which include *Angika* (1985), *Lilavati* (1989), *Sri* (1990), *Yantra* (1994) and *Sharira* (2001), bear testament to the above statement. Katrak points out that Chandralekha's repertoire begins with *Angika* (1985) and ends with *Sharira* (2001) and both refer to the body in Sanskrit (2013). In the former, she demystifies the *Nayika-Nayak* narrative of Bharatanatyam and deconstructs the movement vocabulary of classical dance and in the latter, she reimagines the body as a site for the co-existence of sensuality, sexuality and spirituality (*Sharira*, Program Notes). This continuous engagement with the corporeality of the body is befittingly contained in her ten choreographies between *Angika* and *Sharira*, and shows her continuous evolution as a choreographer in breaking down prevalent understandings of the body. She passed away five years after her final choreography in 2006.

Chandralekha was also a vocal critic of the establishment, and undoubtedly influenced by the leftist undercurrent present in the Indian political scenario of the times. Below, I discuss her first and last work from the set of ten choreographies that she created during her time as a dancer/choreographer. *Angika* marked the arrival of Chandralekha on the contemporary Indian dance circuit and *Sharira* marked her farewell. *Angika* deconstructed the different elements of Bharatanatyam and explored its orientations to time, space and energies. *Sharira* re-inscribed the materialities, subjectivities and sensualities of both the masculine and feminine bodies. Both these choreographies are potent examples of *écriture féminine* where the border-crossings of the choreography allow for a syntax, grammar and vocabulary informed by personal reflections and instinctual awakenings. A commitment to similar aesthetics is encountered in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, such as Sarabhai's *The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya* (2001) and Ratnam's *Padme* (2014, 2016), detailed in Chapter Four and Chapter Five respectively.

Angika (1985)

Angika, a montage of six sections, was Chandralekha's first full-length exploration in dance that laboured to rupture the veil of religiosity that cloaks Bharatanatyam. Angika was premiered by Chandralekha in the *East-West Encounter* organised by Georg Lechner in 1985, following the success of the landmark event in 1984. *Angika* sought to make the intangible connections between body, nature, work and ritual through a deconstruction that aimed to trace the organic evolution of the primal body to the dancing body.

The first section begins with a primal body that concerns itself with the process of self-awareness, i.e. the yogic body explores its potentialities for movement. This revelation of the kinetic body is then layered with the necessity for survival, where the body develops its capacity for attack and defence. The following section pushes this idea further, and examines the relationship of the body to work through an acute observation of the movement of animals and birds that surround the body. As Chatterjea points out, these movements are neither imitative nor overtly stylised, but are better read as processes of discovery (2004). Drawing freely from the basic grammar of the *Chuvadus* and *Vadivus* of the martial art tradition of Kalaripayattu, inspired by the movements of the fauna, this section attempts to unearth how the stances evolved artistically through the human's interaction with their natural surrounds.

Heightening stylisation in the next section, the choreography reveals the ways in which the artistry of the body becomes concerned with a project of aesthetics exploring time-space combinations in arrays of *Nritta* sequences. As the unfolding of the body continues, the element of *Abhinaya* is introduced in the following sequence, and Chandralekha used techniques such as reversing the gaze, re-imagining the traditional format of the solo *Varnam* as a duet performed by two women, and referencing the elements of the 'purified' *Margam* to challenge the status quo of a dance that removed the traditional practitioners from its project of reconstruction and packaged her art in

commercialised wrapping. The final sequence ruptures the temporal linearity of the choreography, returning the memories of a vibrant past and recalling the symbols of cult ritual drawn from pre-Vedic cultures of Mohenjodaro (Chatterjea 2004).

Sharira (2001)

Sharira, Chandralekha's tenth and final original choreography, explored the extremities of the corporeal and conceptual body. Conceptualised as a duet between a male Kalaripayattu practitioner and a female Yogi and dancer, *Sharira* was a choreographic attempt to dissolve the boundaries between sexuality, sensuality and spirituality in the body. Chandralekha played with temporality by a maximal slowing down of time, flirting with the idea of standing it still. The purposefully slow movements of the dancers were juxtaposed to a musical soundscape composed by the Gundecha brothers in the *Dhrupad* tradition.[9] Together, this created a hypnotic effect. Of the choreographic strategy adopted to subvert female sexuality in the patriarchal (b)order of Bharatanatyam, Mitra pens:

> There are two ways in which this challenge is relayed: first, through a haunting triangle motif that is evoked repeatedly through the controlled parting of Doshi's legs. This bodily triangle is symbolic of the yoni hasta in Yoga, a hand gesture that is created by joining the tips of the two index fingers and the thumbs to evoke the yoni, Sanskrit for life-force, the divine passage and the vagina….The second way in which the piece critiques heteronormativity is through an uber-slowing down of time, which emphasises the materiality of Doshi's body and the extremes it can execute. This in turn allows her body an extended and heightened temporality that lies beyond real time, in order to challenge conventional constructions of her body and sexuality as passive. (2014, 5-6)

Chandralekha choreographs to viscerally impact the audience in a manner where the heightened sensations of the muscular tensions are palpably felt in their own bodies. With the triangulated vi-

[9] One of the earliest traditions of Hindustani music where a part of the poem is used as choric refrain and is primarily performed vocally without the support of instruments. The origin of the tradition is linked to the ancient practice of recitation of the *Sama Veda.*

bration finding echoes throughout the choreography, Chandralekha re-magines female sexuality as active, desirable and creative with the female subject in charge. The focus on the pelvic region becomes an allegory for the suppression of female sexuality in the similar vein that the spinal articulations did for domination and control and the sideways glance did for fear of assault. Read with the lens of Chatterjea's radical reading of those two movements, *Sharira* becomes the ultimate act of resistance. Chandralekha reflected:

> So, with all its contradictions, conflicts, tensions, splits and ruptures, tradition, for me, is not a museum piece or a fossil form, hermetically sealed forever, which precludes ideation, commentary, questioning and critique. I see tradition as open and fluid in terms of our times, in interactive relation with the past, accepting as well as foregrounding the tensions and disjunctions. This is the only way to locate tradition here and now - as a prerequisite for renewal of our energies at the level of our everyday life. (1998, 77)

Chandralekha was perhaps the first Indian female dancer/choreographer to infuse her dance with feminist politics. She was dedicated to an aesthetic of modernism in Bharatanatyam that was wholly Indian, and in this sense she coloured her dance with culturally specific postmodern sensibilities. By keenly observing the socialisation of Indian women's mobilities in public and private spheres, she was able to comment, challenge and critique the representations of their subjectivities by seeing the physical experience of women as intimately connected to historicity, and her work continues to inform the practice of many contemporary dancers/choreographers in India today, including Ratnam and Sarabhai.

3.2.iv Mrinalini Sarabhai: The Advent of A Woman-Conscious Choreography

I distinctly remember sitting on my couch in Melbourne and mindlessly scrolling through my Facebook feed on a particularly hot afternoon in January. Owing to a number of friends and acquain-

tances in dance circles (and by extension on my social media contacts), the terrible news of dancer/choreographer Mrinalini Sarabhai's death permeated the window I was scrolling. I recount my heart racing, battling to grapple with the weight of the situation, a loss beyond measure to the dance (and by extension, cultural) landscape of a modern India. Mrinalini Sarabhai, fondly and respectfully called *Amma* by those who came in contact with her, had dedicated her entire being to the complete expression of the body. Tears streamed down my face. I recalled a morning at the institute she founded, *Darpana Academy of Performing Arts* in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India where I was on fieldwork in 2014. On a particular morning, Amma had graced the campus with her presence and stopped to watch the Bharatanatyam rehearsals that were in progress. Midway, she started dancing using a combination of *mudras* and *Abhinaya* to the lyrics being sung, her eyes alight with burning passion. She was 95 at the time. It was my very first encounter with the legendary dancer in the flesh. I shuddered to think of that very same female dancing body—as still, motionless…lifeless.

The day following Mrinalini's death, her daughter Mallika Sarabhai took to Facebook to post an open letter to the currently ruling Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. The words made headlines in leading national newspapers in the wake of the post:

> My dear prime minister. You hate my politics and I hate yours. That has nothing to do with what Mrinalini Sarabhai did to promote the culture of this country to the world over sixty years. She blazed a trail for our culture in the world. That her death sees no word from you shows your mentality. How ever much you hate me, as our prime minister it behove you to recognise her contribution. You have not. Shame on you [sic].

The post attracted scores of mixed responses on Mallika's bold questioning. In a country that publicly pays respects to the death of leading contributors, Mrinalini's exclusion from that public discourse must be viewed as a necessarily political act. Mrinalini was one of India's leading choreographers and dancers, having received two of the highest civilian awards in the country, honorary

doctorates, admittance to the executive committee of the *International Dance Council, Paris,* and a gold medal by the Government of Mexico for her choreography for the *Ballet Folklorico of Mexico*, amongst a host of other accolades and laurels. She also contributed significantly as a performance-maker, cultural ambassador, author and activist in postcolonial India, serving a multitude of social causes, such as the preservation of the Gujarat handloom industry and the global promotion of Gandhian ideals. Mrinalini and, more profoundly, Mallika's performance works and their engagement in public and political spheres need to be contextualised in their entirety. No discussion on Mrinalini's and Mallika's body of work can be validated without situating the Sarabhai family and Darpana in a dialogic interaction with the political environment of the times. The second-wave feminist slogan "the personal is political", is exemplified in their repertoire.

The Sarabhais occupy a privileged and illustrious place in the social and cultural milieu of Gujarat and, more largely, India. Mrinalini Sarabhai, born Saminathan, hailed from a cosmopolitan family considered a part of India's elite. She was born into a Brahmin family to a father who was a barrister at the Madras High Court and president of the prestigious Madras Law College and a mother who was actively involved in public life as a freedom fighter, philanthropist and member of the parliament. She was schooled in Switzerland, where she was trained in progressive pedagogies, including Dalcroze's *Eurythmics*. His visionary approach to learning music focussed on rhythm and dynamics, body movement and improvisation as a three-fold concept. Following her schooling in Europe, Mrinalini returned to India and attended University at Tagore's *Visva-Bharati* in *Shantiniketan*. It was here that her single-minded devotion to pursue dance as a career was cemented.

Mrinalini also briefly underwent training at the American Academy of Dramatic Art. She then invested significant energies into imbibing the movement vocabulary of the classical styles of Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and Mohiniattam under the tutelage of Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, Thakazhi Kunchu Kurup and Kalyanikutty Amma, prominent names that featured in her galaxy of *Gurus*.

After marriage, Mrinalini was based in Cambridge, UK whilst her husband was completing his PhD in physics. Mrinalini's husband, Vikram Sarabhai, was a millionaire scientist of high repute and is widely considered as the father of India's space program. In Europe, Mrinalini came into contact with a number of dancers, theatre practitioners and cultural ambassadors who influenced her approach to process, pedagogy and practice. Vikram and Mrinalini were a *tour de force*, and circled among luminous figures in the fields of the arts, science and politics, within and beyond India. The forces of the history of Mrinalini's interactions—both nationally and transnationally—directly contributed to her project of modernity. The leading publication *India Today* once wrote of the family:

> The Americans have the Rockefellers, Indians have the Sarabhais. Both are families with immense wealth and large corporate empires - and contributions to society that go well beyond the world of business. Both have given generously to charity, contributed to the arts, figured in the world of politics, stood for taste and distinction. The Sarabhais have, of course, operated on a much smaller financial scale than the Rockefellers, but in many senses they have been even more versatile than the Rockefellers. Friends of Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, labour leaders, builders of some of Ahmedabad's finest and proudest institutions, contributors to science and dance, creators of the priceless Calico Museum, the Sarabhais have been princes among merchants and merchants among princes. (1987)

As Grau points out, their privileged position was viewed by them as an opportunity and responsibility to serve society (2013).

That Mrinalini was a questioning student, and not one to merely accept the authoritative control of the male *Guru*, as is commonplace in Indian classical dance training and choreography, is evident in this incident she recalls: "A particular step he taught me, my body refused to do. My mind also rejected the 'adavu' as ugly. Finally, I requested him to change it, which he did" (Sarabhai 1986, 19). Self-actualisation and self-expression were at the core of Mrinalini's choreographic endeavours. She wrote:

> What are the tools the dancer works with? Primarily, the body. The intellect contemplates, the body expresses. The body has to be perfectly trained in order that the mind can use it whichever way it will. The choreographer evaluates each movement and finds its unique quality, the 'sat' or essence. Apart from the design, the movement has to integrate an intellectual, physical, emotional response and have a definite motivation. We are familiar with old movements, and most of us unquestioningly accept them. (Sarabhai 1986, 18)

She was not concerned with purity of tradition or purity of theme, but she did remain devoted to purity of technique. Mastery of technique became her pathway to question the old, and respond to the new. She was also deeply concerned with the root cause of movements, their *raison d'être.*

In the years after her marriage, Mrinalini moved to her husband's native state of Gujarat. Together, the husband and wife duo set up *Darpana* in Ahmedabad in the year 1949. In the wake of a newly independent India, *Darpana* (literally translated as mirror), was set up as a collective of professional dancers, arising from Mrinalini's need to explore the social relevance of dance and creative expression. She sought not to be curtailed by a static interpretation of puritan tradition, but rather to enhance the power of traditional techniques by "total centering in a subject" (Sarabhai 2004, 113). She was deeply fascinated by the idea of the abstract as opposed to realism, and worked to choreograph new motifs and themes that formulated from "an inward journey, a deeply personal equation that unfolded before the audience" (Sarabhai 2004, 112). In her autobiography she states:

> The roots of my 'modern' concepts are in the ancient Indian tradition but we exist in a different century. We should analyse movements in relation to what we human beings are today. For instance, the traditional representation of raudra, the mood of anger, is the same as that of Bharata's world, but yesterday's anger was against evil elements of society depicted through stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, whereas today it is against destructive values in the entire world. (Sarabhai 2004, 117)

The above sentences are just one of her many references to the need to forsake antiquated themes and representations in Bharatanatyam, and direct them instead toward causes of social justice. It is no surprise that Mallika has been strongly affected by Mrinalini's repeated efforts to use dance as an interactive process whereby the plight of marginalised members of the community is communicated in a verbal/visceral manner.

Darpana started as a small company and performance collective, rehearsing and touring new works conceptualised by Mrinalini, whilst also promoting her career as a solo dancer. The company was soon receiving national and international acclaim, and began to attract scores of interested students. When the demand for a training wing was overwhelming, Darpana was institutionalised as an academy of performing arts in 1962, a place where children's creative spirits could be harnessed and nurtured with a strong sense of lineage and tradition. In the words of Mrinalini, "The children who came to me were like unopened buds. My desire was to make them blossom gently into flowers that mirrored their artistic and ancient heritage. 'Darpana' means 'Mirror' and the universe I feel is reflected within each of us" (Sarabhai 2004, 157). In a city that the Mughal emperor Jahangir referred to as "The city of dust", Ahmedabad, a largely industrial city, was an interesting choice for the establishment of an arts centre, and Mrinalini points out that Darpana was viewed as a cultural curiosity when it first opened its doors. Today, Darpana is a cultural hub of national pride, international repute and an indispensable landmark in the sociocultural milieu of cosmopolitan Ahmedabad.

The choreographies listed below are representative dance-dramas from the extensive repertoire of Mrinalini, which exceeded 100 past and active performance works. I have specifically selected her performance works that told stories from the woman's point of view and undermined the dominant hegemony's attitude of 'my way or the highway'. As Grau points out, "Over the years, she has challenged the status of women, deforestation, and pollution and she maintains that she was the first classical dancer in India to commit her art to social causes" (Grau 2013,10). The works dis-

cussed here fit what cultural feminist theatre critic Rosemary Curb would identify as “woman-conscious”, a genre crafted by women and characterised by women's experiences, lives and points of view (1985). Curb describes the possibilities of woman-conscious theatre as theatre that “presents a multi-dimensional unravelling of women’s collective imagination in a psychic replay of myth and history” (Curb 1985, 302). These works were produced at different stages of Mrinalini’s career and being *woman-conscious* is a theme that runs through the repertoire of Mrinalini but is most fully expressed in the works I have chosen for analysis. The choreographies listed below presume the centrality of themes in the lives of Indian women, such as motherhood, archaic patriarchal traditions like the demand for dowry from in-laws, bride burning, and child marriage, and the search for the spiritual through a synthesis of the sacred and the secular. Although the assumed universals of Indian women's experiences often meant turning a blind eye to the stratification of caste and class, leaving Mrinalini’s work open to criticism through a materialist feminist perspective that calls our attention to intersecting identity vectors, one cannot dismiss the boundary-breaking contribution of Mrinalini in unfixing the *Nayika* from her inscription in the phallogocentric structure of the ‘purified' classical dance.

Manushya (1958)

Having carved a name for herself as a soloist, Mrinalini speaks of being increasingly overwhelmed by a desire for creativity, for non-conformity to the strict confines of classical structure and for the freedom to make an informed choice of central themes and narratives in her choreography (1986). She draws parallels between the birth of her first son, Kartikeya, and an internal awareness of the corporeal experience of creation. Manushya was her first experimental work that ruptured the notion of the *Nayika*, the eight types of heroines elaborated in Chapter Two, and explored instead the case of contemporary man and his problems. As Bose reminds us:

> The complex and elaborate vocabulary of dance creates beauty, experiences emotions and tells stories, but does so in set patterns of movement and narrative mostly related to religious themes from myths and legends distanced from social concerns. As a result, within the formulaic processes of classical Indian dancing, the free expression of personal experience has not been an issue of importance (Bose 1998, 252).

Mrinalini was tired of these religious narratives, and quenched her thirst for creativity by embarking on projects that freely borrowed from personal experience and social surrounds.

Ambitious in content, Mrinalini also used movements she noticed in her own baby's way of moving as a starting point for departure from a traditional movement vocabulary. Although this comes dangerously close to essentialised ideas of the feminine, Mrinalini's choice to choreograph themes with social concerns indicated this "free expression of personal experience" as her art was consciously responsive to the issues of the time. Further, by inculcating physicality from her muscle memory as a mother, she began to embark on a surface exploration of perceptions, intuitions and sensations of the body. Mallika is influenced by much of her mother's choreographic choices, and pushes the edge of the possible further in each production. Interestingly, this is a dynamic reflected in the continuum between Mallika and her son Revanta Sarabhai too, as he plays with postmodern possibilities by further pushing form toward formlessness in his body of work.

Memory is a ragged fragment of eternity (1963)

Memory is a ragged fragment of eternity was birthed as an idea in response to the barbaric and brutalist patriarchal Hindu practice of demanding dowry, resulting in the suicides of women from various strata of caste and class due to the twin reasons of the incapacity to meet the monetary demands from their married family and the guilt arising from the burdening of their birth family to fulfil such

demands. The woman then, literally subordinated to a commodity of exchange between her birth home and her marital home, pays with the only price she knows, her body, thereby destroying the object of value in an economic transaction guised in the name of tradition. In her autobiography, Mrinalini speaks of being so traumatised by this phenomena of dowry deaths that she was forced to create an embodied response to it (2004). However, she needed some disengagement from the emotional effect the stories had on her before she could begin to create the performance work, so as to later inculcate the empathetic absorption of the social phenomena to show how traditions, customs and sensibilities othered the Indian woman on multiple counts.

Mrinalini reflects on her own choreographic process: "To create, I have to be engulfed, immersed in the heart of my idea, and then in the intensity of that emotion, detach utterly from the experience and visualise the concept of dance" (Sarabhai 1986, 49). This detachment she speaks of recognises a critical distancing of the choreographer from the dance, an incredibly modern concept for its time. She then seeks to express the emotional intensity of that concept through movement. Mrinalini predominantly draws on the movement vocabulary of Bharatanatyam for the work, stripping it of its cosmetic allure and concentrating her efforts on the *continuums* from the classical. Mrinalini speaks of the profound impact the choreographic choices of Memory is a ragged fragment of eternity had on her as a dancer/choreographer beyond its immediacy:

> Every stranger since has become my own.
> Every sorrow mine.
> Every hardship I feel with my own self.
> Yet it is joy that I want to give in dance (1986, 62)

This divine bliss, *Ananda*, is at the heart of aesthetics in Indian art. At an ideological level, there is a rejection of the experience of *catharsis* as is prevalent in classical Western theatre. On the contrary, *Rasa* that invites the audience to respond to the work through an inner reflection that calls 49 of the

emotional states into play, as spelled out in the *Natyasastra*, forms the philosophical foundation for Mrinalini's art.

The work ends with the audience watching themselves, the members of the society, shrug and walk away over the dead body of a woman that succumbed to the pressures of dowry from her in-laws. This moment alienates the audiences where their involvement in the meaning-making process necessarily draws upon their conscious plane, empowering them to make choices that change the world around them. It is also a stark message that the dancer's oppositional gaze is constantly directed outward toward society, as their own gaze is criticised as one that threatens Indian women's subjectivities. Sarabhai's choreographic choices are antithetical to the kind of narratives that inform a monolithic, authoritative meaning typical of Bharatanatyam. As noted in Chapter Two, the performance work was a catalyst for actual changes to the laws on dowry prohibition in India. It is this transformative potential of the arts as a means toward fantasies of utopia that is continuously leveraged in the feminist choreographies of her daughter.

Mira (1976)

In *Mira*, Mrinalini takes the well-known story of the princess of Mewar, Rajasthan who, from a very young age, had an undying devotion to Lord Krishna. The figure of the Hindu mystic and poet Mirabhai primarily exists through the passage of the oral tradition, like many of the hymns attributed to her authorship. She saw her life's sole purpose as one of servitude to Krishna's image and philosophy. Her *Bhajans*, verses in praise of Krishna's glory, are still considered works of spiritual and artistic excellence, and are modern day household classics in India.

Legend has it that she was married to a wealthy prince of a neighbouring state as a young girl, but stood firm in her refusal to consummate her sexual union with her husband, partake in domestic duties and/or assume responsibilities that accompany royal privilege. In these three ways,

Mira subverts the notion of idealised Indian womanhood and renounces the inner world of the domestic home, in a life-long search for a unison with the sacred symbol of Lord Krishna. Mira's sensuous verse dedicated to the divine evidences the salient features of the Irigarayan concept of the sensible transcendental.

Mrinalini has often referred to Lord Krishna as her constant companion—her father, lover, guide—and her devotion to his philosophies is widely acknowledged. So deep was her love for Krishna, that even on her death, when her body was brought to the premises of her institution for one last time, her daughter Mallika danced to the lyrics *Krishna Nee Beghane Baaro*, a classic Carnatic composition summoning Krishna to please come quickly. By virtue of Mrinalini's search for a complete surrender in Krishna, she deeply identified with the social recluse Mirabhai,

Mira was Mrinalini's first choreography that she created to be danced along with her daughter, Mallika. She speaks of the choreographic inspiration, "What led me to the idea of the two faces of Mira was my concern about modern man's quest for material wealth in the face of the paucity of inner wealth or inner strength. I see all around me this split within human beings, a kind of schizophrenia, a hypocrisy, with the chasm between the reality and the pretence, between the face and the mask, ever increasing" (Sarabhai 1986, 73). Mira is performed as a duet between Mrinalini and her daughter, Mallika. Mallika portrays the youthful and exuberant Mira (the outer self) and Mrinalini embodies the mature and tormented Mira (the inner self). Throughout the performance work, Mrinalini and Mallika mirror each other's movements, separately. Mira's split in identity is reconciled at the end where the striking visual of the younger Mira occupied with the conditions of the material present comes together with the older Mira immersed in the seeking of the spiritual strength. The synthesis of the inner domain and the outer domain in self-representation is the cognisance of a "higher truth" and only in this manner "is salvation attainable" (Sarabhai 1986, 73). This imagery dissolves the binaries of the inner world/outer world, the self/other, the real/representational and the acquisitive/sacrificial through an artistic exploration of the moving body in time and space.

The advent of a woman-conscious choreography in Mrinalini's repertoire was incredibly progressive for the time and confounds our definitions of tradition and modernity by reconstruing the *Nayika* as a thinking subject that can speak her own truth and embody her own subjectivity. It is in this space of intervention that Mrinalini's choreographies dwelled, and from the borderlands of Bharatanatyam she continues to have a remarkable bearing on the choreographic signature of Mallika's resistive body of work.

3.3 On Feminist Choreographies in Fertile Territories

The term choreography is by no means a simple one. In this section, I undertake the chaotic task of unearthing what the phrase "feminist choreographies", foregrounded in the title of this thesis, might mean within the context of the repertoires of Ratnam and Sarabhai. In the studio, the term refers to the sequencing of bodily patterns, structuring of movements and delineation of narrative in Indian classical dance. In the following paragraphs, I will tease out what choreography means within the classical bounds of Bharatanatyam, and what it might mean within the feminist body of work of Ratnam and Sarabhai. In doing so, I develop a framework for reading the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, that may have applications in the analyses of other contemporary choreographers who situate their work in the borderlands of neo-classical dance forms.

As early as 1990, Cynthia Novack commented that "Understanding dance in America requires an understanding of the intertwining of social life and aesthetic concepts" (1990, 232). By pitting contact improvisation against the classical construction, composition and choreography of Ballet, Novack successfully argues for the dance itself as the landscape in which notions of gender, class and race are negotiated. Later in the decade, Ellen Graff (1997) and, more recently, Mark Franko (2002) have pioneered the discussion on dance as labour. Priya Srinivasan (2012) has locat-

ed this discussion on dance as labour in the transnational context of Indian dancers in America. Adopting a postcolonial lens to the labouring body of the dancer, Srinivasan observes:

> Shareera, "the physical body", as it is referred to in Indian philosophical contexts, is a transitory body that is full of holes and fluids and is easily dissolvable. Indeed, our bodies are full of holes; we are composed of building-block atoms that are more empty than full. We are brimming with space, yet our dissected cadavers demonstrate our thickness, a fullness of entities like muscles, ligaments, bones, organs, blood vessels and tissues, all jostling for space under our skins. (Srinivasan 2012, 170)

Taking note that dance "exposes shareera as liquid labour", Srinivasan persuasively drives home the point that the fluids that rise to the surface of the skin bring to light the idea that the body produces its own discourse, i.e. a bodily writing of sorts (2012, 170). This bodily writing, an outcome of choreographic choices, is decidedly feminine and can be made sense of in the conceptualisation of Cixous's *écriture féminine*.

Susan Leigh Foster's monograph *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (2010) undertakes a genealogical study of three analogous terms, namely choreography, kinaesthesia, and empathy, and does not see the division between dance and discourse. By locating choreography as a kind of theorising that is an implementation of choices, she articulates:

> I have proposed that "choreography" can productively be conceptualized as a theorization of identity – corporeal, individual and social. Working to contest the reception of dance as the presentation of a kind of spectacle without a history or methodology for engaging with the physical, I initially envisioned choreography as the hypothetical setting forth of what the body is and what it can be based on the decisions made in rehearsal and in performance about its identity. Each moment of watching a dance can be read as the product of choices, inherited, invented or selected, about what kinds of bodies and subjects are being constructed and what kinds of arguments about these bodies and subjects are being put forth. These decisions, made collectively or individually, spontaneously or in advance of dancing, constitute a kind of record of action that is durable and makes possible both the repetition of a dance and analysis of it. (2010, 4)

Clear in Foster's unpacking of the term is the emphasis on choreography as a "product of choices", speaking to the power and agency of the choreographer in the studio and/or on stage. If we are to adopt such a definition of choreography, then women's choreography, by its defining characteristics, becomes a feminist act. Further, Foster maximises the understanding of the term to encompass the performativity of selfhood in the personal and the political, specifically the construction of femininity and masculinity and participation in non-violent modes of resistance (2010). Butler's theories around gender as a "*stylized repetition of acts*" has clearly set the precedent for Foster's claim (1990, 140). If women are indeed outside the discourse of language, then choreography as bodily writing becomes the site in which women can recuperate power, agency and desire from the bounds of patriarchy. Refusing to remain inscribed in a representational economy controlled by voices and visions of imperialism and nationalism, Ratnam and Sarabhai approach choreography as a project of *écriture féminine*.

By inculcating the corporeal fleshiness of the female body, and reclaiming a strategy of self-representation, Ratnam's and Sarabhai's choreographies are analogous with Cixous's agenda, i.e. "In fact, she physically materialises what she is thinking; she signifies it with her body. In a certain way, she *inscribes* what she's saying; because she doesn't deny her drives the intractable and impassioned part they have in speaking" (Cixous 1976, 881). By maintaining a fluidity between dance and theatre, Ratnam and Sarabhai infuse language with sensory perception, sensate meaning-making and stillness. They re-enter the realm of language in their choreography and seek to destabilise the domain of language itself from which women have been long exiled. For instance, Ratnam speaks of the use of this stillness as re-inscribing her linguistic presence in her process and product:

> Stillness is something that I've come to inhabit as a conscious, conscious presence in my work. The absence of noise and movement is also the presence of something else so for me stillness or a so called empty space is not really empty - it's also very full. And to allow stillness means you have to be extremely mature and very confident to allow that stillness, and to trust both yourself and your audience. So I think stillness is very powerful. It is very, very difficult to do stillness as opposed to fast movement. And I think that stillness has been something that has slowly crept in or flowed into my work. It is present in my work. I value it very preciously and as a woman, I feel that I need to. (2016, pers. communication)

This stillness is imbued in her work with a conscious engagement of breath and energy centres of the body. Srinivasan draws on Vedic philosophy which construes the body as "illusory" and "incorporeal"; in contrast, Ratnam's body feels filled to the brim with her own subjectivity in the way she uses stillness as a dramaturgical device in her choreography (Srinivasan 2012). Moments of silence inform her stillness in words and inflections of breath inform her stillness in movement.

Dance criticism, especially in the West, expounds a lot of energy in the bifurcation of textuality and materiality in dance. I would like to clearly articulate my position, which is that such a divide does not exist in the work of Ratnam and Sarabhai, and hence this work can only be analysed, researched, and written about by consciously embracing the hybridity in their performance work. A Western dualism penetrating the field of critical theory from the time of Descartes may be to blame, and the tensions that surface from repeated privileging of the cerebral over the corporeal in Western classical and modern choreography and criticism explain the postmodern turn in which there was a complete rejection of textuality and a preoccupation with musculature and everyday movement. This anxiety was also mirrored in performance criticism within the academy. As feminist performance scholar Ann Cooper Albright pens:

> Too often feminists speak of the body only in terms of the cultural constructions of the female body. This constructed body is seen as a sort of material blank page onto

> which the society etches its own image. But I have spent too much time working with bodies to want to gloss over the implications of a physical engagement with the world. Cultural identity is not necessarily synonymous with somatic identity. Yet neither is a somatic identity any more "real" or essential than a social one simply because it is anchored in the body (emphasis added). (Albright 1997, 12)

It is important to pay heed to the caution that Albright brings to light. In counterpoint, the classical arts in India are informed by the epistemology of the Vedic school of thought that generates modes of knowing from a unison between the physical, psychological and spiritual. The complex 'in-betweenness' of Ratnam's choreography is captured in the program notes of *Ma3Ka…the triad supreme:*

> While the choreographic métier will still retain the identifiable vernaculars of Bharatanatyam's various strains we seek to legitimately borrow from, while erasing and/or pushing the borders of India's other rich dance genres. This complex Neo-Bharatam vocabulary will be infected/inflected with western contemporary dance movement accents as well to further incorporate Anita's truly cosmopolitan hybrid persona while reading the Goddess Feminine in a more relevant original vein. The kinetic solo will challenge the parameters of traditional narratives and allow us to explore new dimensions showcasing its geometry and architectonics of movement. (*Ma3Ka…the triad supreme*, Program Notes)

Any attempt then to distance the dance of Ratnam and Sarabhai from its representational apparatus is as regressive to scholarship as an attempt to alienate the art from its productive apparatus. In this manner, their body of work lends itself beautifully to (syn)aesthetic analysis.

Janet O'Shea questions the assumptions of the global stage in her book, and writes in praise of Bharatanatyam, "Rather than requiring a new set of parameters, I think that Bharatanatyam dancers deserve credit for opening up arenas of debate, dialogue and difference within a "traditional" form…Bharatanatyam dancers by meeting the challenges that confront them, not only address issues in their own sphere but also provide solutions useful to practitioners of other forms" (O'Shea 2007, xii). Bearing in mind that the re-invention of neo-classical dance removed the *devadasis* from

its fold and responded to pressures of colonialism and conservative nationalism, the contemporary experiments with modernism, transnationalism, and hybridism can only exist in dialectical tensions with the classical, but never within its purposefully bounded frame. Like O'Shea, I too celebrate the inclusivity and multiplicity of Bharatanatyam as an ever-evolving form, one that has made space for changes such as the introduction of the solo male dancer (allowing for the representation of a homoerotic sexuality as the male dancers too dance of their lovelorn responses to a male king/deity); the transition from the solo *Margam* to ensemble dance-dramas; and the inclusion of narratives that explore natural themes within the solo repertoire, such as the onset of spring in Alarmel Valli's choreographies or the flow of the Ganges in Malavika Sarukkai's choreographies. However, I do express hesitation in categorising Ratnam's and Sarabhai's choreographies as Bharatanatyam, for this discounts the transgressions of their female dancing bodies to make it to the borderlands. Purkayastha supplements the point I raise here, "I would argue that in spite of overlaps of meaning, a fundamental differentiating factor does exist, one that points towards a divergence between the modern classical and the modern non-classical genres at a formal level" (2014, 6-7). In the transgression of the intangible but felt presence of classical bounds, Ratnam and Sarabhai have been the target of much criticism. By consciously choosing to occupy the borderlands of Bharatanatyam, they embody a politics of resistance and overlooking this liminal space they negotiate for their praxis in scholarship diminishes their tryst with "modernism, feminism and transnationalism" (Purkayastha 2014).

The lack of an appropriate vocabulary to rely on in the criticism of Ratnam's and Sarabhai's work has left reviewers, colleagues and curious onlookers confused, frustrated and ultimately agitated. This is partly what led to my fascination with their body of work that escapes any attempt to be pinned down. However, I must reiterate that the study is not a comparative analysis of the choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. Although the women come from similar aristocratic family

backgrounds, and operate in a comparable time-space milieu within the Indian subcontinent, their approaches to art and aesthetics remain vastly different. With Bharatanatyam serving as the common departure point, Ratnam and Sarabhai navigate their own trajectories into the world of contemporary performance. Parallels, however, can be drawn in their access to an embodied feminist politics and poetics. Interestingly, Ratnam's performance work has received close to no scholarly attention, with the exception of inclusion in Katrak's writings on contemporary dance in India (2008, 2011, 2014). On the other hand, though Sarabhai's performance work and political presence has been the subject of much needed in-depth studies, including by Chatterjea (2004b) and Grau (2007, 2013), neither of these projects employ an explicitly feminist framework for their analysis, which remains the pivotal focus of my thesis. Ratnam observes that nearly a quarter century after producing her own performance work:

> I cannot say that I still have acceptance, of my work, but certainly, there were more and more people willing to come to watch it, which automatically meant there was a curiosity, there was a willingness to watch, and the response and the crowds came from outside dance – they came from films, cinemas, spoken word, poetry, literature…you know, visual artists, painters, sculptors, thinkers and scholars – everybody but the dance community came. (2016, pers. communication)

Commonality of experience to anyone dwelling on demarcated borders is a hard battle of the right to remain. Recurrent in the initial reception to the body of work of both Ratnam and Sarabhai is evidence of a hard battle against critics, colleagues and audiences toward artists going against the grain.

Although their struggles in reception may bear resemblance, their starting points for choreography remain vastly different. Ratnam talks of the need to be convinced in something before she creates:

> Now, the impetus to create sometimes doesn't come from inside me. The impetus to create, the idea to create can sometimes come from something completely different – it could be a passing conversation with somebody, it could be a postcard a friend sent me, it could be a newspaper headline I read, it could be a sentence from a book…it could, it could be many things…and so I don't go by calendar. I decided I'm going to take the entire year of 2012 by not creating anything new. (2014, pers. communication)

For Sarabhai, the starting point has remained music. She, like Ratnam, has continually emphasised that her school of contemporary dance is not imitative of the West, but is grounded in Bharatanatyam. Although they draw freely from the grammar of movement in Bharatanatyam, Ratnam and Sarabhai rupture choreography as process in the way it is framed in Bharatanatyam.

Choreography in the Indian classical idioms usually has a close relationship with music. It is also interesting to note that there is often a distinction between the dancer and choreographer in Bharatanatyam. If the *Guru* is responsible for the choreography, as is commonplace in Bharatanatyam practice, the dancer usually has no say in the process. Rather, the dancer follows the oral instructions of her *Guru* who premeditates the choreographic design before a rehearsal session. Within the studio in Bharatanatyam, as I recount from personal experience, both the literal lexicon of Bharatanatyam and its metaphorical applications are drawn upon in instruction. For example, the *Guru* might instruct the dancer to do "the first Sarukal adavu in first speed" or "the second Mandi adavu in third speed" and the dancer automatically knows to synchronise the movement to the spoken syllables or the music. Alternatively, she may be told to portray "a pot-bellied Ganesha swaying his trunk back and forth" or "a shy heroine expressing her love for her Lord in a letter through her messenger". The trained body draws on its muscle memory to do, portray or become a pattern, image or idea. There is very little space afforded to the student dancer for improvisation within the studio, with the exception of *sancharis* (the repetition of a single line over and over again allowing for a reading between the lines within the classical repertory) in *Varnams, Padams* and/or *Javalis*. I

remember being afforded the freedom to assimilate images from first person experience and encounter into the framework of the dance itself in these specific items. It allows the dancer to explore the psyche of the *Nayika* and blur the lines between the real and representational. It is possibly the only sections in the *Margam* that allow the imagination of the dancer to run free, albeit within the parameters of the structure. This is also the only time and space in the *Margam* that enables the dancer to become an idea, as opposed to enact an idea. The continuous repetition of the lines in itself allows for paucity and reflection, and invites the audience to partake of the scene being painted on stage. It is without doubt that improvisational *sancharis* find echoes in the choreographic processes of Ratnam and Sarabhai who often don the hats of both dancer and choreographer.

A striking similarity in the work of Ratnam and Sarabhai is the continual return to the multiplicity of goddesses in neolithic forms of worship, and their performative assertion of these goddesses within myth and post-religious secular realities. The invocation of these images is an attempt to take ownership of the representation of these women in a manner that is not mediated by the dominant order of traditional masculine discourse. By writing the bodies of the goddesses as transgressive, and embodying their reflections in the construction of selfhood and their sisterhood, Ratnam and Sarabhai challenge the canon. The inculcation of goddess mythologies in the narratives of their performance-text serve a project of *écriture féminine* that explores the injustices done to the goddess figure itself in mythical representations, analyses the personal and political by situating the self in the locus of the goddess symbol and confronts the spectator by drawing attention to the disturbing distance in treatment of the reverential feminine and the real woman. Further, the nature of their embodied writing is realised from their corporeal experience of being. This is best evidenced by an example. In the work *7 graces…the many hues of Goddess Tara* (2005), a choreography on the goddess Tara inspired by Tibetan Buddhism, Ratnam explores pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood as impulses for her bodily writing of the black Tara, the world mother. As Cixous expands,

"She alone dares and wishes to know from within, where she, the outcast, has never ceased to hear the resonance of fore-language" (1976, 889). Ratnam speaks of drawing on her own muscle memory in her interactions with her children such as the pinching of their cheeks and forcing them to eat, as well as deeply personal moments such as the rubbing of skin to check for dryness and the digging of the ear to clear out wax as images that inspired her choreography (2016, pers. communication). However, these images were not transposed as pedestrian gestures into the performance work, but translated into the language of dance. At other instances in the same work, the body seems to reference image itself as the driver for movement through its derivate impulses, in the fashion of a Butoh-body. While these images are impossible to read in a literal sense, the aesthetic offers a way of reading by valuing the subjective effect it has on the spectator. In these moments, form appears as content disappears. Nonetheless, the symbols of motherhood do surface once the maternal drives pass through the thetic phase in the choreography. It can, and indeed has, been argued that the child-mother relationship seeks to impose an essentialist identity on the experience of women. But, as ecofeminist Vandana Shivas argues, "Contemporary western views of nature are fraught with the dichotomy or duality between man and woman, and person and nature. In Indian cosmology, by contrast, person and nature (Purusha-Prakriti) are a duality in unity" (Shiva 2010, 40). I evoke Shiva here, as the reference to a lot of Ratnam's movements in 7 graces…the many hues of Goddess *Tara* take on an androgynous quality, even if inspired by feminine subjectivities.

The gaze theory has been the topic of fascination of many film and performance studies during the 1970s and 1980s, made famous by Laura Mulvey's conception of the male gaze in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). In summary, she argues that the gaze in cinema is masculine and invites the voyeuristic gaze of the male spectator to identify with the active male subject, and the female is thereby reduced to a passive object. She emphasises the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the female victim who is rendered voiceless by the voyeurism of the male sub-

ject. Remarkably, this commodification of the female dancer is further highlighted in analysing the psychosexual fantasies of the *Nayika*, moved only by her lovelorn response to an imaginary male king or god. For the *Nayika* exists on stage merely as an object to fulfil the dominant hegemonic desires of the master narrative. Although she is dancing on stage, her "to-be-looked-at-ness" in full view, her body and its subjectivities are made invisible. I am in agreement with Peggy Phelan when she writes of Odissi (and the same argument can be made for Bharatanatyam) as a dance form that has caused the systemic erasure of female existence and experience (1988).

Ann Daly stresses that this theory of the female body as a site of survey has much to offer dance scholarship; she asks "How can women represent themselves on stage without being co-opted by the conventions of the male gaze? Is it possible for women to reconstruct their own standards of beauty that need not depend on becoming the object of the male desire?" (1991a, 3). Not all scholars are in agreement, and Daly revised her writing in later years, but delving into the intricate politics of the gaze is beyond the scope of this thesis. Ratnam and Sarabhai directly address such above-mentioned questions by adopting a principle of montage that ruptures a single point of view and requires the active engagement of the spectator in the making of meaning. They also privilege goddess mythologies and personal narratives that highlight their selfhood and subjectivities. By re-visioning the *Nayika* in their dance as women with power, desire and agency, Ratnam and Sarabhai disrupt the gaze by fracturing the fictions of traditional devices in dance. The compactness of the female dancer's orientation to space, the constraint in her facial expression and the constriction in the extension of her limbs and torso are debunked in the dance of Ratnam and Sarabhai. Further, they direct their gaze outward knowingly, thereby casting the glance of the surveying subject while they continue to remain the surveyed object. They strive to dislocate dance from the cultural baggage of colonisation through an integration of the semiotic, the symbolic, and the scenographic, and hence appeal to the multi-sensorial cognisance of the viewer, as opposed to a purely visual one.

Both Ratnam and Sarabhai create work with autobiographical strands, and have done so for the last two and a half decades in which they have been actively creating and performing their own work. Although this has now become common practice in much contemporary performance work in India, in the time they were first creating, these choreographic choices were largely unfamiliar to audiences. By and large, the dances of these women are a declaration of the human condition. For bell hooks, "Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subject, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story" (1989, 43). Drawing on the experiential as the cause for expression, Ratnam and Sarabhai stage the self through a range of subjective strategies. In cataloguing and chronicling experiences from their own life kinaesthetically, visually and textually, Ratnam and Sarabhai controversially bring self-referentiality to the front and centre, fracturing the representations of an idealised femininity in and through movement, costume and narrative. By negotiating a space for the comprehensive spectrum of their personhood, Ratnam and Sarabhai infiltrate their performance works with intimacy and impact derived at the interface of dance, mythology, music, story-telling, spoken-word, poetry, theatre, multimedia, costume and other material artefacts. As performance artist Tim Miller emphasised in a workshop that I attended with him as our rehearsal director, "the aim of autobiographical performance is to find a window for the spectator" (Miller, 2012). This process of production is neither indulgent nor egotistical, but delves into the personal to make manifest the politics of difference. In the case of Ratnam's choreographies, explicitly intended at a young, urbane, cosmopolitan crowd, self-representation is used as a device to activate the spectator to find threads of meaning that are reflective of their own lived reality. In the case of Sarabhai's choreographies, where she creates different works for a variety of audiences and contexts, self-representation offers a perspective that she hopes will perpetuate her agenda for activism and action at all levels.

Both dancers do not view tradition and modernity as opposite projects in dance, but resist polarities in favour of an organic evolution that oscillates back and forth between the past, the present and the future. They both maintain the stance that the compartmentalisation of dance, theatre and music was a product of the interactive forces of colonisation between the ruler and the ruled and, in that sense, they swing back to a time pre-Bharatanatyam to let tradition free-fall into their contemporary realities. For instance, Ratnam spoke of her performance work at the *Performance and Religion* working group at the *International Federation for Theatre Research World Congress 2016* in Stockholm, Sweden where she performed Sufi whirls for 45 minutes to different soundscapes inspired by the harmonised Gayatri Mantra, Egyptian Chant, Korean influences and Celtic music, amongst other new-age references. Sufi whirls are customarily part of ceremonial worship traditionally performed by male dervishes and consist of 360 degree spins in continuous circles set in motion with the right foot while the arms are extended outward with the right palm open to the sky and the left palm turned down to the earth; the eyes are closed with the head tilted slightly to the left. The aim is to achieve a transcendental state of being, submit the ego of selfhood and embark on a journey in search of the truth. As Cixous notes, "she [woman] knows far more about living and about the relation between the economy of the drives and the management of the ego than any man" (1976, 888). Despite the grandiose nature of this comment, it is undeniable that Ratnam is able to lose a part of herself in the gifting of this performative moment to the spectator rather than a traditional departure from the stage upon the closure of a linear narrative. On a metaphorical level, the Sufi whirling is meant to be symbolic of the planet's rotation on its axis and revolution around the sun. This whirling, characteristically performed by men is subverted, de-contextualised and the rite is used within a traditional frame of performance to enable the audiences to become witnesses, as opposed to viewers, to a process of becoming. Here, Ratnam manages to alienate the gesture of whirling by de-familiarising the spiritual tradition in the context of contemporary performance.

Both Ratnam and Sarabhai pay a great deal of attention to the visual field in their performance works. Ultimately, their immaterial bodies and utterances are incomplete without their material counterparts of costume, set, props and lighting in their performance worlds. Performance design, especially within the world of dance, is still in its infancy in India. The classical dance form of Bharatanatyam is usually performed in a traditional proscenium arch theatre with a black backdrop, basic lighting and a live orchestra in the dancer's right hand corner. Sometimes, ugly banners of the hosting festival and its sponsors are layered upon this black backdrop, detracting from the minutiae of movement by agonising the gaze of the spectator. Although Rabindranath Tagore and Uday Shankar worked with elements of scenography, these experiments were few and far between. In today's contemporary performance circuit in India, there tends to be an outright rejection of artifice and a manoeuvre toward minimalism in the visual field. Additionally, these performances tend to take place in alternative spaces and pop-ups. Ratnam and Sarabhai, however, remain the exception, not the rule. In fact, both choreographers refer to the envisioning of the final performance worlds in dreams. Speaking of the production *The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya* (2001), Sarabhai notes:

> I had a very strong visual sense, like I saw right in the beginning when I started thinking about it, I saw the sails and the sails moving. You know it was a very clear image and as I told you I see sails and I see the sails becoming different things. So the whole boat sequence…Where do I go? What am I adrift on? and so on…I saw very clearly. My dancers are always very amused when I come into the rehearsals and say I had a dream last night and they say OK, is it about a scene coming up? Because very often I wake up with a very clear visual picture and then I go and tell them and we try and figure out how to get there or how to get out of there. So that's how it became what it was" (2014, pers. communication).

It is this dreamscape that is recreated in much of their performance works. Their dance is never choreographed to function bare bones. They predominantly create work for consumption in traditional proscenium theatre spaces, deploying scenographic vocabulary as an integral part of their process and product. Their *mise-en-scène* is culture-specific and deeply grounded in Indian art and

aesthetics and their use of design is technically sophisticated. They layer their constructed world with metaphor and meaning, using emerging media technologies to empower this world.

Ratnam and Sarabhai also incorporate ritual in the performance design of their feminist choreographies. The incorporation of elements of ritual on stage, usually a behind-the-scenes act, becomes the ciphers of the familiar for the audience. It helps women reach toward their collective cultural memory, and is incorporated in the way that Artaud prescribes in theatre (influenced heavily by his viewing of Japanese and Chinese performing arts troupes), "to heal the split between language and flesh" (1976, xxxv). Schechner questioned the loss of the sacred in performance since it has transformed into a commodity for consumption (1976). Both Ratnam and Sarabhai are immensely critical of this very commercialisation of classical dance in today's era, and reclaim ritual as a mechanism to offset the aforementioned loss of the sacred. The healing obtained by the heightened intensity of ritual is targeted to bring the spectator into the fold of the performance and strike at the transformative power of consciousness.

Ratnam and Sarabhai deconstruct the apparatus of performance in a number of different ways. They unearth their own performance language and approach to choreography in a cultural environment that either occupies itself with preservation of the classical or rejects completely the dual concepts of Indian and tradition in dance and aligns itself instead with the principles of modern and postmodern dance in the West. Refusing to be contained in a paradigm of either/or, Ratnam and Sarabhai draw freely from this contested ground of tradition, and rework, reframe and reformulate its applications in a contemporary mould. In doing so, they regulate relationships between the body and its muscle memory in order to politicise female subjectivity in performance. In comparing her work to that of British South Asian choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh, Ratnam asserts:

> Shobana, if I want to use postmodern rhetoric, I would say Shobana's work is colourless and I am full of colour, in the sense, she works in abstraction so intensely, Shobana Jeyasingh. She works from the multiple strands of the fact that she is Tamil,

> she was Christian from Tirunalveli and she admits in many, many forums that she was not a good classical dancer, which then forced her to relook at, revisit, requilt her vazhuvoor Bharatanatyam background with negotiating a British South Asianness in performance. Her abstraction works toward bringing everything to a kind of a zero point. My approach to dance is to take it to infinity, adding colour, adding layers and really heightening everything…and expanding it. I think that our approaches are possibly very, very different because I live and work in my hometown. ..so this is, this is where I've grown up and this is where I live in which I perhaps take many impulses and images and references almost for granted. I can create more organically, not just conceptually from the head that flows through the body, but sometimes in the reverse – what my body feels like doing and then process it perhaps as, Oh what did I do! So, both of us have rasa in a very different way, both of us use the idea of stillness in a very different way but I think Shobana works so, so purely on the idea of 'Show, don't tell' and I work on 'show and tell.'" (2014, pers. communication)

The "show and tell" approach explicitly references the marrying of the semiotic to the symbolic. It is thus virtually impossible to tease out the elements of the classical, the modern and the mundane in Ratnam's body of work. This interdisciplinarity reflects a deconstructionist approach to the avant-garde, and situates the female dancing body as a storehouse of infinite permutations and combinations. In de-contextualising the grammar of Bharatanatyam, particularly through the use of *mudras*, both Ratnam and Sarabhai perform an embodied way of thinking about Brechtian *Gestus.* Content and form are treated as homogeneous in catalysing choreography. By constantly floating between illusion and reality, the fourth wall is shattered. For example, in the production *V for…* (1996), Sarabhai employs black comedy in her pantomime-inspired performance, supported by her cane, to a monologue on violence. The soundscape speaks, "It's that little gene. It's small and it's mean. Too small for detection. It's your built in protection. Adrenaline, kill. It will give you the will. Yes you better face it. Cause you can't displace it. You're V-I-O-L-E-N-T. Cause you're either a victim, or on top LIKE ME". Sarabhai directly addresses her audience with the cane in this segment, and she points across the room when the word violent is spelt out in the soundscape, directly placing blame on the body of audience. At the end of the monologue, when she refers to herself as being part of the problem, she places a hand on her chest and then uses the cane to powerfully knock

down a co-performer (who was at this point part of the immobile frame constituting the set) and the co-performer falls to the ground. Any illusion of being in the theatre is dismantled at this point, and the spectator is confronted with his/her own aggression.

By emphasising the independence of the vignettes that are strung together in a montage in the manner pioneered by Pina Bausch, Ratnam and Sarabhai do not subscribe to a temporal linearity. In fact, Ratnam uses the image of a spiral in describing her body of work, where the artist and spectator start at point A and progressively curve further away from this point in their own individual journeys through the arc of the performance and end up necessarily in a multitude of different points, but never back at point A (2016, pers. communication). Circumscribing physical language in a principle of montage, Ratnam's and Sarabhai's vignettes often stand alone as independent scenes that can be re-visioned in a (syn)aesthetic response to the layering of the verbal, the visceral and the technological in their performance landscape. Each layer does not function as completely coherent or interpretable but a basic idea is fragmented through the free range of associations formed by the assemblage of the various elements in the visual field of the spectator to produce multi-layered, raw and sensory statements. This layering may or may not complement the curvature of the performance, and often functions even when far removed from narrative. In thinking of the temporal as cyclical rather than linear, they embody an aesthetic practice that speaks to the creative potential of the modes of feminine writing proposed by Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva.

Ratnam and Sarabhai are also compulsive collaborators. The intuitive, experiential and sensory knowledge of their co-directors and dancers is drawn on in making choreographic choices and though they retain the right to include or exclude movement phrases from the final product, they do not concern themselves with taking credit for particular moments and movements that arise in performance. Sarabhai often collaborates with performance designer Yadavan Chandran to bring her dreamscapes to life and Ratnam has collaborated with notable dramaturgs/choreographers/costume

designers, and her collaboration with Canada-based South Asian dancer/choreographer Hari Krishnan marks 25 years in 2016. More detail on the specific nature of their collaborative process follows in the analysis of their work in Chapters Four and Five. Pushing the possibilities of a preconfigured movement to its extremities also finds place in the aesthetics of Ratnam and Sarabhai. In a phenomenological sense, they try to reduce the movement vocabulary to its essences, intentions and sensations.

As Ratnam says, her work is not for "lazy audiences" (2016, pers. communication). It requires the multi-sensorial engagement of the spectator in order to arrive at individualised meanings. Sarabhai favours a more prescriptive approach, through the adoption of the alienation effect, as first developed by Bertolt Brecht and made popular in epic theatre. Her performance work actively seeks to showcase traditional bias against women and their life force in the form of discriminatory phenomena such as rape, female foeticide, sati, dowry, domestic abuse, pollution, deforestation and other macro-political and micro-personal manifestations. Her choreography is also conceptualised with the viewpoint of harnessing the power of the arts to effect social and political change. As Sarabhai thinks out loud in an article published in the newspaper DNA, "The performance is merely the conduit, the placebo, the sugar coated pill, to ensure that the receiver is open to the message, accepts it, doesn't raise walls before you can reach out" (2011).

On the other hand, Ratnam is invested in imbuing her choreography with a "feminist consciousness". As she puts it, "so much of my work is about process" (2016, pers. communication). Embedded in such a process is the commitment to self-reflexivity in one's own artistic practice. Suppositionally, the work is always becoming. Albright writes, "Lived bodies strain at the seams of a culture's ideological fabric. Inherently unstable, the body is always in a paradoxical process of becoming—and becoming alone. As any dancer or athlete will readily admit, the body never reaches a stable location, no matter how disciplined the training" (Albright 1997, 5). By investing her

energies in process, Ratnam's choreography is allowed to simmer, shape, reshape and shape-shift continually and organically in her repertoire of work. She hopes to give her audiences something to take back—an image, a memory, a moment, a flicker, a feeling. Her performance work is resonant of Akram Khan's understanding of the body as a museum: "I feel the body is like a museum but an evolving museum so it's constantly mutating. It's a museum because it carries history. It carries generations and generations of information, cultural, educational, religious, political and so on. Then with each generation the body transforms, takes that information and responds to the environment that we live in." (Khan, cited in Machon 2009, 112).

Ratnam's art is constantly in a state of responsiveness to her life, and these impulses form the bedrock of her bodily enunciations. Ratnam treats her material artefacts, lights and costumes as "living organisms", invoking their potential to create a *sthayi bhava* (dominant mood) and affect the sensory perception of her audiences through the creation of *rasa* (2014, pers. communication). This is a conscious engagement and she claims it is ever-present in her performance work. On the contrary, Sarabhai expresses the opinion that *rasa* is an all-pervasive ideology in India but does not engage with the concept in the way that it has been codified within a neo-classical dance framework. Katrak also elucidates the idea of a body-based *rasa,* where emotive value is laden on the physical planes of the body in motion and stillness, as opposed to/in complement of the expressivity of the facial features (2011). This body-based *rasa*, evident in Sarabhai's abstraction of movement and incorporation of ritual and Ratnam's focus on breath, energies, silence and stillness, allows the audience a point of entry into the work through the awakening of their own kinaesthetic awareness. Jane Desmond writes of re-visioning dance:

> Looking at dance demands that we find ways to talk about proprioception, sensation, emotion, and expressivity which lapse neither into pretended objectivity of scientism nor the transcendent figurations of a unified "self". It demands that we theorize relationships between the public display of bodily motion and the articulation of social categories of identity, of their transmission, transformation, perception and enact-

> ment. These are some of the questions that dance studies can lead us into. They are based on the historical materiality of the body, and are thus questions which scholarship on visual representation in film or painting, or on narrative from literary studies, has not had to grapple with as consistently. In addition, they call for an engagement between the figurative and the abstract, and between the narrative and the non-narrative. (1997, 3)

Desmond's approach to studying the figurative and the abstract and the narrative and the non-narrative has been fruitful in my own analyses of the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. Indeed, as Sarkar Munsi has noted, there is a great deal of apprehension amongst Indian dancers in dealing with the body. She notes that a majority of critical ink spilt on the subject too steers clear of, or only just touches upon, the issues of the body, focussing its energies instead on the content or meaning of the dance (Sarkar Munsi, 2010). I attempt to bridge this divide in my thesis, through the methodological perspectives provided by transnational feminist frameworks, mirroring the dancer-scholar's own hybrid identity and the choreographies of her subjects of analysis. It is my hope that my (syn)aesthetic analysis combines the textual, visual, kinaesthetic and tactile elements in discussing the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai and opens up new ways of engagement with Indian dance in the academy. As a matter of fact, Ratnam herself has spoken of moving the rhetoric of her performance work from a "contemporary classicism" to a "transnational modernity" (2016, pers. communication).

I argue that characteristic to the performance works of Ratnam and Sarabhai that defy rigid categorisation, are commonalities in choreographic process and output, as I have detailed in this section. In sum, I propose the following framework in the choreographic analysis of the repertoire of Ratnam and Sarabhai. The framework takes into account the overarching similarities in their bodily writing through a (syn)aesthetic reading of their repertoire, while allowing for the detailed dissection of differences and specificities in their individual repertoires. I chart out the ways in which their choreographies are reflective of an embodied *écriture féminine*:

1. Producing a body of contemporary work dwelling in the beyond, refusing to be pigeon-holed, and existing in its dialectical tensions with the classical

2. Hybridising process to create choreographies that are affective by rejecting the binaries of dance and theatre

3. Troubling the received universals of mythology in the classical idiom, especially through the adoption of the goddess trope

4. Destabilising the primacy of the male gaze by subverting the woman on stage from pas-sive object to active subject

5. Inculcating the autobiographical I/eye into the composition and choreography of the output

6. Adopting a principle of montage, as theorised by Bertolt Brecht and evidenced in the work of Pina Bausch, thereby rejecting coherence in choreography and seamlessness in dra-maturgy

7. Drawing on the elements of the visual field, such as set and lighting, as "co-performers"

8. Incorporating ritual

9. Deconstructing the productive apparatus of performance

10. Engaging with the philosophy of *rasa* through the requirement of active reflection, in contrast to passive receptivity, from the body of audience

Chapter Four: Mallika Sarabhai and Dance to Change the World

Mallika Sarabhai is well known in the world of dance in India. Indeed, amongst the many feathers in her cap, she is probably most widely identified as a dancer/choreographer. In a career as a performing artist that has spanned over three decades, Sarabhai has established herself as one of the success stories among professional dancers in India. She has had her work commissioned by leading arts bodies, including the *British Council*, the *Smithsonian Institution,* and the *Forum of World Religions* to name but a few; generated a profitable income model for her repertory company; collaborated with local and transnational artists, such as Italian actor/director Rita Maffei, Nigerian dancer/actor Peter Badejo, and Indian Odissi dancer Daksha Mashruwala amongst others; presented her work on leading national and international stages and at festivals such as *Sadler's Wells*, *Festival Des Champs-Élysées,* and the *Perth International Arts Festival*, amongst a host of other prestigious platforms; devised a pedagogical framework for the complete training of the body for herself and her repertory company; and conducted workshops at *Roehampton University, National Centre for Performing Arts Mumbai*, and the *Indian Institute of Management*. Perhaps her single most important contribution to the landscape of performance in India is the introduction of her unique brand of artivism that combines Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Yoga, Kalaripayattu, folk dance, story-telling, mime and contemporary theatre techniques to stage interventions through (syn)aesthetic performance works that question, challenge, reflect, rattle and offend the social, cultural and political conditions, especially with respect to women, in her contemporary surrounds.

Preferring to identify herself as a "communicator", Sarabhai's many facets as an artist, activist, academic, writer, publisher, and politician come together to form a unified whole (2008). She is a recipient of numerous awards for artistic excellence, including *The Golden Star Award* by *Theatre Des Champs-Élysées for the best dance soloist, Paris* (1977), an *Honorary Doctorate of*

Letters awarded by *The University of East Anglia, UK* (1997), *The Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for Creative Dance, India* (2001), and *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres* from *The French Government* (2005), to name only a handful of her laurels. Having taken over the artistic reins of *Darpana* from her mother in 1977, Sarabhai facilitates a variety of creative platforms for the redressal of injustices and issues that are close to her heart. She was even shortlisted for *The Nobel Peace Prize* in the year 2005.

Mallika, daughter of the late dancer/choreographer/activist Mrinalini Sarabhai and the late scientist/educationist/industrialist Vikram Sarabhai, occupies a position of the "cosmopolitan patriot", as set out in the introductory chapter, in the landscape of Ahmedabad, Gujarat (Appiah 1997). Her aunt Lakshmi Sehgal was commander of the Indian army and her great aunt Amulya Sarabhai headed the very first labour union strike in India. Her celebrated family history is closely intertwined with the history of the state of Gujarat, and Nehruvian ideologies of modernity filter through to their approach to art, science, religion, politics, industry and the nation at large (Grau 2013). Growing up in such a family with exposure to a wide variety of illustrious members committed to the betterment of the marginalised, Mallika Sarabhai's addition to the long list adds another figure dedicated to the progressive ideologies and community development initiatives that are synonymous with the Sarabhai family name.

Sarabhai was trained extensively in the classical Indian dance forms of Bharatanatyam by her mother and in Kuchipudi by the famed C.R. Acharya, and received theatre training when she toured as the feminine/feminist Draupadi in Peter Brook's The *Mahabharata*/*Le Mahabharata* in the 1980s. As a child, she claims to have been lazy, trying to escape dance and move toward theatre, only to return back to her passion in the 1990s. Sarabhai's training now spans a wide range of artistic, meditative, movement and martial arts practices, and she spends a considerable amount of time investing her energies into deconstructing the movement vocabularies of these practices. She has

repeatedly stated that the two most influential artists in her own life have been her mother, Mrinalini Sarabhai, and internationally acclaimed albeit problematic director, Peter Brook.

Although Brook has come under attack by many postcolonial theorists, with Bharucha's searing criticisms of Brook's cultural appropriation unforgettable to most scholars in the field,[10] it is worth noting that British South Asian dancer/choreographer Akram Khan and Mallika Sarabhai have both acknowledged the indebtedness they feel for having been part of the production and the impact it had on their own intercultural approaches to performance-making and story-telling (Khan 2015, Sarabhai 2016). Considering their landmark contributions to contemporary performance praxis in India and the diaspora today, it is important not to discount the influence of Brook in shaping their artistic visions, although their work is now vastly different from Brook's aesthetics, nor does it bear any resemblance to each other's processes and products. I trace this influence in the discussion of Sarabhai's first solo self-authored and choreographed work, *In Search of the Goddess* (2000) later in this chapter.

4.1 Darpana Academy of Performing Arts: Surveying the Field

Mallika Sarabhai took over the running of Darpana from her mother in 1977, and shifted the focus of Darpana in 1998 to branch out into a professional repertory company; a school for classical, folk and contemporary arts; a centre for international artists and workshops; a centre for non-violence through the arts; a publishing house; a centre for film and communications and an open-air amphitheatre providing an in-house platform on the riverfront for hosting festivals. Darpana holds a number of festivals throughout the year, the most prominent being *InterArt (the Vikram Sarabhai International Arts Festival), The Arts for Tolerance and Non-Violence Festival, The Sunday to Sun-*

[10] Refer Bharucha (1988) for a criticism of intercultural theatre in general and a scathing critique of Peter Brook's Mahabharata in particular for the debate that continues to hold significance in postcolonial theatre criticism.

day Theatre Festival, The Cinema of Resistance Film Festival, Naada and *Celebrating the World of Dance Festival*.

Sarabhai remains committed to using the performing arts as a catalyst for social change and this has become the focal point of Darpana's existence under her directorship. Having completed a Masters degree in Business Administration from the *Indian Institute of Management* and a PhD in Organizational Behavior from *Gujarat University*, Sarabhai had the necessary administrative and managerial acumen to take on a leadership role and accelerate the growth of the institution. When her mother was at the helm of affairs, Darpana received 30 percent of its funding from government grants, and Sarabhai reconfigured Darpana's business model to drop that to a meagre 2 percent when she took over the directorship (2014, pers. communication). She did this with a view to freeing her artistic practice from the clutches of political agendas and silencing strategies. Owing to her ongoing battles with the right-wing government in power and her more recent involvement with politics, as will be elucidated in a forthcoming section, this funding from government grants has now fully disappeared. Due to such developments, Sarabhai has constantly had to negotiate a feminist model of economics to recycle her limited resources, now primarily acquired through her solo and ensemble tours, to keep Darpana's artistic and social commitment alive. She laments the loss of many senior dancers in recent years that has put insurmountable pressure on Sarabhai through the dependence on her tours as a soloist to pump money into the organisation (2016, pers. communication). Nonetheless, Darpana continues to thrive in Ahmedabad, always bustling with students, artists, visiting artists, academics, scholars, guests and audiences alike. In fact, Sarabhai has donated adjacent land from her own personal property for the expansion of Darpana, as she sees the academy as an extension of herself. This act of generosity brings to mind Cixous's claim, "If there is a "propriety of woman," it is paradoxically her capacity to depropriate unselfishly, body without end, without appendage, without principal "parts"" (1976, 889). Unbelievably, in seeing her institution as an extension of her selfhood, and donating her property as a "giver", Sarabhai construes a femi-

nist model of economics capable of growth and multiplication whilst retaining her artistic and personal integrity (1976, 889).

A typical day at Darpana starts early at 7 am, when the body, mind and spirit are prepared for the day by the practice of *Bikram Iyengar* Yoga. This is followed by a Kalaripayattu class, which then leads into dance rehearsals by the performance wing of the company. At 10 am, the company breaks for a cup of chai at the in-house *Natrani* café.

The day is then followed by administrative activities, and it was during this time that Sarabhai was free to grant me access to the video archives of Darpana. Darpana has been meticulous about archiving its repertoire of works, and has even released a few performance and biographical DVDs. The communication wing, *Darpana Communications (DCom)* headed by Yadavan Chandran, is in charge of this documentation. The institution makes radical use of technology, light and sound as an interface between dance and the digital world. Further, the collection of books in the library at Darpana is exhaustive and covers topics ranging across a variety of disciplines including, but not limited to, religion, philosophy, mythology, visual art, dance, music and leadership. The environment is holistic, and does not see a distinction between art and life. Art is a way of life at Darpana.

Planning for the yearly activities is constantly in full swing, and Darpana challenges itself, year after year, to break out of its perceived comfort zone. The organisation has an air of dynamism that feels refreshing, and is in stark contrast with the relatively rigid environs of most classical organisations in India. During the day, theatre rehearsals also take place on campus for Darpana's street theatre interventions around the slums of Ahmedabad. The work done by the *Darpana for Development* team is substantial, consisting of amateur actors trained by experienced directors to travel around the slums on weekends performing short skits with musical interludes on welfare issues such as HIV awareness, hygiene, neo-natal care, non-violence, women's rights and the environment. These projects are often spearheaded by Sarabhai in association with *UNICEF, UNESCO*,

and *WHO* and the street-theatre interventions by Sarabhai and her team have produced remarkable results in fighting for the autonomy and agency of slum-dwellers to make informed choices regarding their bodies, rights and surrounds. The process embarked on by these actors is resonant of Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

On the weekends, I had the opportunity to assist on these productions and tailgate the actors around the slums of Ahmedabad. I found the evidence of these performance outcomes to be significant. Children in the slums would come up to the actors and talk about how they now fold a clean cloth, usually their mother's sarees, eight times to filter water before drinking. The *World Health Organization* endorses that this kills up to 80 percent of the bacteria present in the water that is filtered through. The children are familiarised with such information and insight that could potentially impact their well-being in huge ways, through simple and effective staging. The characters in the skits, more often than not, remain the same so, over time, the audience starts to identify with them. For example, the children learn to not do what the goat does, to do what the doctor says, to listen to the narrator, and so forth.

Darpana truly comes to life in the evenings, when the gates are flung open for music, dance and drama classes and workshops. Industry professionals at the forefront of their field run these classes. The pedagogy is revised from time to time so that the mode of instruction and material taught is fresh and relevant. Certification is offered at three levels—Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced. The institution not only trains people who want to make a career in the arts professionally, but actively attempts to involve the local public in the arts for fun in a non-judgmental environment. I took folk dance classes every alternate day for the months that I was there and I learnt a traditional Gujarati *Garbha* routine. The way the body needs to loosen up and develop fluidity, in contrast to the rigidity of classical Bharatanatyam, was tricky but ultimately fulfilling. I noticed that my body had to unlearn the geometry of classical dance, to then be able to learn the fluidity of the Gujarati *Garbha*. The high energy of the folk dance forms of India, scored by catchy background per-

cussion, make them access an uninhibiting body. The classes were held at the *Natrani amphitheatre*, a purpose-built open air state-of-the-art venue on the riverfront at Darpana.

Sarabhai lives just above Darpana, and her dogs roam the institution at their whim and fancy. In the gardens, you sometimes see peacocks dancing in the wind. Her children, Revanta Sarabhai and Anahita Sarabhai, who have also found their first love in dance, are increasingly becoming involved with the institution. Revanta has spearheaded the functioning of the conservatory, and is building pedagogical tools that integrate arts into academic curricula for schools in the neighbourhood. He holds a Masters degree in Choreography from *Roehampton University* in London and has worked as a resident choreographer at *Korzo Theatre*, Den Haag. He is also an actor, filmmaker and multimedia artist. His younger sister, Anahita, is a dance graduate from *Sarah Lawrence College* and is currently based between New York and Ahmedabad. She is also a skilled choreographer, videographer and stage technical assistant. Her openness about her sexuality as a lesbian positions her in a contested domain in a country that has recently re-criminalised the right to gay sex. Foreign exchange students and artists-in-residence are welcomed with open arms at Darpana. Long-term Darpana guests inevitably become part of the Darpana family. A strong artistic vision and commitment to the community within which Darpana exists is at the heart of every gesture found within its walls.

The walls of Darpana are lined with traditional murals and a majestic ceramic horse stands towards the entrance, all painted by the resident visual artists and visiting mixed-media artists over the years. Ahmedabad is one of India's hottest cities, with temperatures rising to 48 degrees Celsius in the months that I was visiting. Being situated on the banks of the Sabarmati river helps, as you get some breeze during the evenings. The harshest of weather conditions do not dim the din and bustle of Darpana. Attention to detail is evident in every direction you turn. Even drinking water for the students and staff is cooled in the traditional Indian earthen pot called the *Matka*. Sarabhai believes that this integrated approach to Indian arts is a "going back to the roots" approach rather than

a contemporary one, a perspective she holds true of her repertoire of work as well (2014, pers. communication).

Founded in 1949, Darpana has seen the highest of highs and lowest of lows, but what sets it apart is the pillars of idealism that hold it up. I had the opportunity to interview a host of Darpana artists during my time there, in addition to personal correspondence with a number of them formed by forging friendships during my fieldwork. The outcome has been a wealth of information that highlights the Darpana difference at every turn, and has added depth and richness to the analysis of Sarabhai's body of work. For the purpose of my thesis, I have selected four feminist choreographies from her repertoire for a detailed analysis that I believe represent her wide-ranging approaches to feminist choreography, trace her evolution as an artist over the years, and paint her aesthetics as innately heterogeneous. *Sita's Daughters* (1990) is an example of *écriture féminine* employing strategies of subverting the canon to challenge conventional representations of gender in India and construct an embodied resistance to the plight of the treatment of Indian female bodies in society; *In Search of the Goddess* (2000) is her first self-authored and choreographed performance work and critically examines, dismantles and re-imagines goddess mythologies in a variety of contemporary contexts; *The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya* (2001) is an embodied intertextual response constructed as a (syn)aesthetic *play*text to the written verses of contemporary and traditional texts on the Devi; and *Colours of the Heart* (2003) is a transnational collaboration born out of her time in captivity that engages autobiographical strands of selfhood and community to politicise personal narratives.

4.2 *Sita's Daughters* (1990): Artivism for Gender Sensitisation

To anyone familiar with the Ramayana, the very title of the performance work would raise eyebrows. My knee-jerk reaction when I heard of the production in 1996 as a young girl was, "Sita's

Daughters!? Didn't Sita only have two sons?", a response similar to the one the reader is likely to have had on reading the title of the work. My initial initiation into Sarabhai's work as a choreographer and dancer was watching her perform in the *Miss World* pageant held in India alongside her troupe in the year 1996. I was only six years old at the time and I vividly recall my pressing concerns in that moment being the need to get to the bottom of how Sarabhai managed to convince her *Guru* to allow her to wear black, an inauspicious colour, on the performance stage. I was also struck by the fact that she faced her back toward the audience, a strict prohibition in Bharatanatyam, where the dancer is always meant to be forward-facing to the audience, another attempt at 'purifying' the form as I would learn years after. Little did I know then that I would revisit the very same artist's performance work nearly two decades later as a point of investigation for my doctoral thesis.

One would be forgiven for responding to the title of the performance work in a similar fashion to the one set out above, irrespective of your age, nationality and/or location. The tongue-in-cheek title invites intrigue, for it is no secret that in the many versions of the Ramayana available to us over the centuries, Sita only birthed twin sons, Lava and Kusha. No daughters are present in any interpretation. Sarabhai acknowledges the provocative title of the work within her performance, in a poignant moment where she addresses the audience as the actor explaining that "any woman who finds her voice to fight oppression, to fight against what is wrong in society, that is a daughter of Sita. And fortunately for us, there are plenty".

Her embodied exploration begins with a very simple question on the identity of this female goddess through her own eyes, "Who was Sita anyway?" There are over 300 versions of The Ramayana in India, and Sarabhai briefly references the "received" Ramayana, the more or less singular version passed down from generation to generation through the oral tradition. Sita, the daughter of Mother Earth and the chaste, benevolent and subservient wife of Lord Rama is hallmarked as the

emblem of idealised Indian womanhood, perpetuating Bhatt's notion of the "Sita Syndrome" referred to in Chapter Three (2008).

The one-woman show starring Sarabhai deploys techniques of Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, folk dance, story-telling, mask and mime to destabilise the combined authority of the masculine, colonial gaze and is strung together in a non-linear weave of vignettes that explore the transgressive acts of modern-day *Nayikas* fighting for women's empowerment in society. Using spoken word as a tool for expressivity of women in the margins, Sarabhai draws attention to injustices within the social and cultural milieu of India that are constantly blindsided in a contemporary society deeply entrenched in patriarchy. At the very beginning of the show, she makes a humorous comment referencing that she has lured audiences to the proscenium stage on "false pretences", announcing that the primary aim of the performance work is not a showmanship of her dancing prowess, but a labour to tell the tales of women—"women I know, women you know, women we think we know and women we must certainly know".

Ideated by Sarabhai and written in collaboration with dancer, actor and director John Martin of *Pan Intercultural Arts* in London, Sita's Daughters is one of a trio of works that were the fruit of that transnational collaborative relationship. Pan Intercultural Arts is a not-for-profit arts organisation committed to using intercultural performance work to empower people in the margins and affect their lives in a positive manner. After Sarabhai's debut as a choreographer and her return as a dancer with their first collaboration *Shakti: The Power of Women* (1989), Sarabhai earned a reputation and following in the fashionable art circles of Great Britain where the work toured in 1989 and 1991, and in the homeland of India where there was a country-wide tour of the work commissioned by *The British Council*. Specifically seeking then to speak to a different segment of society, Sarabhai co-wrote Sita's daughters after in-depth discussions with women activists who work on the field, and their thoughts concerning the most pressing problems facing women in India today, espe-

cially in rural India. The issues dealt with in the work shed light upon the phenomena of rape culture, female foeticide and the problematic deification of women. The performance work continuously cuts across timeframes, referencing women in mythology, history, contemporary India and the self. The lack of a linear narrative allows for the path of the various women to cross, and engages the audience in an introspection on their own identification in that trajectory.

Sita's Daughters, which premiered in 1990, has arguably been the most critically acclaimed, appreciated and performed work of Darpana's entire repertory. Calling it her most iconic work to date, Sarabhai explains how the performance work has been presented over 600 times in three different languages, across a host of venues ranging from icons in the cultural landscape such as *The Smithsonian Institution* to an intimate performance in a North Indian village where eight rape victims aged 10 to 75 gathered around and fed back their personal stories at the end of every section, extending the performance time from an hour-long production to a duration of four hours (2014, pers. communication). Presented at the *Sunday to Sunday Theatre Festival* in Ahmedabad in early 2014, after a gap of twelve years, statistics from the feedback collected from Darpana indicated that it was voted as a favourite amongst the audiences who have witnessed theatre year after year for the past eight years at Darpana's open-air amphitheatre, *Natrani.* The *Sunday to Sunday Theatre Festival* is a week-long festival commissioning local and international theatre groups with a commitment to promoting excellence in theatre, bringing theatre to the local audiences of Ahmedabad, encouraging upcoming theatre artists and preserving disappearing theatre traditions of the region. The reason for the reigning popularity of Sita's daughters is simple, the issues remain even more pressing today than when the work was first conceptualised, and the urgency for action is palpable with Sarabhai's every gesture, every word, every breath.

The very first segment begins with the traditional composition by revered *Carnatic* composer Maharaja Swathi Thirunal, *Bhavayami Raghuramam*, a hymn often performed within the tradi-

tional repertoire of classical dance. The hymn upholds the values and virtues of Lord Rama, looked upon in Hinduism as the '*Maryada Purushottama*', literally the 'perfect' man. Sarabhai intersperses the paragraphs of her classical dance with a dialogue scripted in the form of an interior monologue, in which Sita is having a conversation with Mother Earth, whose womb she had once impregnated. Sarabhai employs the gestural vocabulary of *hastas, jathis* and *Abhinaya* to literally represent the lyrics being extolled by the live orchestra behind her and to accompany her spoken word every time she breaks into speech. Sita pleads with the soil to swallow her whole, unable to bear any longer the burden caused by a lack of love and trust in her life, most of all from her 'perfect' husband. The articulation of her train of thought is layered upon *Carnatic* music, causing an unlikely marriage between the verbal and the visceral, thereby enabling a voice for Sita that is her own, to not be spoken for by men. This dramaturgical choice expresses the power, agency and desires of the female body. Sarabhai's Sita openly shames Rama, mocking his status as the all-knowing divine male, reminding him of her innate power and questioning a husband who mistakes the wife's love for weakness. Sarabhai's Sita also steps into the fire, not to prove her fidelity, but to demonstrate her indestructibility, claiming that all Rama has destroyed through this ordeal is the "love and trust between a husband and wife". The powerful scene ends with Sarabhai's Sita making known to the audience, "I shall be born again in each generation. Next time we shall tell our stories, differently."

Sarabhai stands in a red spotlight and directs her unflinching gaze outward at the audience as she sings in Hindi of both speaking and writing her own truth. She holds the *hamsasyo mudra* with her right hand and draws a straight line signifying truth in Bharatanatyam, and then points to her chest with her hand forming the *pathaka mudra.* Sarabhai's back is straight and she stands upright, aware of her Sita's voice that has been muffled throughout her history (Cixous 1976). She continues to gesture of speaking her own truth by drawing the *hamsasyo mudra* out of her lip with her right hand to signify speech. And Sarabhai then directs the gaze of the audience gesturing to her

entire body from her head to her toes, before using the *hamsasyo mudra* with the right hand and *pathaka mudra* with the left hand to depict writing, seemingly referencing an *écriture féminine* to reverse the effects of a hegemonic writing "where woman has never *her* turn to speak - this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely *the very possibility of change,* the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (Cixous 1976, 879). This speaking is marked by a combination of the semiotic and the symbolic but the performance-text evidences far more characteristics of the Kristevan phenotext than the genotext.

Sarabhai adopts a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach throughout the length of the work. Within the choreography, as mentioned previously, Sarabhai makes a nod to the provocative title of the work. She goes on to explain her framing of *Sita's Daughters* as "any woman who finds her voice to fight oppression, to fight against what is wrong in society, that is a daughter of Sita. And fortunately for us, there are plenty." This statement is worthy of repetition. Sarabhai's vocal training is apparent and her ability to project her voice and her clear diction instantly command your attention. In an interview with the *Hindustan Times*, she speaks of the importance of accessibility in her work: "A lot of musicians and dancers mystify their work. I come from a different school of thought – I try and make it accessible. In my Bharatanatyam performances, I often have lyrics projected at the back of the stage so that people actually know what I'm doing" (2015).

The subtle nuances of every gesture that accompany her spoken word, like the instance where she candidly unfolds her hair as she talks about modernity to let it weigh down in a chic, shoulder-length bob, as opposed to the *Nayika* in Bharatanatyam where the female dancer has her hair tied down in a long plait with tight black thread to secure it in place and heavy ornamentation to accompany the plait, demonstrates the sensitivity that goes through even the simplest acts in Sarabhai's staging (Refer Figure 1). Long hair is often considered the marker of an idealised femi-

ninity in India, and female dancers are seldom 'permitted' by patriarchal forces to make autonomous decisions about their body, such as cutting their hair short. Through this simple act of shedding the second-behaved behaviours of the female *Nayika* and construing her instead as a subject in command of her own agency, Sarabhai firmly situates herself as a modern speaking subject influenced by tradition but refusing to be limited by it. Incidentally, writer and poet Samia Mallik, who collaborated with her on *Colours of the Heart* (2003), references the viewing of this gesture as the moment that she knew she wanted to work with Sarabhai in the future.

Sarabhai is dressed in a simple saree in the colours of pink and blue that echo a balance of feminine and masculine energies, an equilibrium of sorts. She alters this saree in a nonchalant manner as she strolls across the stage to assume different characters, releasing a pin as she transitions from classical dancer to the character of a contemporary woman (both can be read as versions of herself), dragging the drape of the saree over her forehead as she transitions from narrator to the character of a rape victim, throwing on a white lab coat as she transitions from Mira to the character of a female doctor, and so on.

The second thematic montage revolves around a real-life incident that took place in a tiny village in Uttar Pradesh where a school teacher was raped by the principal of her school, who then threatened to tell everybody that she was a 'slut' and to ruin her reputation if the word got out. On approaching the police for help, the teacher was nearly harassed again by a male police officer and ridiculed by his female colleague. On a consult with an educated doctor, she was informed that she was not pregnant but that rape is so commonplace in India that she should just shut up and get on with her everyday life. Much to her dismay, even her parents felt the same way. A social worker finally helped her deal with the situation. Sarabhai's prowess as an actor really comes to the fore here, as she portrays the different characters, i.e. the female victim, the male rapist, the male police officer and the female police officer, in the situation with equal ease. Masks are used as a performa-

tive aid. Re-visioned through the writings of Cixous, Sarabhai's rape victim doesn't "speak" per se, "she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself, she flies; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she vitally supports the 'logic' of her speech" (Cixous 1976, 881). The demure stature and tone of the depicted rape victim echoes a sense of helplessness caused by victim blaming and 'slut shaming' in India, by the forces meant to be at the helm of public protection, including the police and the judiciary, and many times by the victim's family itself and society at large. Yet, her flesh resonates with flashes of fear, sensations of bleeding and memories of writhing in pain.

Reversing the lens, the man in the tale was promoted, he sent thugs to the door of the victim to hurl abuse at her and even had her dismissed from her job. The issue of rape is so widely considered acceptable, that the then Chief Minister of Kerala publicly announced, "What is rape after all? It is a very common thing. You drink tea, you commit a rape". Sarabhai weaves his very words into the performance, calling into question such off-the-cuff comments made my male members who occupy privileged positions in public life. Sarabhai even employs *double-entendres* to throw light on the irony that women are not allowed to rape in a dominant order that is ironically complacent about the violation of their bodies by men.

Contrary to traditional Bharatanatyam, temporal linearity is done away with in Sarabhai's sequencing of the various vignettes, and she jumps between timescapes to make a point of the stagnation, if not worsened conditions, for women in contemporary India. Jumping back in time, Sarabhai directly questions her audience in a forum-style fashion, expecting responses to be thrown out at her, delving into the politics of gender representation in mythology and society. She breaks the fourth wall and asks the audience what they know about Mirabhai. She encourages them to participate in a discussion about the construction of Indian feminine identity. In the version of the performance work I viewed, the only answer that was thrown up from the audience was "Krishna's

Mirabhai", an identity that does not construct her in her autonomous selfhood but as a possession of a holy male figure. Depending on the nature of audiences, this segment plays out differently, calling for her improvisational skills to be on demand in the story-telling that unfolds. In Sarabhai's portrayal of the mystic saint, princess of Mewar, rebellious woman and devotee of Lord Krishna, Mirabhai, the same Mira who formed the protagonist for her Mother's choreography referenced in Chapter Two, Sarabhai sings in a state of bliss accompanied by the weightlessness and playfulness that the folk dance form provides. I am particularly struck here by the materiality of her narrative form rather than meaning. Her euphoric whirls around the stage, at a steadily increasing pace, embody a sense of liberation for the female dancer who is racially marked. In this particular instance, it begs the question of what kind of movements have been 'sanctioned' for Indian women on the performance stage, and for which class, caste and race of women. Dancers like Sarabhai occupy a complex positionality owing to privilege that sanctions a right for them to "reiterate, expose and produce differently" (Butler 1993, 285).

The performance work also deals with issues as complex as female foeticide, an issue often met with a deafening silence even in popular media. Sarabhai performs a long-form multi-character monologue through the lens of a South Asian female doctor, also based on a true story, who makes the decision to give up her practice owing to the number of requests for abortion after the pregnant women learn of the sex of their child. The doctor was an expert in a form of pre-birth testing that was yet to come to India and, after her stint overseas, she wanted to return to the homeland to contribute to her country. Excited at the possibility of empowering women by enabling them to make choices using this newly-developed medical test that determined characteristics, deficiencies and even diseases in the foetus (of which the biological sex determination was just an ancillary feature), she wanted to bring to her country the everyday miracles afforded by modern medicine. However, the female doctor is so jaded by a society eager to rid themselves of the burden of a female child,

that she eventually gives up her practice and instead trains a younger generation with the hope of a better tomorrow. She does not even sell her machine that enables the testing, even though it had stopped being of use to her personally, as she did not want to contribute to this prevalent phenomenon of female genocide. This section of the work is dark and dreary and leaves the spectator with a sense of questioning.

This changing point is perhaps the most poignant moment in the show, where Sarabhai breaks out of character(s) and brings an autobiographical lens to the show through the telling of a deeply personal story. She talks of the day that she learnt that she was pregnant with a baby girl. She recalls that she returned home to pen a poem that has henceforth come to be known as *Anahita's Lullaby,* and she beautifully sings this lullaby in Hindi, translating the lyrics into English for the audience as she goes along. She also announces it as a lullaby "for every little girl anywhere in the world, and for every woman in the audience who once remembers that she also was a little girl". Sarabhai assumes a seated position with her legs stretched out and portrays a mother-daughter relationship that accompanies her singing where images of her pouring oil over her baby's legs, arms and head to massage the oil into the infant's skin is followed by her washing her baby's naked body and finally wrapping her up in a towel to lay her to bed. The lullaby highlights the harsh realities of being born a woman in a man's world, yet it is the relentless hope that comes through in Sarabhai's signing. She refers to the repression of the drives of women in this world by frightened men. She provocatively uses terms such as "slut, whore, cunt, bitch" in the performance-text to critically comment on labels that women are assigned and says that we must get rid of this idea that women are a burden.

Here, the poetic language takes a positive turn and Sarabhai sings sonorously of a changed world, despite the lack of recognition of said change by stagnant systems of oppression. She says "you can dance and you can sing and you can fly to the moon, because you ARE a girl".

She speaks of the feminine as the only power that can make this world whole again. The tune peaks in a note of utopia with Sarabhai urging her baby girl that she can be anything she wants to be and do anything she wants to do and love anyone she chooses to love, should she choose to love at all. In the end she sings, "take this lamp my child and pass it to every little girl. Tell them that that tomorrow is OURS and that we are FREE". Throughout the singing, her gaze remains fixated on the eyes of her intangible daughter. The lullaby is as much a pulsating rhythm as it is a phonic revolt. Years later the lullaby proved to be prophetic as her grown daughter Anahita came out of the closet as a lesbian in a country that re-criminalised homosexuality in the year 2013 by an *Indian Supreme Court* ruling, after it was de-criminalised in 2009 by the *Delhi High Court;* the (dis)pleasurable politics of this performative moment is profound. The fight continues for equality of the LGBTIQ community's right to exercise democracy in the choice of their partners in India. As de Lauretis puts it, the intensely personal for women is deeply braided with female sexuality as "that which is the most personal and at the same time most socially determined." (1984, 184).

In immediate succession to this self-referential bodily writing and the serious nature of its embodied political commentary, Sarabhai uses feminism in a manner that is light-hearted. She embodies a whistling princess in one of her many characterisations in this show. The act of whistling, or producing a carefully controlled sound caused by tensions in the insides of the mouth that let out a stream of air, has long been the domain of men. Contemporary culture, including popular culture, throws up a plethora of examples. The male crew use it for cue calls, the loyal fans use it to cheer on sports teams, the 'wolf-whistle' is even seen as a sign of sexual harassment and the songs in popular culture laden the term with innuendo (refer global music sensation *Flo Rida*'s hit song, *Whistle*). Sarabhai's deliberate act of subverting a mode of communication that is gendered as masculine by playfully presenting the tale of a whistling princess reaches the perfect pitch of a transformative politics.

It is hard not to be enticed by the sheer versatility of Sarabhai as a performer: singing, dancing, story-telling, acting, even whistling on a stage where the female body is often spoken for, choreographed upon, scripted out of, rendered invisible and voiceless. In this sense, her body is transgressive, yet she expresses an unease to acknowledge it as such. She explains that she feels her work sits in a liminal space:

> I think all the boundaries have come in over the last 1000 or 1500 years because of the advent of patriarchy, of Islamic and foreign rules, of British Victorian values and now of India's misogyny informed by Hindutva ideology and all of that. I'm not sure that I think they (always) existed. In the Natyasastra, there is no distinction between theatre and music and dance and any other form. It is all bound together. There are different tongues in the same mouth. It's much easier to be just a part of the classical dance space and not have to sing and speak and therefore people went into a kind of specialization which in fact reduced what it was. When I was shut down, I was doing all of that and I was singing and I was dancing and I was doing mime work and I was standing on my head. Umm, I think I was going back to the Natyasastra. (2014, pers. communication)

This approach brings to mind the notion of playful pluralism in feminist theatre criticism. But as Sue Ellen Case observes, "Swinging from theory to opposing theory as described here would not be a kind of 'playful pluralism', but a guerilla action designed to provoke and focus this feminist critique" (1988, 132). In this sense, Sarabhai's swinging between different bounded forms of performance can be read as the refusal to bow down to an oppressive singularity that arises from patriarchal characteristics of authority, linearity and territoriality.

Just as Sita begged for Mother Earth to swallow her into her womb, the performance ends with a scene that draws parallels between Sita and the *Bishnoi* tribal community of Rajasthan. In 1730, the women of the community literally hugged the trees that they considered their siblings to stop them from being felled by the soldiers in the area on the order of the then King of Jodhpur. 363 women were killed in the process of their elective martyrdom as the soldiers inhumanly chopped down the trees, along with sacrificing the bodies of the women. The resistive strategies of the Bish-

noi women find echoes in the spirituality found in ecofeminism. As Starhawk points out, "Ecofeminism is a movement with an implicit and sometimes explicit spiritual base…To say that ecofeminism is a spiritual movement, in an earth rooted sense, means that it encompasses a dimension that profoundly challenges our ordinary sense of value, that counters the root stories of our culture and attempts to shift them" (1989, 174). Unsettling the notion of women and nature as dominated others through shifting the root story of Sita, Sarabhai celebrates their abundance and rapture. Sarabhai slows down time to embody the becoming of a flower from a seed and finally freezes in a statuesque image that signifies the symbol of a tree in full bloom, and concludes her performance work with the lines "Like the flowers, may the daughters of Sita blossom everywhere".

The performance-text has undergone significant changes in the course of its lifetime, and will probably continue to do so until its last breath. Sarabhai has contributed the script to the theatre students of Columbia University and the University of Cincinnati for them to allow it to take a life of its own. The script is used as an adaptable framework for exploring issues of gender oppression in other cultural contexts, and local narratives are added so it tells the stories of Sita's daughters in a transnational context. The performance work is compulsory viewing in many theatre departments across the world and has even been inculcated into gender sensitisation programs by the police force of Gujarat and presented before the Judiciary of Maharashtra for 400 district judges. The public knowledge of the epic of the received Ramayana is used as a starting, as well as departure, point for this work, much in the way that it is referenced in Anita Ratnam's *A million SITA-S* (2010), discussed in the following chapter. Sita becomes the symbol of infinite re-visions, allowing for reinterpretations that rupture the received icon, time and time again. *Sita's daughters* saw Sarabhai birth a unique brand of artivism and challenge the prerogative of Rama, the prerogative of a patriarchal (b)order.

4.3 *In Search of the Goddess* (2000): Feminist Re-visions of the Devi

In Search of the Goddess is a solo performance work, with a supporting orchestra, conceptualised, created and choreographed by Sarabhai. Commissioned by *The Smithsonian Institution*, the performance work was first performed in Washington and subsequently toured the United States and India. The work still continues to be programmed as part of festivals and was presented at the *Seattle Symphony* in the USA as late as October 2015. The fused elements of Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, mime, speech, song, sound (organic and/or composed), percussion, mask and everyday movements serve to qualify form as an interdisciplinary, dynamic entity; a metamorphic vocabulary to re-vision the icon of the goddess in Indian myth, legend and society, constructed historically through the "prism of patriarchy". Whilst her embodied writing does favour the representational over the abstract, and does not break away from narrative, conventional structures are rendered alien through a manipulation of time, a verbal-visceral multilayering, and an intentional rupture of the fourth wall between the actor and the audience. Although these are commonplace strategies in the theatre today, the performance work was still revolutionary for the conservative domains of dance in India in the early 2000s.

After the creation of the feminist works *Shakti: The Power of Women, Sita's Daughters* and *V is for…* with John Martin in the 1990s, and a few other notable transnational collaborations, *In search of the Goddess* was Sarabhai's first attempt in tackling the entire process, product, politics and packaging of a female-centric performance work entirely by herself. She opens by singing a traditional hymn in Gujarati on the mother of all creation, Raja Rajeshwari. Using an earthen pot as a percussion instrument, she conceptualises the power of creation as a distinctly feminine ideology in an interplay between spoken word and syncopated rhythm. The trees and plants dancing in the wind, the twittering chirping birds, the beasts, the countless number of dancing singing people, the

tide, time, the years, the months, the days, the hours are evoked as symbols of formation, a theme she revisits in a later part of the work.

The dissolution of polarities between femininity and masculinity are apparent even in her costuming choices—where the choice of colours black and red, the rejection of a *davani* (a diagonal piece of cloth covering the blouse in an effort at modesty in Bharatanatyam), a *pyjama* tailoring around her ankles instead of a skirt/sari bottom typically worn by a female dancing body and short hair make visible her personal and political perspective.

She fashions a galaxy of goddesses—Bhumi, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Parvati, Sita, the river Ganga and Durga—in what she refers to as man's attempt to populate the world with goddesses. She punctuates her narration with playful remarks that call for the concept of *consciousness raising*; for instance, she proclaims of the Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, that she is "a great *favourite* in Gujarat" and makes a snide comment at the general public when she refers to Goddess Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom, as "fast disappearing". By asserting herself as a *speaking subject* (in the Lacanian order), Sarabhai insists on an identity for the goddess figure that is not part of a discourse dominated by male subjectivity. She then breaks into dance, strictly classical in idiom, gesturing the virtues of each goddess, interspersed with *jathis***,** arrays of rhythmic compositions engaging the footwork of classical dance.

This stringing together of a relatively traditional danced invocation in praise of the goddesses serves two functions: it lulls the spectator into a false sense of security and it establishes Sarabhai's virtuosity of technique, dispelling the myth that dancers engage in experimentation of modern dance due to a lack of discipline, technique and skill to perform the puritan version. Refusing to reinforce femininity through cultural conditioning in society and for stage, Sarabhai lets her performance take a sharp turn at this juncture.

Coming to Draupadi, the figure that inspired Sarabhai as an artist, Sarabhai offers a critique of Draupadi's body as a "commodity in the marketplace". Having toured the world in Peter Brook's canonical east-west production The *Mahabharata*/Le *Mahabharata* for five years as Draupadi, the only Indian and non-theatre trained cast member, Draupadi's inner turmoil of her love for Arjuna and her questioning, contesting and challenging the all-pervasiveness of male hegemony in court mirrors Sarabhai's love for dance and her refusal to be "animated by the absent male" on stage (Case 1987, 4). Within the popular telling of The *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is a princess for whom a *Swayamvara*[11] is arranged, so she could be married to a suitable prince. Against her will, she ends up in a polyandrous marriage, laid as a wager in a bet, de-robed in the full view of a public court of men only to be redeemed by Lord Krishna (obviously a male god) and denied entry to the gates of heaven. It is no doubt that Sarabhai's interpretation of Draupadi in Peter Brook's version, and its subsequent global reception, had a huge part to play in Sarabhai's approach to her art. She recalls:

> I think the whole process of doing the Mahabharata and seeing the kind of effect that my interpretation had on audiences across the world, especially women, marked the starting point of my journey of coming into my own as an artist. Very, very different women from very chic Sorbonne educated women to black women in Harlem to Aboriginal women in Australia to very sophisticated women in Copenhagen and whatever. I realized that I'm trying to convince people of something and that I'm an artist and the marriage is what works. It also dawned on me that I didn't think any-one else could write my work. Until then I had thought of myself as a non-creator but realized that I'm going to have to create because where else would I find the wordsmith who will be able to voice what I feel? So I came out a different person. (2014, pers. communication)

In Sarabhai's interpretation, she questions the grounds on which Draupadi missed the mark on be-coming a goddess. She launches into story-telling, dance and mime after drawing the attention of the audience to Draupadi herself, describing her as "a Devi (Goddess) we need to listen to". As a choreographer and performer, she freely adopts verbal and written narratives, refusing to pay heed

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[11] Swayamvara is a congregation of male suitors seeking the hand of a female princess of marriageable age. Usually, the King retains the right to make the decision and the marriage is fixed when the princess garlands one of the suitors to be her future husband.

to the binary oppositions of the intellect and the senses in dance. With a distinct political agenda for her art to serve as activism, Sarabhai is not concerned with dance outperforming language. Instead, she opts for an intertextual weaving in an effort to affect the audience through a cyclical loop of vignettes that challenge our complacency in receiving a monolithic mythology of the goddess(es).

By bringing the female character Draupadi that moves the narrative of The *Mahabharata* to the front in her performance-text, Sarabhai explores as basic a premise in which the *Swayamvara* is that of Draupadi's, and the decision of whom to marry is that of her father's. Her Draupadi catechises the public on her life and her offering as being a prize to the shooter of a fish. She professes her angst over the exchange of her hand in marriage as a trophy for a competition: "No garland was worn; the garland was me". Powerful words. In Sarabhai's enactment, the men who compete for Draupadi's hand in marriage—Duryodhana, Dushasana, Jarasandha and Arjuna—are characterised as egotistical, immature, arrogant and subservient, in sharp contrast to the powerful women on the stage—self-assured, valiant, defiant and reflective of their own condition. This sight of difference is registered through her site of difference, i.e. her dancing body, the way she holds her weight, sways her shoulders, controls her gaze, and twitches her facial muscles. Combining aspects of *Tandava* and *Lasya*, the fluidity of her dancing body adopts gender-bending strategies to stage the men in the narrative as oppressors who undermine the powerful body and voice of Draupadi. As Draupadi, Sarabhai's body does not reify feminine gender codes, but is written as a body that refuses to regenerate old patterns. As Cixous writes, "When the 'repressed' of their culture and their society returns, it's an explosive, *utterly* destructive staggering return, with a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions" (Cixous 1976, 884). I understand Sarabhai's Draupadi as a woman who marks the return of the repressed in our society, a decade after her initial portrayal of Draupadi in Brook's play enabled Draupadi's force to come across through Sarabhai's flesh.

Sarabhai's Draupadi, whose "heart was tied to a bow and arrow", does not wallow in self-pity but rather takes issue with being shared by five people, gesturing to money thrown directly toward the audience, her face filled with disgust. Dripping with sarcasm, she proclaims, "Unknowingly Ma Kunti[12] spoke, and husband became husbands in *this,* the Pandavas kingdom of Dharma (way of righteousness)". Her intense isolation in ironically being the wife of none, is presented as a metaphor for being a woman in a man's world. Sarabhai's depiction of the scene at the court, where the *Pandavas* gamble against the *Kauravas*, is underpinned by motifs of men's unquenchable thirst for more, incapacity for self-control, and inability to lose with dignity. In many ways, the famous court scene drawn from the *Mahabharata* is a direct comment on the failures of contemporary capitalism. Losing all his material possessions, his land, his animals, his army, his status, his title and even his kingdom, Yudhishthira proceeds to play, losing his brothers, losing himself and finally offering his wife as pledge. Upon his final loss in the game of dice, Draupadi is dragged to the centre of the court, traces a semi-circle questioning each male member of the court and by extension audience, of the fairness in a *Dharma* that does not validate her existence as a wife and a woman. Limitlessly de-robed, she is only saved by Krishna's intervention. Refusing to express gratitude for this arbitration, she calls into question, "Yes Krishna gave me cloth but where was the Gita's truth? Was Arjuna not in need of this counsel then?" She then dances this defiance to Tamil lyrics, and once again repeats loudly, "Yes Yes Krishna gave me cloth but where was the Gita's truth? Was Arjuna not in need of that counsel then?" This repetition through English speech, Tamil song and the articulate body allows for the spectator to cerebrally and corporeally make meaning of the question, and draw individualised responses to their stance on the situation, through a reflection of their own identity in the socio-cultural milieu of today's largely patriarchal society in India.

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[12] Ma Kunti is the mother of the Pandavas who viewed all her sons as equal and hence asked them to share everything between them equally, leading to Draupadi being forced to marry the five brothers in the master narrative of The *Mahabharata*

Jumping to the end of Draupadi's life, where the *Pandavas* trek on towards paradise without her, she lies fallen. She then sensuously plays with the snow, feeling the texture of the snow on her cheeks, her lips and her arms provocatively addressing the process of becoming aware that "heaven too must be only for men, better then to rest in the warm embrace of this snow". She then joyously sings, enveloped in the tactile pleasure of being one with the earth. The montage ends in a display of sheer abundance as Sarabhai's body desirously produces the illusion of fusing with the snow. Her *Abhinaya* expresses utter intoxication and the erogenous zones of her body such as her mouth, lips, neck, ears and breast bask in the tactile effects of the extremities of her interiors.

The next section of the work further politicises the symbol of the goddess interpreted through the optic of Savitri. In the traditional telling of the Mahabharata, Savitri is a beautiful princess who finds love in Satyavan and chooses to marry the forest-dwelling son of a blind king. However, when Savitri comes to seek the blessings of her father, a divine Sage announces that Savitri has made an erroneous choice, for Satyavan is destined to die one year from the time they are wed. Savitri exerts her agency and makes the active choice to marry Satyavan nonetheless. Savitri, unlike Draupadi, her counterpart in the Mahabharata, was a goddess who won all the accolades, received the glorification that the status of a 'goddess' brings. However, as Sarabhai points out, this privilege is only granted to her as she serves the story of the homosocial man's narrative, i.e. she feeds his fantasies of being the ideal wife and even offers her life instead of the sacrifice of her husband's life. She served as a devoted wife to him, and when Yama, the God of death, arrives at her doorstep to claim the life of Satyavan, she is said to have offered hers as well, not wanting to live in this world without her husband. "Generations of our women have been asked to follow Sati Savitri, to want to give up their lives if their husbands died," ruminates Sarabhai. The practice of Sati, or wife-burning, still prevalent in parts of contemporary India, where the woman is burnt on the funeral pyre of her husband is justified through the re-tellings in the vernacular of a version of the afore-

mentioned tale. Sarabhai brings to life the Savitri from the source text, embodying her as a woman of the world, as opposed to a fictional goddess.

Delivering a monologue and using a mask as her performative aid to represent both Satyavan and Yama, Sarabhai places Savitri in the spotlight of the production's visual field (Refer Figure 2). Savitri traverses the length and breadth of the proscenium theatre stage, chasing Yama, manipulating him through her offers of praise and challenging his authority as the male god of destruction. In the process, she is granted a couple of boons, anything she wants except Satyavan's life. Savitri wins for her father-in-law the sense of sight so "he may see the plight of the world" as her first wish, and his position as King so "he may rule over a united world" as her second wish. She continues to confront Yama, undaunted by the prospect of death, "Tell me Yama, are you only a destroyer or can you create? If you cannot create, how dare you destroy Yama? *Look at me, I am a woman, I can destroy and create, am I not greater than you Yama*? ANSWER ME (emphasis added)". These lines are perhaps the most potent in the narrative arc, for they return to the metaphor of the goddess as the creator of the universe, mirroring the biological capacity of the woman to create and to nurture, symptomatic of cultural feminism's formulation of femininity as inherently and intrinsically superior to masculinity (Dolan 2012). They are also resonant of the opening scene where Sarabhai plays the percussive instrument to portray creation as a feminine condition.

Once and for all, when granted a third and final boon, Sarabhai's Savitri asks Yama who previously called her a chaste and a virtuous wife "for 100 children so that by them I can remember Satyavan's life". The boon is granted, followed by Savitri calling Yama's morality into question: "You have called me a chaste and a virtuous wife, you have granted me 100 children, if you take away Satyavan, how then can I have them Yama!?" It dawns on Yama that he has been outwitted by a woman, and Satyavan awakens from a deep sleep unaware that he was in the clasp of death, and Savitri and her husband make their way homeward.

Sarabhai's reading of Savitri as a refreshing, rebellious and resistive woman resonates with the audience, as it portrays the female protagonist as one capable of making her own calculated choices and facing the associated consequences of such choices. According to Sarabhai, "In Savitri's name, the sacrifice of widows, or sati, was justified. My Savitri calls those men who worship her--and burn widows at their dead husband's funeral pyres--liars and manipulators. Sacrilege again! Fundamentalists of every hue screamed and threatened. Male chauvinists castigated me" (Sarabhai 2004, 30).

Sarabhai's choreographic choices are clearly at odds with the intent of classical dance and patriarchal mythology. In her non-linear narrative, she jumps back and forth between goddesses made in different centuries by the collective psyche of the male imagination, and the process of making gods and goddesses in contemporary India out of mortal men and women engaged in cricket and politics until they are caught out for corruption.

Sarabhai's demonstration of the tale of a female ascetic raped by the God Indra in the absence of her Brahmin husband whilst she was meditating under a tree, brings Sarabhai's wicked wit into display. The only witness to the incident, a one-eyed monkey, is left perplexed at the end by what humans call justice, a direct comment on the male-dominated domain of judiciary in India—for a horse was slaughtered by God Indra as sacrifice for sinning against a high-caste Brahmin male, a guilty male god walked away without punishment, the Brahmin husband's ego was appeased and a woman missed being made a goddess. My body vividly remembers Sarabhai's kinaesthetic portrayal of overpowering the female body on to the floor, lying flat on her stomach, slapping her palms against the wooden stage and kicking her legs before standing up to 'dust off' the evidence. This raw visual, unprecedented in Indian classical dance, where there is minimal contact with the floor except through the grounding of the feet, was a profound moment that jolted the body of the spectator into an agitated state. Humour in the embodiment of Sarabhai's one-eyed monkey,

bearing resonances of the animal gaits studied in Kalaripayattu, but constructed with comedic intent, is adopted as a device to deliberately unsettle the body of audience, making the very act of viewership uneasy. This segment, reworked into her TED talk in 2009[13], viewed around 500,000 times, boldly addresses problems in India today: rape, female victimisation, mindless religiosity, a corrupt and patriarchal judicial system and the overarching power of the privileged, educated, elite male in a class-conscious society. Not blind to her position of privilege amongst the cosmopolitan elite of India, Sarabhai does not view this as an opposition to her public and performance self. In fact, she recognises this privilege as a position that affords her freedom, recognition and, by extension, responsibility to be an agent of change in the world.

Sarabhai concludes with a dance on the infinite symbolism of *Mahishasura Mardhini*, the go-to goddess of defenders of the 'pure', who often finds her way into the representational apparatus of the *Margam*. Although the avatar of *Mahishasura Mardhini* breaks the mould of the conventional imaginings of the goddess; being a transgressive body with four hands and three eyes, riding a lion, fighting in battle and destroying evil, there is no connection between her sacred symbolism and the treatment of women in contemporary India. The impact of finishing on a high note, dancing joyously as *Mahishasura Mardhini*, was particularly disturbing. Whether Sarabhai is informed by her mother Mrinalini's practice of foregrounding *Ananda* is unclear, as it is impossible to draw conclusive statements on artist intent. Was it an unconscious subscription to a phallic order in dance? Was it a conscious criticism of the elitist attitude that argues for the sameness of women's experiences, reflected in the image of Mahishasura Mardhini, and does not allow for differences in caste, class and social condition? Was it a provocative problematisation of turning a blind eye to the representation of marginalised women in mythology and society? Was it a referencing of the cyclical ideology prominent in feminism, beginning with creation and ending with destruction? Was it a

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[13] Link to TED talk: https://www.ted.com/talks/mallika_sarabhai?language=en

dwelling in the beyond, departing from and returning to the familiar in the exploration of uncharted territories in dance?

There are no real answers, only the potential of a transformative politics. The viewer does not have to be preconditioned in order to make meaning of the performance work, they only need to possess a capacity to be reflective to their own condition if they want to arrive at any conclusions. *In Search of the Goddess* is essentially an exploration of exclusion in a canon that sees the woman as other. The conviction that change is not just necessary, but actually possible, is palpable in Sarabhai's every breath, every gesture, every utterance and every whirl on stage, calling for change in the social and material conditions for women in a contemporary India. When asked if she is a feminist, Sarabhai's response was, "I think I was born one. I can remember being so for a long time. In my earlier days, I drew inspiration from my mother. Women's issues are human rights issues. Women constitute 51 % of the world's population. Women are not a minority. To me, feminist is not a dirty word. It's an honest fight against injustice" (Quoted in Devik 2004).

4.4 *The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya* (2001): Engaging the Senses in Hybridised Performance

The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya, a complex text, is stripped bare in an attempt to arrive at questions of essences, not at the answers. It is an intensely personal exploration into the reciprocity of the sacred goddess and the secular self, and is crafted as a philosophical conversation with the goddess, presented on stage through what Grosz refers to as an "embodied subjectivity" or "psychical corporeality" (Grosz 1994, 22). Unlike much of Sarabhai's previous work that deals with history, culture, community, politics and representation, The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya is essentially an exploration of a secular spirituality, emotional states, muscle memory, stillness and lived

reality. The text is an embodied intertextual interpretation of the English poem *Devi* by Suzanne Ironbiter, based on the account of the *Devi Mahatmaya*[14] within the Sanskrit text of the *Markandaya Purana*. The music was composed by Indian rock blues duo, Mark and Phillipe Haydon, the costumes and sets were a project commissioned by Asialink-sponsored Australian designer Jodie Fried, and the entire artistic landscape was ideated by Sarabhai's creative counterpart, Yadavan Chandran. The 60-minute choreography is marked by the background score of a full-length monologue overlaying the musical composition, voiced in a dream-like tone by Sarabhai. *The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya* was premiered in Darpana's open air amphitheatre, *Natrani* and the work was toured within India.

Dance critic Rupa Srikanth of *The Hindu* writes:

> Sarabhai's The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya was neither about the spiritual text, nor was it about the mythology contained within; it did not have traditional music or grand costuming either. But what it did have was the essence of the Devi Mahatmaya – of the external and internal battles that we face daily.
>
> It was not a message that came on a platter. It took flight from Indologist Suzanne Ironbiter's interpretation of the text; an interpretation in verse – a monologue with Goddess Shakti that was filled with familiar mythological allusions and unfamiliar mindscapes. The dance theatre production was thus an abstraction of the abstract (2007)

A surface reading of Sarabhai's performance-text gives one the allusion that there is a lot to absorb and interpret, because there is. But at the heart of this work is an obsession with meaning, not in the reductive sense of the term, but in the sexual/textual layers of meaning produced in the body/text relationship. As in much of her mother's aesthetic, a search for the authentic self in this specific instance becomes the justification for the art. Regarding a performance of classical dance, postmodern practitioner Yvonne Rainer witnessed in India, she once mused "I refuse to believe that my enjoy-

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[14] Literally translated as Glory of the Goddess. A Hindu religious text in Sanskrit consisting of 700 verses in 13 chapters believed to have been written between 400 and 600 BCE as an ode to the power of the Goddess of creation and destruction.

ment of it must be dependent on understanding of the meaning. But maybe we in the Western avant-garde are really fooling ourselves in our contempt for that question, "What does it mean"?" (Rainer 1974, 187). If meaning is a concept of aversion in the Western avant-garde, in Indian art it remains the anchor for the artist. However, the process of meaning-making is significantly shifted in the work of contemporary feminist practitioners. Meaning is re-visioned as a multilayered entity which can only be understood through an organic exploration of the somatic and the semantic in performance. Then, if one is to make sense of such meaning, Irigaray theorises that "one would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing *an 'other meaning' always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them*" (1985, 29). Abstraction, thus, becomes a necessary outcome.

Speaking of the ideas that stirred the work into a stage production, Sarabhai remembers a dry phase in her artistic journey—when she was uninspired to create or compose. On one such occasion, the idea for *The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya* was birthed:

> …And I was sitting on this favourite arm chair of mine, which is in my bedroom, and my nanny who was still alive came to me and handed me a book and said Amma said to give you this. And it just said Baby on top. I opened it at a page and started reading it and it said, you know this version of the Devi Mahatmaya is written by this American woman, but she has taken the Kabeer Mira style which is a conversation with the deity – with the Goddess. Her name is Suzanne Ironbiter. And this line I read said, "Ironbiter, your question itself is wrong. You ask me how you will navigate through the streams. I am the board and I am the water. Accept that and then you will not be lost.
>
> Those words went piercing through me with a striking clarity, and instantly I decided that I wanted to do this. I didn't know anything about the book, I mean I hadn't even read the original Devi Mahatmaya, but this conversation style of questioning the goddess is very much my relationship with the mother goddess. I then decided it had to be outside the religious context because for me it was not a religious text. It was a philosophical one of trying to find the self within ourselves. You know, Who is the I? If I ask the question, then my mind cannot be the answer. If my eyes see, then my eyes cannot be the answer, and so on and so forth. (2014, pers. communication)

The autobiographical reference of the body as a tug of war between divinity and humanity is made manifest through a multisensorial mesh of text, design and flesh. The performance landscape evokes a sense of spectacle, through an active engagement of the audience's multiple senses—aural, visual, tactile, haptic and olfactory. The sensual effect of other-worldliness is reminiscent of ritual. As a reviewer notes in *The Hindu*:

> The most potent sequences of the evening, which linger in the mind's eye, were those inherently visual. Such as the goddess donning her vermilion-red vestments, her radiance multiplied by both her human and stage accessories. Such as the Mahishasuramardhini sequence, which drew the audience into its embrace with vivid theatrical devices. Such as the final dramatic flower formation, "kalam maaikkal", reminiscent of Kerala temples, erased by a flurry of movement, as if invoking a ritual trance. And a few others.
>
> These moments apart, the evening proved disappointing only because it fell short on Sarabhai magic" (De 2002)

The outer world created through careful scenography is conjured up as fantastical, and the inner world journeying into the vast crevasses of the mind's eye/I is conceived as fundamental. Against the backdrop of a surreal set, the dancers clad in white leotards, white tights and a white covering skirt assume an androgynous quality and their movements remain hypnotic through the choreography. Contrary to many of her other performance works, Sarabhai does not provide a roadmap for the audience to follow her trajectory. Instead, she invites the audiences into the illusory world she creates on stage, and gives them a sensate experience of her subconscious. As Sarabhai asserts, for "terribly gendered" audiences of Indian dance and theatre who are obsessed with meaning as literal translation, this was not an easy journey to embark upon (2014, pers. communication). This is evidenced even in the aforementioned review, which talks of a lack of "Sarabhai magic" on stage.

The choreography was assisted by senior member of the troupe, Padmakumar, and Sarabhai's son, Revanta. Their contributions to the work were largely improvisational, offered as an additional aid to Sarabhai's choreography. The choreography itself was imbued with the Western post-

modern concept of minimalism. The overall aesthetic of the work was refreshing and was dramatically different to previously seen work of Sarabhai. The work is stripped of *Abhinaya* (as in the sense of facial expression), literalism (as in the body's relationship to the text) and codification (as in the canonised classical dance forms). Instead, the essence of movement and its inscription in time and space matrices are explored in, with and through the trained body. Further, as an embodied response to an intertextual writing through an introspection of the inner realms of the body, notions of the reader/writer/choreographer/dancer/spectator are configured in complex manners.

In an attempt to deflect the voyeuristic gaze and deny the passivity of the female dancer in the construction of identity, Sarabhai dissects form to arrive at a body underlying the trained body. This is not a body independent of the trained body, but a body that is primarily concerned with physicality, i.e. a body concerned with its relationship to breath, weight, energy, time, sound and space and with its relationship to the other bodies on stage. The bodies on stage are articulate, enunciating emotion through their musculoskeletal frame, thereby highlighting the kinaesthetic awareness of the body in motion. In order to unlearn form (and with it epistemological foundations of form established through a combination of cultural contexts, social functions and moral limits), one must have first learned form. Only through an explicit engagement with form, and the sensual mode of learning it, can one begin to tease out the sum of its parts. The approach then is not one of appropriation of modern or postmodern dance in the West, but an endeavour to penetrate the seemingly impenetrable surfaces of the classically trained body to draw closer to its essence, borrowing only accents of minimalism characteristic of postmodern dance in the West. As Chakravorty posits:

> The dancing body in Indian culture is an important place for analyzing the perceptual changes taking place in our sensory world, impacting on how we experience culture, self and subjectivity. Thus embodiment as experience and expression, for me, is the key to analyzing Indian dance as it transforms from a national narrative of tradition, culture and gender identity to an emblem of global consumer culture." (2009, 212).

This body does not leap, twirl or lift as oft-witnessed in the Western dance traditions of classical Ballet, Graham technique, Cunningham technique, postmodern dance, and contact improvisation amongst others, but is marked by an effort to unmark systems of signification that permeate Indian high and low movement systems, be it dance, spiritual practices or martial art traditions. In this sense, the body needs to depend on its own kinesiology, as opposed to the dependence on external factors of lyrics, exaggerated gestures, elaborate make-up and a dominant discourse. The body needs to direct its own senses inwards, literally *the journey inward*, to the meticulous deconstruction of the performing self. Although numerous theorists have argued that the self itself is performative, it is worth highlighting that I speak here specifically of the construction of the dancing self.

To illuminate this idea further, I draw upon my own experience in learning a form of Gujarati folk dance whilst on fieldwork at Darpana. The language of the lyrics was alien to me, and I trained four days a week under the guidance of a regional male practitioner invited by Darpana as an independent teaching staff. To my classically trained body, the significant shifts in the orientations of breath, weight, energy, time, sound and space did not come naturally. There was, however, a sense of becoming a liberated body, not confined to the conventions of classicism that call for precision in the rotation of the pelvis, clarity of lines in the geometrical patterning of arms and feet, extension of limbs in the kicks and the exactitude of isolated contractions of the head, face, shoulders, arms, legs and feet in response to rhythm. In contraposition, the folk dance was founded upon freeing the flow of the body. It did not demand (as much) flexibility, endurance or muscular control and was characterised by weightlessness. The purpose of the dance form was social or entertainment based, as opposed to one rooted in the sacred and spiritual. Never performed solo, it required a comprehension of how others move, so the end result is one of unison, as opposed to the pressures of perfecting technique placed on the solo performing body in classical dance. In a particular sequence, I was required to glide along a curve, marked by a quality of lightness, in a circular travers-

ing along with the other dancers to a dynamic tempo. To conjure up an image, it should have resembled women (on steroids for the speed) traversing along to Ring-a-Ring-a-Roses. I struggled with this basic step. As a trained dancer, it was infinitely perplexing not to be able to grasp such a seemingly simple movement phrase. We would spend a significant portion of every session, with the male teacher demonstrating the movement over and over again for me to duplicate. Unlike dance training in the West, studios seldom come affixed with mirrors in India. On the one hand, this does away with the development of a narcissistic self in the rehearsal room, on the other it does not provide for a correction based on reflection, and relies on the body's kinaesthetic awareness as its point of reference. Given that context, despite the absence of a mirror to differentiate my movements from that of the ideal, I had an intense awareness and sensate knowledge that I was not performing it correctly. I just could not dig deep enough to unearth why.

It was during one such session that Sarabhai happened to pass by, and stood around to watch my training. She was able to place a finger on the problem immediately. Her rigour in training the body in multiple movement systems, and kinaesthetic awareness developed by careful construction and deconstruction of that body became instantly clear. She pointed out that the release and tension of the balls of my feet resulted in a weightedness in the landing, causing my body to move sideways in a manner that resembled skipping. It is this framework of conditioning and reconditioning the body through an investigation of muscle memory and an organisation of muscle involvement that affords Sarabhai an abstract interpretation of the text *Devi* through the body. It is also a skill that most choreographers in India, whose process is characterised by oral instruction, an obsession with the 'ideal', interpretation of lyric in the literal sense, imitation of movement in transmission of the choreography and the very ignorance of dance as process, seriously lack. Sarabhai speaks of sending her dancers to folk dance lessons when she feels they need to 'loosen up' (2014, pers. communication). Folk forms also subscribe to the features of "repetition" and "eternity" of cyclical time

(Kristeva 2002, 354). In The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya, Sarabhai adopts this cyclical orientation to time to create a feminist *jouissance.* Folk forms also do not pay nuanced attention to technique, opting instead to be guided by the spirit. Thus, once the steps are learned, internal intuition rather than an external virtuosity becomes the driving factor for the body, enabling Sarabhai's choreographic process to de-fetishise the dancing body.

Resisting singular systems of signification, Sarabhai transgresses the symbolic in an effort to return to the semiotic so that it can resurface within a signifying practice. The bodies on stage seem liberated by an attention to primal instincts such as breath, sleep and unconscious. Adopting the props of the sails as "co-performers", Sarabhai's dancers counter-balance the weight of their bodies to create patterns that are dependent on the existence of the props (Refer Figure 3). In response to gravity, the bodies of the dancers sustain their weight, suspend real time, swing their limbs and collapse to the floor. Touch is employed to draw our attention to the sensuousness of the divine feminine. The larger-than-life demon Mahishasura makes his way through the audience and on to the stage in a striking visual reminiscent of the folk tradition of *Poikkal Kuthirai.* The demon is constructed through light-weight cloth and materials with gaps for two dancers to fit their bodies. Sarabhai as Devi stands ready for battle. The other dancers create asymmetrical shapes in the space, carrying fire torches that create an other-worldly effect. As Mahishasura crumbles before the radiant Devi, a soundscape of the trickling of water is layered with the sounding of a gong, ringing of a bell and wielding of cymbals, offering a multilayered form affecting the audience in an individual, felt and haptic manner. A new age spirituality seems to suffuse the atmosphere, allowing for Devi herself to be understood anew.

Irigaray's project may have carved a space for the previously silenced female subject, but Grosz makes a point of locating that voice explicitly in the female flesh. Grosz stresses the importance of a discourse not dependent on the discursive strategies of the dominant model:

> If women are to develop autonomous modes of self-understanding and positions from which to challenge male knowledges and paradigms, the specific nature and integration (or perhaps lack of it) of the female body and female subjectivity and its similarities to and differences from men's bodies and identities need to be articulated. The specificity of bodies need to be understood in its historical rather than simply its biological concreteness. (Grosz 1994, 19)

Sarabhai's self-referentiality in the work is an attempt to voice this identity and situate this subjectivity through her dancing body. Sarabhai's body and the body of her dancers seem awakened, i.e. the *root chakra, sacral chakra, solar plexus chakra, heart chakra, throat chakra, third eye chakra* and *crown chakra* emanate the effect of being in balance. The inner oscillation between chaos and stillness is meant to be reflective of the quintessential human condition, regardless of gender. These affective moments are arranged into movement patterns that are still (focusing on the deep breath of the performers), repetitious (as in the performers continuous movement in a cyclical rotation of the legs, with their shoulders hunched forward and hands locked together at the back), emotional (as Sarabhai's muted and passionate shrill), tense (as in the performers varying levels of struggle to hold the *Virabhadrasana* or the *arabesque*) and ultimately transcendental (as the closing scene that recreates a cult-ritual archetypal of Kerala temple traditions). This bodily enunciation of experience comes from eternal probing of motivation as a female artist, a relentless pursuit for Sarabhai:

> Do I want to dance? Why do I want to dance? Do I only want to dance to earn money? Do I want to dance for personal glory? Do I want to dance because I want to become famous? Do I want to dance because I want to do that more than anything else? Do I want to dance because I believe dance can do something in peoples' lives? Do I want to dance because I think dance can help the marginalized? Do I want to dance because I can't not dance?...you dig into yourself and churn and churn and its painful and horrible and you feel sick and you don't want to face it but you do and you come to that Amritham (divine nectar; comparable to *Ambrosia* in Greek mythology) at the end. (2014, pers. communication)

There is a clear emphasis placed on the sensuous desires of the female body, repeatedly referenced in Sarabhai's sentences of "Do I want to dance because…". She then negotiates a space for her de-

sires to be crystallised in her dance, by actively making choreographic choices on the inarticulable. As a by-product, it seems to me that she frees the body from the arc of recognition afforded to the female performer through conventional lenses of viewership. Irigaray posed the question, "Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realisation - here and now - through the body?" (1993, 148). I read Sarabhai's performance work as an embodied response to Irigaray. The choreography substantiates that the sacred, the secular and the sensuous are not demarcated categories but come together in the bodies of women of colour, particularly dancers, as this melting pot is often a real-world experience for them. Contrary to popular opinion about the work as uncommunicative, I argue that the performance work adopted a hybridised approach to its communication by fusing forms and allowing for the free play of associations to generate singular meanings.

4.5 *Colours of the heart* (2003): The Personal is Political, The Political is Personal

Colours of the Heart ideated as a collaboration between UK based singer-songwriter of South-Asian British heritage, Samia Malik, and Mallika Sarabhai after their brief encounter in Wales, where Malik was in the audience for *Sita's Daughters*. The scene previously noted in which Sarabhai talks of modernity and unveils her bob is when Malik knew she wanted to work with Sarabhai. Upon listening to an album by Malik, Sarabhai felt that Malik spoke the musical language of Sarabhai's work and Malik felt that Sarabhai embodied the visual field of Malik's music (2014, pers. communication). Controversially, after this brief encounter, Sarabhai got caught up in the politics of a case where she was framed on false account for getting young girls to illegally migrate to the

United States through the banner of her institution, Darpana.[15] In order to evade the possibility of jail time, Sarabhai went underground for a period of time, during which Malik and Sarabhai collaborated on *Colours of the Heart,* transnationally. This performance work, funded by T*he British Council*, toured many major Indian cities, including Bangalore, Chennai, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Delhi, Kolkota and Thiruvananthapuram, outside of Ahmedabad. In 2004, the work was also revisited in a residency program at *Roehampton University* in the UK where Sarabhai was invited to teach and facilitate choreographic processes. The proceeds from the show went to *Darpana for Development*, a humanitarian aid initiative founded and funded by Sarabhai and her choreographies respectively, and was utilised for people affected by the *2002 Godhra riots* in Gujarat. In the paragraphs that follow, I situate the politics of Sarabhai in the environ of the aftermath of the Gujarat riots, in order to better make sense of the resistive strategies and critical commentary embodied in Colours of the Heart.

"The personal is political" has been a slogan bandied about in most brands of feminism since the second-wave, but Sarabhai embodies the ideology in inverse too, where the political is personal to her. As the inheritor of the twin legacies of families who have contributed their efforts significantly to nation-building, Sarabhai is crystal clear on her privilege being in an interdependent relationship with her duty to her state, her society and her country. Apart from her own parents' contributions to politics and public life, Sarabhai was passed on the mantle from her maternal grandmother, the political activist Ammu Swaminathan; her maternal aunt, Captain Lakshmi Sahgal, who was a renowned freedom fighter, an officer of the Indian National Army, and the Minister of Women's Affairs in the Azad Hind Government; her paternal aunt Anasuya Sarabhai, who embodied Gandhian ideologies and headed the labour union in the country; and her other paternal aunt, Mridula Sarabhai, who was a revolutionary institution builder and worked toward women's em-

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[15] Refer http://www.thehindu.com/2004/12/14/stories/2004121406901200.htm for an article on the charges being dropped. Read Mallika's open letter to the public here: http://www.countercurrents.org/guj-mallika251003.htm

powerment, civil liberty and the individual's right to choice and disagreement in a democracy. Clearly, Mallika realised she had large shoes to fill.

Having been the darling child of Ahmedabad until the bloodbath that took place over a decade ago in the worst incident of supposed state-sanctioned sectarian violence in the country, people were quick to turn their backs on Mallika Sarabhai after her vocal stance on the bloody Godhra riots in Gujarat in February 2002. The events unfolded in this fashion: the train, *Sabarmati Express*, full of Hindu pilgrims, erupted in flames near the Godhra railway station in Gujarat on the morning of 27th February 2002; 59 people were killed and 48 people injured. Believed to have been a pre-planned attack by Muslim mobs, the incident triggered three full days of communal riots between Muslims and Hindus in the state, resulting in the loss of an officially estimated 790 Muslim and 254 Hindu lives. Unofficial sources suggest that over 2500 Muslim lives were lost in the riots. Death, destruction and displacement were resultant of these riots, and the Gujarat state government, under the counsel of the then Chief Minister Narendra Modi, currently the Prime Minister of India, were heavily criticised for their complacency. A significant amount of information about the riots remains unknown, and the post-clash media coverage of the incident was sensationalist and often supported by fiction, not fact, until it became impossible to arrive at any conclusive opinions about the violent attacks. However, the riots marked rock bottom in India's democratic history and the sonorous failure of the constitutional rights afforded to every citizen of the country, i.e. the failed promise of safety and secularism, meant to filter through to the occupants of a state through the appointed state legislation, was palpable across the nation.

In the wake of the riots, Sarabhai was the first to file a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the *Supreme Court* against the Modi government, demanding an independent inquiry into the alleged involvement of the state in the Godhra riots. She succeeded in getting the closed files of the case reopened, and the claimants' compensations by victims reconsidered. In a political system riddled with corruption, Sarabhai speaks her own truth. Going against the state as a woman in India is no

mean feat, and Sarabhai became the target of state-sanctioned harassment. Overnight, friends became foes, companions became challengers and supporters became strangers. The political slander of Sarabhai and her construction as an enemy of the state by media and right-wing mobs so intensified that Sarabhai had false charges pressed against her, with an arrest warrant issued in her name in the latter part of the year, a time when she was forced to go underground into hiding. It is during this time that she collaborated through technology on the work Colours of the heart, discussed below. Sources of funding from corporates and patrons were cut off, with Sarabhai's touring becoming the principal source of funds for the running expenses of Darpana. This did not, however, affect the audiences for her performance work or the enrolments in her school. Sabotaging her every step, the government issued a stay order, which prohibited Sarabhai from local travel outside the state of Gujarat and international travel beyond the borders of India. In continuous slander by the right-wing political parties and local media sources, the vilification of Sarabhai was characterised by intimidation, menace and blackmail, and she was refused the constitutional rights afforded to her as a citizen. The government has gone as far as to build an overhead bridge behind the open-air amphitheatre at Darpana on the riverbanks, a deliberate attempt to detract from Darpana's plans and torment Sarabhai in the process. Her performance work, *Unsuni: Unheard Voices*, a musical adaptation of former IAS officer Harsh Mander's novel of a similar title, was threatened with censorship *vis-a-vis* cultural policing as the state was aware of his position as a vehemently vocal accuser of the political involvement in the Godhra riots. A local publication, *DNA India*, reported an official working with Darpana as stating, "The board has demanded a cut in one of the scenes where a manual scavenger refuses to carry human excreta on her head. The cut demanded is unreasonable as it is nothing obscene or defaming about a particular community, but a fact. The government pays lakhs of women everyday for this job…Objection has also been raised for a song titled *Sau shawl kare* (asking 100 questions)." The performance work adapted five monologues from Mander's novel on struggle,

courage and hope and used Bollywood dance as a dramaturgical device to communicate these stories.

Colours of the Heart is an ensemble work; part music, part dance and part story-telling, devised in collaboration with five female co-performers. The performance work explores contemporary issues around racial and gender identity politics through an unapologetically autobiographical lens. As a humanities scholar writing about autobiographical studies and women's literature, Sidonie Smith reveals, "Autobiographical practices become occasions for restaging subjectivity and autobiographical strategies become occasions for the staging of resistance" (1998, 434). The racially diverse, all-female ensemble consisted of five dancers of different performance training, aesthetics and professional experience. In addition to Malik and Sarabhai, the cast included Sonal Solanki, a Gujarati dancer at Darpana who was trained under the guidance of Mrinalini and Mallika Sarabhai in Yoga, Kalaripayattu, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, folk and contemporary dance forms and has performed widely with the company locally and internationally as a principal performer and member of staff; Arundhati Sinha, a *Kalakshetra* trained Bharatanatyam dancer, originally from Assam, who was a guest artist at Darpana at the time and possessed a distinct geometry and technique in her movement style; Ambra Bergamasco, the Italian daughter of experimental theatre practitioners Ulla Alasjarvi and Beppe Bergamasco, a Butoh-trained performance artist and a PhD candidate who was exploring the performative possibilities of reintegration in situations of post-trauma and violence and was working at Darpana to expand her own creative language; and Jeannine Osayandi, a performer, educator and choreographer of West African and Brazilian dance, who was teaching Sarabhai's son Revanta African dance in Philadelphia at the time she made Sarabhai's acquaintance. A key issue in Sarabhai's work is casting—not just who is cast in a production but also the processes by which casting takes place. Grau has previously drawn attention to the democracy of the casting process at Darpana (2007, 2013). Seemingly binary oppositions, such as director/performer, actor/dancer and signifier/signified, are done away with and her choreographic process and creative out-

put often evidence a deliberate overlap of multiple roles. In this particular instance, the casting seems to have been a case of an organic evolution of chance encounters of female dancers of different ethnic backgrounds and creative practices seeking to embody aspects of feminine experience and narrate stories from personal memory. Allowing for the subaltern to speak, the performance work does away with colonialist conceptions of women of colour owing to a largely non-Western cast, allowing themselves instead to construct their culturalist and materialist subjectivities through engaging the semiotic and the symbolic in a culturally-specific case of *écriture féminine.*

A sample survey of the *Margam* emphasises the dominance of the male subject, exemplified by adopting the through line that responds to the psychosexual fantasies of the invisible male hero, usually Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, Lord Rama or Lord Krishna, inviting the heterosexual male spectator to identify with this linear narrative that exerts hegemony over the female dancing body. In sharp contrast, Colours of the heart allows for the creation of a fragmented discourse, one without a beginning, middle and end, that places the female subject and her lived experiences at the heart of the performance work, allowing those experiences to frame an aesthetic that is *authentically* female. British feminist theatre scholar Jacky Bratton distinguishes the autonomy of autobiography in masculine and feminine strategies:

> The masculinist assumption is that men choose to publish their life stories when and because they have a sense of their own autonomy and difference, and their unique importance to the public life of their day. The most pervasive characteristic of female autobiography, on the other hand, is argued to be self-definition in relation to significant others; so that, rather than a sense of individual autonomy, a sense of identification, interdependence and community is key in the development of women's identity and therefore also central in the stories of themselves. (Bratton 2003, 101)

In this sense, female autobiography is the re-inscription of the self in a performance manoeuvre aimed at moving the previously absent female body into the spotlight. As Bratton argues, this is possible through a deliberate construction of a shared identity in which their cultural specificity and

individual sovereignty is seated (Bratton 2003). These women speak from the particularity and universality of their own experiences, not in an effort to reduce the arguably complex commonalities of womanhood, but to display the diversity of authorship and agency in an effort to disrupt dominant hegemonic discourses. A 2004 description in *The Times of India* by Aruna Sunderlal from the *Bangalore School of Music* who presented Colours of the Heart read, "The singer and dancer weave personal narratives into a universal one, and focus on issues that impact women all over the world. This production talks about the loss of innocence and the shackling of women by customs and traditions.". While the work often hints at a romanticised global sisterhood, this comment perhaps underestimates the space that the dramaturgical devices and choreographic choices negotiate to subvert stereotypes and showcase the multiple, multilayered and multivalent 'realities' of the simultaneously racialised and gendered bodies on stage.

Deirdre Heddon, a scholar who has contributed extensively to the autobiographical in performance studies, has discussed how raising awareness and consciousness informed feminist approaches to making art and, in particular, the positioning of the autobiographical within the performance work, notably in the works of feminist performance artists such as Tim Miller, Lisa Kron, Bobby Baker, and Curious Theatre Company in the U.S. (2007). On the Indian performance stage, although dancers like Chandralekha and Mrinalini Sarabhai devised dancing selves that blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction around this time, these selves were, by and large, 'mythical', never placing outright the biographies of women as speaking subjects on the stage. Constructing from the base scouted by her predecessors and previous collaborators, Sarabhai draws textual and embodied material for performance purely from lived experience and muscle memory in *Colours of the Heart*. Neither is she quick to capture this experience as an essentialising truth, nor is she blind to the heterogeneity of experiences informed by class, caste, ethnic and racial markers, evidenced by her multilingual script and multiracial cast. Interestingly, this is the first show that Sarabhai

worked on with an all-women cast and collaborators. As Sarabhai observed in a conversation with Malik, published in *The Hindu* on August 17th 2004, "Women have unfortunately been the largest marginalised community over a 1000-year history of patriarchy. But there are lots of marginalised communities, and I always say at one time in each of our lives we must have felt the other. The other means being hated, division, often cruelty, self-doubt and feeling helpless and alone." Thus, the homogeneity in identification with the heterogeneous experiences, comes only from Sarabhai's single-minded belief that every member of the cast and every member of the audience has at some point been in the position of the other.

The opening image on stage is striking as the five women dancers are essentially frozen in a frame, shifting at the repetition of every second verse sung by Malik (also in the visual field of the performance landscape), thereby creating a tableau of images bound by a connecting white cloth. The white cloth becomes a metaphor for the captivity of women, and the warp and weft of the fabric are twisted and turned to create freeze frames of subjugation—of women whose hands, legs and mouth are bound by tradition, of women on whom abstinence is thrust, of women whose image is controlled by the male gaze, of women who are like a puppet on a string at the mercy of men and of women who finally take their own lives from the inability to escape (Refer Figure 4). Malik's evocative choreopoems being sung by her on one corner of the stage form the background scape with poignant lyrics such as, "It's not the colour of the heart, it's the colour of a face; It's not the whisper of a dream, it's the roar of a race." And "Words can free her, words can keep her in her place; Words may heal you, she may die in their embrace." The masculine control on language is thus addressed right at the outset, and the auto/biographical words then become a self-fulfilling prophecy to let women steer their own subjectivity in, through and beyond language.

The dancers are costumed in black leotards with a *Batik* printed skirt tied around the waist, and the fall of the cloth being wrapped around in different ways to reference culturally specific cos-

tumes. For instance, the Indian dancer brings up the fall of the cloth to drape it around like a saree fall. The only jewellery that the women wear are earrings that accentuate details of their face, as opposed to traditional Bhraratanatyam jewellery that accentuates the objectified womanliness of the dancing female body. Malik was dressed in all-black drapes and silver jewellery and stood at the right-hand corner of the stage, lit by a mild spotlight. Occasionally, she walks to the other corner of the stage and sits amongst the dancers, employing pedestrian gestures to contrast with their stylised gestures. There were few props on stage, only two larger than life screens that stood on either side and played visuals from time to time.

In the next sequence, Sarabhai's effect on the body of audience is profound, reaching the undesired state of disturbance alien to Indian classical dance. Bearing semblance to Kristeva's semiotic chora, Sarabhai shifts the signifying practice from the symbolic to the speculative. Referencing her instinctual body to lyrics that extoll being made a stranger in one's own city, the loss of innocence and the inarticulable suffering that cannot be sung in a masculine language, Sarabhai produces images that are undeniably disturbing to watch. These shocking images include the claustrophobia of being locked behind four walls, of scratching off her face in agony in order to create a fresh one every single day, of silencing her screams from the frustration of a fragmented reality. Unlike her previous performances, where she relies on props to create her theatre world, the bodies of her co-performers construct and re-construct the shifting arenas of the performance, becoming at one time the four walls that bound her in hiding when she went underground, and reflecting at another moment her inner demons swaying her from side to side as she loses touch with her perceived reality. The two screens on either side project images from the Godhra riots, and post-Godhra repercussions, and press releases that vehemently attack Sarabhai. This entire collage demands a slippage between the senses, and the intertextuality of the concocted performance landscape creates a corporeal resonance and deeply unsettles the body of audience. She puts her vulnerability in full view. In

emoting the *bhavas* of sorrow, fear and disgust, Sarabhai evokes a complex response in the body of the viewer, who cannot resort to a corresponding singular *Rasa*. When asked of her stance on Rasa Theory, Sarabhai says, very matter-of-factly:

> I do not come at any of this from the point of view of a theory that somebody has propounded or from the point of view of text. I am a practitioner. I am a practitioner who reads a lot, who studies a lot, but I am not an academic. I believe Rasa filters through our lives constantly and whether you theorize it or not, whether you put it into nine very tight compartments or not, they come through everything. They come through the colour you wear. That (my attire) is part of the Rasa that you consciously or subconsciously want to give out today. So I think it transcends everything. (2014, pers communication)

By performing a bio that is beyond the private self of domesticity, but presents a private self continuously harassed by the state and spoken for by the press, Sarabhai sounds her voice and embodies her pain. It is the immediacy of these interacting forces that aids a "writing aloud", in the sense discussed by Barthes, that constitutes the corporeal effect of a different kind of *Rasa* (1975). In that moment, I realised that I had bit my nail so hard that it was bleeding. Sarabhai has never paid heed to her bifurcated identity as performer and politician/someone in the political space, allowing for the two to interact freely, and always accounting for an openness to the public at large. This feeds into her choreographic direction, where the barriers between the personal and the public are baulked at. By 'acting out', Sarabhai and her co-performers seek to undo the othering of the woman on the stage and in society.

The depressive consciousness tapped into is allowed to continue, with red lighting further agonising the mood on stage. Malik moves on to the next song, the chorus of which sounds "At night, when they are all alone, why do women cry!?" Throughout the song, the lyrics allow for the audience to relate with the work in a physiological sense, embracing a language which "cannot fail

to make of it the chaosmos of the personal - in her pronouns, her nouns, and her clique of referents" (Cixous 1976, 888). To illustrate, the lyrics question why women scrub their soft, supple skin so hard in the shower; why women lose the pure, unadulterated dreams of their youth; why their bloody tears stream like a leaking tap. The dancers stand in a circle facing each other, and move in a repetitive, gut-wrenching motion, forcefully jerking their shoulders inward. Following this repetitive motion are movements that see the dancers losing weight in their arms and falling to the floor, picking themselves back up again, only to once again be rendered weightless and lay fallen. Each verse of the song sees a dancer occupy centre stage and literally depict the lyrics in the dance aesthetic that she has been trained in, whilst the others continue to move in unison in the background. The choreography does not come across as a mindless fusion of forms, but an organic evolution of a generous process. With the Kristevan conception of genotext in mind, the corporealising of the underlying foundation of the cerebral reveals itself in the bodily writings of the dancers. The performance work was largely workshopped, with the dancers bringing their own physicalisation to the lyrics. As one of the dancers, Solanki, said to me, there was a close observation and feedback loop in place during the workshopping process (2014, pers. communication). This feedback loop especially took into consideration the meaning-making nature of the movement itself. Improvisation was encouraged (in counterpoint to directive choreography in Indian classical dance) and democratic decisions were made on the parts that stayed and the parts that were cut.

I focus the discussion back on the performance. The mood of the performance work is overturned at this interlude, as Malik assumes a more authoritative tone, "Even if my eyes become the soles of your feet, this fear will not leave you." At this crossroads, the dancers do away with representation, and abstract the words in pairings of two and three. The immediate pairing of the three Indian dancers and the two foreign dancers raises questions. If the Indian dancers were paired together on account of similarity of race, were the foreign dancers (one white Italian woman and the

other an African-American woman of colour) only paired together on account of difference? As Malik voices the lines, "While I can see…While I can speak…While I can walk…While I can think…While I am free…This fear will not leave you (x5)", the Bharatanatyam dancers stand in a line and rush to the front of the performance space with gestures embodying each of those everyday movements, only to physicalise an intense blow to their stomachs and slowly retract backwards. This brutal blow impacts in a tactile manner, and the blow feels very real; the twitch, sweat and shiver in the body of audience palpable. The female dancers become subjects that can speak, walk, think and attempt to liberate themselves from the bounds of patriarchy, allowing for the female spectator to have an active subject who exerts her agency to identify with (only to be thwarted by the dominant order), thereby complicating the conventional viewing paradigm. The male spectator is afforded only the pleasurable feeling of inducing fear in the female body as the arc of recognition. The exploration of the interconnectedness of the performing body, the choreographic output and the subject formation in this performance work re-vision the situatedness of self in the work. The traditionally masculine domain of the spectator and the feminine domain of the spectacle are ruptured to create a choreographic configuration in which these domains are diminished.

Malik stops singing and walks across the stage to sit on the opposite side to deliver a monologue, mid-song, titled "I was the third daughter in a culture that worships the first son." In this monologue, she crystallises the problematics of a patriarchal culture that has a deep-rooted fear of change. The dancers sit around in a semi-circle, and physicalise the lyrics individually. In every narrative, Malik's tautology, "*I was the third daughter in a culture that worships the first son"*, is perspicuous. The narrative is circular, and feeds into the experiences of the different voices in different measures, returning to the inescapability of the patriarchal (b)order fixed upon the female, even in her varied attempts to transgress it. Cixous calls the negotiation of a liberated space where "she arrives, vibrant, over and again, we are at the beginning of a new history, or rather at a process of be-

coming in which several histories intersect with one another" (1976, 882). Sarabhai and Malik fuse the verbal and visceral in the bodies of their co-performers to create this liberated space. The choreography is attentive to the contours of feminine subjectivities, in which personal histories are shaped by global narratives and vice-versa. As Jeanne Perreault notes, "Writing "I" has been an emancipatory project for women" (1995, 2) and it is this very process of emancipation, of going beyond the bounds, that construes the aesthetics of both Malik's and Sarabhai's work. It is an aesthetics neither arrested by theory but arresting of the spectator only in its emancipation.

The dancers break out of their silence at this point, entering the spotlight to deliver a monologue each. The monologues are delivered in the mother-tongue of each of the performers, except for Sarabhai, who delivers her monologue in English. This highlights her urban, English educated, cosmopolitan upbringing and the deep impact of colonial values in a postcolonial India, especially amongst the elite sector of society. The monologues chronicle a personal narrative drawn from the storehouse of information they have of being human, of being woman. They tell tales of rape, abuse, discrimination, namelessness and bullying. It is important to ascertain here that I do not subscribe to the notion of an essentialist self, the self on this stage is very much a constructed one, through the production of a counter-narrative that imagines the I and the staging of that self. Despite the fact that I believe gender to be separate from biological sex, the fact remains that woman is mediated through discourse, thereby re-inscribing the female body with marked signs and symbols of her biological sex. The others listen and improvise in the background to create a frieze of the monologue being narrated. This re-enactment of the women's lived experiences is narrated to bring to bear the accounts of people othered due to the double bind of gender and race. The power differentials are illuminating.

In her analysis of the production *Fingerlicks* (1998), Heddon makes the astute observation, "The future life becomes implicated by the reporting of the life already lived and an involvement in

Fingerlicks necessarily becomes a part of the life-story, rather than merely commenting upon it" (2007, 39). The same can be said of Colours of the Heart, where the story does not end for the participant performers. In fact, in my interview with Sarabhai, she addresses the real life morphology of the performance work itself. For instance, Osayandi was raped 20 years ago by her husband's best friend. Within the workshopping process was the very first time she had uttered a word about the incident. She broke down completely and decided to use that story as her monologue in the performance work over the course of the choreographic process. After that very rehearsal, she called her husband and recited the incident that she had kept from him for all those years in significant detail. A year after the production, her husband came to see Sarabhai personally and express his gratitude. He explained that throughout the 20 years of their marriage, he had always felt like she was holding something back and that this performance work had provided her with a closure of sorts and brought the couple closer together (Sarabhai 2014, pers. communication). Similarly, Solanki's monologue is cleverly crafted to highlight how the woman always remains 'homeless' in India, due to the patriarchal nature of property inheritance. When a woman is a young girl, she is reminded that it is the house of her father; when a woman is married, she is reminded that it is the house of her husband; and when the woman gives birth, she is reminded that it is the house of her son. This specific realisation dawned on her in the studio space, and made her question the righteousness of property ownership and transfer in India. Since then, she has gone on to purchase her own home, in her own name. In a personal conversation with Solanki after a tiring folk dance class where I was training with her adolescent daughter, she spoke to me about bringing up her daughter with a sense of absolute freedom, in a manner not tied down by tradition. She also spoke of how women would gather around the cast after the performance work in each staging and thank the performers for a chance to process their own experiences of gender parity (Solanki 2014, pers. communication). Herein, lies the utopic potential of performance.

The performers, at one point, file in line and step up one at a time, telling tales of rejection and the very different ways they perceive rejection in their own ethnic particularities. The tales of parody are infused with humour and their faces register everything in subtle ways—the twitching of a lip, the scrunching of a nose, the creasing of the eyebrows, the gentle curve of a smile, the tightening of the cheeks. This light-hearted shift adds an interesting layer to the performance by infusing it with dexterity, warmth and wit. If, according to Broadhurst, "All liminal works confront, offend or unsettle" (1999a, 168), then by a mere fulfilment of criteria, Colours of the Heart is a liminal performance work. A review in a large circulation daily newspaper dismissed the performance as "nothing new" and claimed that the different facets of the work were "loosely strung together" and "there was a forceful attempt to link them up" (The Hindu, 2004). But it is this very free association of ideas, rather than a linear narrative, that engages the audience in a manner that requires their active reflection and negates the possibility of a singular interpretation. Resisting tradition and defying categorisation, the performance work is concerned with the fragmented experiences of contemporary women, literally the *colours of their heart*. These colours are not meant to shift smoothly or seamlessly, they are not shades, they are, after all, colours—dramaturgical interruptions. Sarabhai also notes that whilst female members of the audience were very receptive to the work, male audience members were less so (2014, pers. communication).

Viewing this performance work made me reflect on the process that a group of 20 of us went through in a two-week workshop with American performance artist Tim Miller that culminated in the showcase of a collaborative public performance work. The charged exploration searched for the narratives and metaphors of the body as a crucial way of looking inwards for stimuli for the creation of original material for artistic and creative expression. The workshop had a near-therapeutic effect for everyone involved in the process, and we would sometimes leave the rehearsal space emotionally exhausted, at other times uplifted. In this space, Miller would also share from his body of work in

the past, work that has actively engaged with the mechanisms of the state. He recalls his embodiment of resistance: "The wish fulfillment inherent in creatively fucking with these power-of-the-state architectures is consistent with my desire to encourage, to imagine, a kind of psychological inner theatre where we redesign more equitable social spaces for human beings to occupy" (Miller 2002, 20). It is precisely the seeking of such equitable social spaces that is the preoccupation of much of Sarabhai's performance work; Colours of the Heart is particularly direct in 'giving the finger' to patriarchy. The curtain comes down to an image of the performers lined up in a horizontal file, and sounding out the line "I am not THAT woman, THAT woman is not me", while directly addressing their gaze outward and pointing first at themselves and then pausing before directing their index finger pointedly at a spot in the audience. The experiential effect of this moment is profound. The performers then break into song and dance and clap together in an act of sisterhood at the very end, ending in a note that is impregnated with hope for transformation in the future.

Sarabhai's work, largely woman-centric, is now broadening its horizons. She is working toward several pieces that are aimed at men, specifically young men, in collaboration with her son Revanta. She hints at a project that aims to get at the identifying characteristics of the construct of masculinity. Questions such as "What is masculinity? What is macho? What is not?" are the starting points of such discussion, and she and her son Revanta Sarabhai want to take it to colleges to start a men against male violence movement to say men have to make informed choices and stand up to injustices against their female counterparts. She talks of the necessity of "a mass sensitization of all the people in power; politicians, doctors, judges, juries, bar associations, police force, teachers – it is a massive task" (2014, pers. communication).

In 2009, Sarabhai stepped into the political space as an active participant. She contested elections as an independent candidate for the Gandhinagar (capital of Gujarat) parliamentary seat against the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) sanctioned candidate LK Advani. As an independent, it

was a given that the odds were never going to be stacked in her favour. However, refusing to align with the corruption prevalent in both the non-communal Congress party, with whom Sarabhai's family have been closely aligned in the past, and the communal BJP, whose politics pervade a *Hindutva* ideology, Sarabhai made an active choice to stand as an independent candidate, observing a politics for the people, a politics founded on the tenets of transparency. She did not win.

In 2011, newspapers across the country flashed the news of Sarabhai's allegation that Modi bribed her lawyers in the post-Godhra riot case of 2002, using public funds allocated to secret services in the country. In October of the same year, Modi undertook a three-day fast titled *Sadbhavana Mission*, proclaiming the reason for the fast being the payment of homage to those deceased in the Godhra riots of 2002. A public protest was organised by the people to demand 'justice' for the victims of the Godhra riots. Sarabhai, and prominent lawyer Mukul Sinha, who was tasked with representing the riot victims before the specially appointed judicial inquiry commission, amongst 57 others, were detained by the police and transported to Shahibagh station, where they were later released . In their open letter, the protesters challenged, "Narendrabhai, you may turn Gujarat into heaven for a handful of rich and powerful. But have you ever peeped into the hell through which we the victims and the community, as a whole, are going through? No, you have not, and we know you have no desire or intention of giving us justice. We, therefore, dismiss your 'Sadbhavana Mission' as just another publicity stunt" (2002).

In 2014, Sarabhai infamously joined the *Aam Admi Party* (AAP), a party formed in 2012 that gained a lot of momentum in India, and is currently the ruling party of the capital city of Delhi. Having worked previously with *India Against Corruption* founders Arvind Kejriwal and Anna Hazare, Sarabhai believed that it was a political party that closely aligned itself with the principles of equality and justice, central to Sarabhai's ethos on public life. The AAP has had its own battles to fight, and Sarabhai has repeatedly voiced her support for the party that is still finding its feet. Claiming at the time that she was joining the party as a "foot soldier", Sarabhai was soon caught in

a row for her criticism of fellow party member Dr Kumar Vishwas. She openly called into question his regressive views on women, homosexuals, and the marginalised in general. Naturally, there was retaliation and public coverage. On being questioned about whether she believes the personal and pleasurable to be political, Sarabhai responded:

> I think the personal is political is certainly true. I don't think India....India has so many other issues that I think are more fundamental than sexuality as far as empowerment is concerned that I am not even thinking of the sexual satisfaction of women as being crucial because if they are being raped and pillaged and burnt and thrown acid on then sexuality takes a slightly back seat. So I don't think saying vagina, vagina, vagina, vagina is of particular relevance to India....it will be in a few years I hope. I think female sexuality is a minor subject vis-a-vis the huge issues we face. I am not saying it's not important, I'm just saying we are not there yet. we have other much more fundamental life and death issues facing us.(2014, pers. communication)

It is these life and death issues that Sarabhai confronts head-on in her performance work. That Sarabhai's politics is inexorably linked with her personal and, by a domino effect, performative, is hence beyond question. It is worth reiterating that she has continually identified herself as a "communicator", a sentiment echoed by her mother Mrinalini Sarabhai, and sees artistic expression as a tool for communication of the issues prevalent in society, and a summon for social change. I firmly believe that engaging with Sarabhai's performance work by paying no heed to her political presence and harassment by the government, is a futile endeavour. Her consistent insistence on social critique eschews the conventional theme, content and narratives of classical dance, and insists on the message being the decision-maker of the modality of performance. Sometimes, that modality of performance happens to be politics.

Figure 1. This photograph shows Mallika Sarabhai in *Sita's Daughters* (1990) gesturing toward the audience with her gaze directed outward wearing a short bob and a pink and blue saree (courtesy of Darpana Academy of Performing Arts Archive)

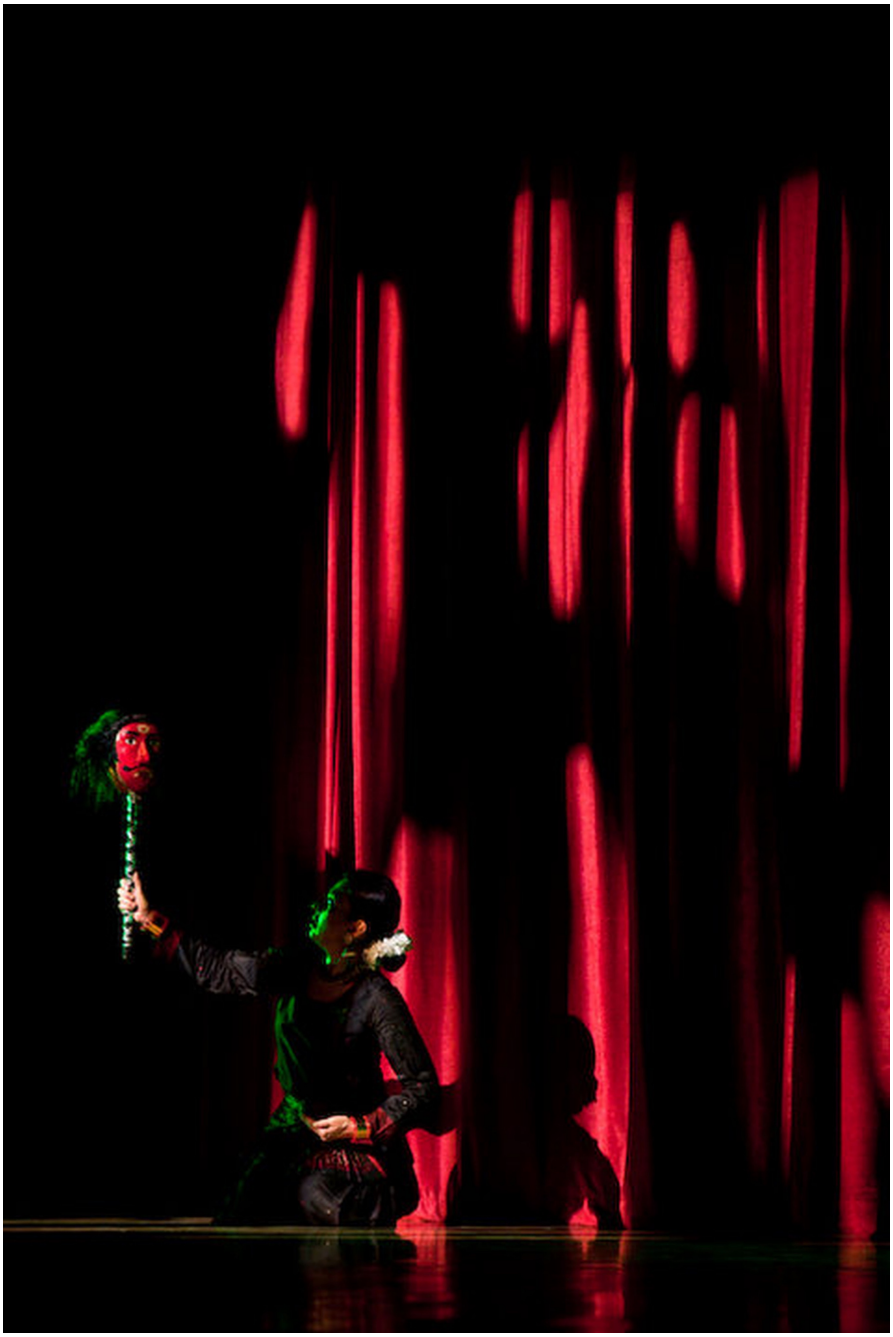

Figure 2. This photograph shows Mallika Sarabhai in *In Search of the Goddess* (2000) playing the role of Savitri in the midst of a battle of the wits with Yama who is represented through the use of a mask. Photographed by Yadavan Chandran (courtesy of Darpana Academy of Performing Arts Archive).

Figure 3. This photograph shows Mallika Sarabhai along with her ensemble in *The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya* (2001) where the cast use the white sails as "co-performers" to create shapes and patterns with their bodies in conversation with the scenographic elements. Photographed by Yadavan Chandran (courtesy of Darpana Academy of Performing Arts Archive)

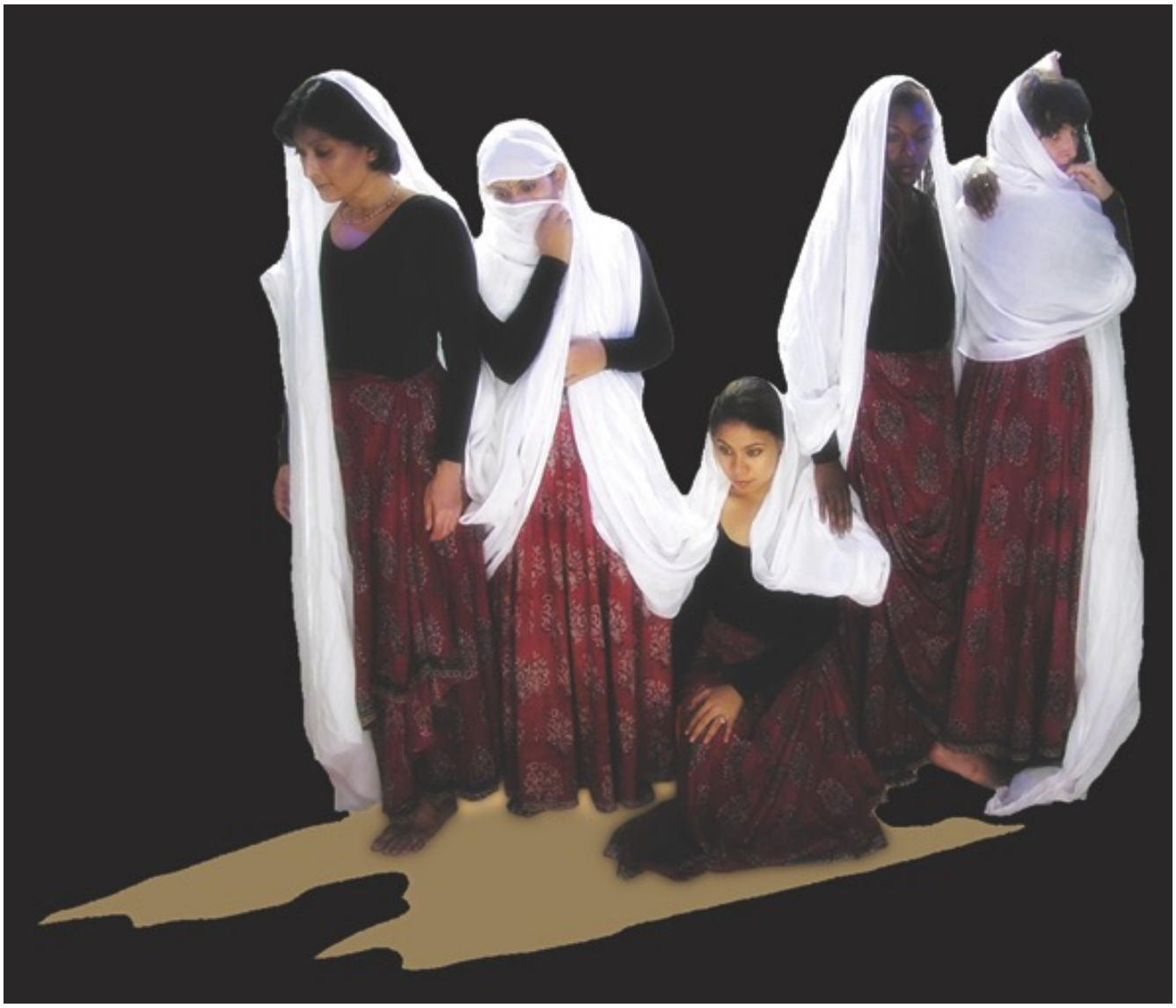

Figure 4. This photograph shows Mallika Sarabhai along with her ensemble in *Colours of the Heart* (2003) in the opening scene where the dancers use the warp and weft of a white fabric to represent the ways in which they are othered by a patriarchal society. Photographed by Yadavan Chandran (courtesy of Darpana Academy of Performing Arts Archive)

Chapter Five: Anita Ratnam, Feminist Consciousness and Transnational Modernity

Dr. Anita Ratnam is a dancer, choreographer, artist, scholar, author, cultural activist, curator, collaborator, educationist, diarist and fashionista. While she dons these many hats with relative ease, her multiple steps have worked in unison to mirror and distort notions of idealised Indian womanhood on and off stage. Holding a PhD in Women's Studies, the intersections of dance, gender, sexuality and culture are subjects of interest in her body of work. Being intensively trained in the Indian classical dance forms of Bharatanatyam, Mohiniattam and Kathakali, she draws extensively on the vocabulary, semantics and grammar of these dance forms in her performance works, in addition to the martial arts traditions of Kalaripayattu and Tai Chi and the meditative traditions of Yoga and Qi Gong. This results in her performance output being marked by minimalism and the power of suggestion that go hand in hand. The spoken word is also of utmost importance in her performance works and she regularly uses conventions of traditional theatre in her performance-making processes and outcome. Considerable criticism was directed at her work when she started performing in the 1990s, and there still exists a deep sense of discomfort amongst traditionalists who do not understand how to situate her practice. Her response to such criticism has resulted in the creation of a hybrid form of individualised performance that she labelled *Neo Bharatam* in the 1990s. In my interview with her, she told me that she decided to call the form Neo Bharatam after she had seen *The Matrix* at the cinema and Keanu Reaves' character was called Neo. Ratnam defines Neo Bharatam as an individualised response to her art and life (2014, pers. communication).

As a result of evolving a mode of praxis that is in continuous conversation with Ratnam's own life experiences, this reflexive practice has necessitated a constant state of growth and regeneration, for Neo Bharatam remains open to limitless possibilities produced by one's muscle memories. It is important to acknowledge at this point that Neo Bharatam is not a fusion form, for it is not the

piecing together of multiple movement vocabularies for the sole purpose of aesthetic appeal or generation of fresh movement material. Rather, it is a reflexive performance praxis that serves a tripartite function:

i. To stage the lived reality of Ratnam and her art in the here and now in a performance tapestry that weaves together the dual strands of the particular sacred and the global secular. Her work is largely devised, choreographed and scripted in collaboration and performed individually and is usually framed as a process of exploration

ii. To critique the modes of representation of the *Nayika* or heroine in Bharatanatyam by producing performance texts that claim power and agency for the Indian woman on the theatre stage. Women form the central motifs of all of Ratnam's work and are analysed through the prism of performance and mythology. Autobiographical strands inform Ratnam's interpretation of these mythologies. She does not shy away from the 'feminist' label and the personal and political concerns that she grapples with reverberate across her repertoire

iii. To evolve a mode of contemporary performance that is rooted in Indian and pan-Asian performance traditions, thereby helping shape South Asian and Indian dance discourses without an adoption of techniques and terminology used in Western dance discourses. Not one for imitation of the West, she does away with what she believes "white bodies can do better" (2014, pers. communication). Her intent to work with Indian mythology and rework its reception and interpretation further complicates her position as a contemporary dancer and performance-maker working from Chennai, the home of neo-classical Bharatanatyam

In many ways, these functions feed off and into each other and are hence not as separate as they may appear at first glance. Thus, Ratnam's body in performance becomes the site for negotiations of gender and genre that are constantly in a state of flux. The strength of patriarchy is continuously challenged in her work and she attempts to radically revolutionise the concept of the Indian woman, carefully constructed as part of the larger nationalist movement in India in the country's struggle for freedom from the British Empire. Dance Scholar Judith Lynne Hannah distils Mrinalini Sarabhai's writings on the *Nayika,* "the plight of the male-defined ideal woman is depicted as longing, hesitation, sorrow, loneliness, anxiety, fear, parting, yearning, pleading, forgiveness, faithfulness, despondency, envy, self-disparagement, depression, derangement, madness, shame, grief and being rebuked, insulted and mocked by one's family and deceived by one's lover" (Hanna 2016, 122). Further, the foremother of Indian contemporary dance, Chandralekha, questioned "the appropriateness of as basic a convention as the yearning of a female dancer for her male lover, her master, her God" (cited in Stiehl 2004, 95). Ratnam denies this type of identity and representation of the feminine in her work, and develops the idea of what she terms the "female transcendental" (2014, pers. communication). She asserts, "Dance is my attempt to populate the world with interesting women. Some of them are those we recognize as goddesses. They have mischief, rage, anger. They can kill, protect, laugh, they have sensual power. They are, I hope, enigmatic, complete, intelligent, passionate" (quoted in Kreisberger 2010). As was seen in Chapter Three, goddess mythologies are a common strand in the choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai.

Ratnam pays significant attention to scenography in her work. In an interview, she notes:

> Every, every bit of my collaboration becomes a co-performer. The scenography, the costumes, the music, the lighting, everything is actually part of the performance - Can I use them, are they going to say something, can they be there as a signifier of something? I think my performance through with these devices. I'm always thinking of everything in that frame—there's not just me. Everything I place in that frame is actually making a comment—it's not decorative. So that's why, for me, it is a performance experience, it is a 360-degree performance experience. (2014, pers. communication)

This layering of her performance world lends her repertoire to a (syn)aesthetic analysis with relative ease. Additionally, her aesthetic adopts breath, silence, stillness and energies as choreographic devices to critique the modes of representations afforded to the woman dancer, as will be detailed in the analyses of her performance works. Ratnam also situates the subjective experience of the female body in her work as her body becomes a site of radical resistance to the framing of gender in Indian classical dance. Personal motifs inform her entire body of work. For example, in *7 Graces…the many hues of Goddess Tara*, Ratnam begins the piece with her back bent (a movement used to depict female oppression, pioneered by dancer Chandralekha in the 1990's and expressed in productions such as *Sri*) from the outermost periphery of the stage, tracing all four oblong sides with a pulling motion (Katrak 2011). Gradually, the movement quickens into circles, becoming smaller as her motion of unending tugging at an invisible but seemingly endless umbilical cord builds in intensity, evoking the pain and rigour of childbirth, an experience resonant of Ratnam's birthing of her own first child. Ratnam is always responsive to the phase of her life as evidenced above. As she turns 60, she speaks of a sort of Alzheimer's of the body and is interested in exploring a return to the Bharatanatyam body in the next decade, as she feels her body is forgetting other movement vocabularies but her muscle memory vividly remembers Bharatanatyam as it returns to its powers of recall (2016, pers. communication).

Though her work draws heavily from the Indian classical dance traditions in which she is trained, this chapter will demonstrate how Ratnam disrupts and even ruptures the foundational elements of that tradition, including the choreographic processes behind the solo dancer, the established modes of *Nayika* or heroine representation, the grammar of the movement techniques, the artifice of costume, the veil of mindless religiosity, the structure of the *Margam*, and performance of the representational (as opposed to the real). These departure points overlap and interplay between the self, the sacred, the secular, and the sensuous in Ratnam's repertoire, and critique the lived expe-

riences of women in the geo-politico-cultural landscape in which Ratnam's work is rooted, i.e. her hometown Chennai. Such paradigmatic shifts in performance, I argue, contribute to renewed ways of constructing gender and sexuality in the terrain beyond Bharatanatyam.

Ratnam's blog, narthaki.com, a one stop resource for dancers, choreographers and spectators alike, is a comprehensive guide to dance in India and features Ratnam's monthly musings on recent developments in Indian and South Asian dance from a first-person perspective. Ratnam actively speaks at cultural events, conducts movement workshops and provides guest lectures on dance, theatre and performance in festivals, interdisciplinary institutions and universities across the globe. She has also been the convenor of the festival of alternate arts, *The Other Festival*, for ten years, held in association with *The Park*, Chennai, and has organised multiple performance conclaves on gender, culture and dance in India. All these facets of her work contribute to the making of a self-reflexive practitioner, more interested in process than product.

For the purpose of this thesis, I have selected four feminist choreographies from her repertoire for a detailed analysis that I believe exemplify her attention to process, trace her evolution of the Neo Bharatam genre over the years, and embody a hybridised aesthetics of resistance. *Ma3Ka… The triad supreme (2009)* is a non-linear exploration of goddess mythologies re-imagined through its communicative potential with personal narratives; *A million SITA-s (2010)* is an example of re-visioning the phenotext of the *Ramayana* with the genotext of the sub-narratives of othered women within the canon; *Avani - A handful of dust…*(2011) is a (syn)aesthetic response construed as an embodied intertextuality between a Bengali male poet's text and a Tamil female dancer's flesh; and *Padme* (2014, 2016) is a work-in-progress where Ratnam dons only the hat of the choreographer, not the performer, and co-creates an ensemble work that explores the erotics of the body and frustrates interpretation.

5.1 *Ma3Ka…The Triad Supreme* (2009): Rewriting of Goddess Mythologies

Imagine being in the midst of a performance when your mother was being pulled away from this earth. Imagine then never having a memory of being held in the arms of this mother. Imagine trying to make peace with the fact that you never satisfied your own mother, never earned her seal of approval, not even after local and international laurels came your way. Imagine a lifetime of feeling like you weren't good enough. Imagine not having a chance to say one final goodbye. For Ratnam, these were more than just figments of her imagination. This was her lived reality. And it is these events that reframed the dramaturgical direction of Ma3Ka, initially conceptualised to be an exploration of the divine triad of goddesses – Swetha, Padma, and Shyama.

The performance work eventuated to be a triptych of the holy trinity—Saraswati, Lakshmi and Meenakshi—refracted through the prism of the women in Ratnam's life—her 95-year-old grandmother Saraswati who continued to be her guiding light until her very last breath, her recently departed modern and indomitable mother Leelavati, and her 20-something year old autonomous and fashion-forward daughter Aryambika. The performance work was inspired by "personal mythology", as Ratnam terms it in her program notes, and explored the energies of the goddesses, divine and individualised, through the doctrines they stand for—wisdom, prosperity and courage respectively.

Ma3Ka is the choreographic output of a two-year process, and her tenth collaboration alongside director Hari Krishnan and visual designer Rex, and Ratnam classifies the performance work as her most "risky and vulnerable" show to date (2010). Hari Krishnan is a Bharatanatyam, Ballet and contemporary dancer, researcher and scholar based in Toronto, Canada. His company *inDANCE* regularly collaborates on transnational productions and he has been an artistic companion and personal friend to Ratnam for over two decades. Their first collaboration, *Adhirohana – The Ascent*

(1998), was based on Adi Sankar's *Soundarya Lahari*, and evoked the cosmic *mandalas* through the energetic fields of the body. The work drew from tantric philosophy and its underpinnings of *Chakras*. In the exploration of the *kundalini* energy, the performance work was resonant of Chandralekha's choreographies. Krishnan writes in his director's notes:

> Ma3Ka is a new destination in our 11 year journey with Anita in a continuing collaborative adventure. As a team we seek to question and reassess our shared interests in Indian Goddess worship, feminist theory and womanhood. We dissect the representations of the female body/mind/spirit in the evolutionary schema of East and West binaries. Together we have created original works of performance art that speak to Anita's pioneering spirit and quest to archive a body of repertoire investigating the life stories/songs and poems of Indian women dance artists who while being constantly called on to channel The Goddess Feminine from without, also reserve and practice the right to choose to walk away from this "rock of Sisyphus" and unchain the feminine "goddess" within instead, wars and all… (2009)

The performance work itself is structured in a non-linear composition of images from life and myth. The three formative segments of the work, referencing the energies of the three sides of an equilateral triangle, are directed as glimpses of multiple moods, thoughts and reflections, emphasising their ephemerality. Any attempt to capture a moment, construe a literal meaning or conceptualise a figurative whole is reductive. The three segments are punctuated with the work of the bilingual story-teller Revathy Sankkaran. Sankkaran is renowned for her own brand of *Katha Kaalakshepa*, otherwise known as *Harikatha*, in which story-telling, philosophy, music and gesture are combined together to be recited for an assembled audience. This narration breaks the fourth wall, and Sankkaran addresses the spectator as storyteller, drawing attention to such sensitive subjects as man's incessant greed and flippant references to the love for *Louis Vuitton*. The absence of live musicians on stage, an absence that is relatively standard in much of Ratnam's work,[16] is compensated

[16] Ratnam has repeatedly expressed preference for recorded soundscapes over dancing to the music of a live orchestra. Although this disqualifies her from certain venues, particularly in Tamil Nadu, where puritan classicism has ensured that the requirement of a live orchestra has a strong hold, Ratnam remains committed to the practice of using recorded music.

for by the evocative soundscape courtesy of the musical direction of Anil Srinivasan, Vedanth Bharadwaj, and KSR Anirudha.

If scenography is indeed "an open-ended conversation between design and performance" (Mortimer, cited in Howard 2009, xviii), then the space for a sensory experience is an intrinsic part of Ratnam's work. An equilateral triangle frames the foundation of the stage and each of the vertices of the triangle is enriched with images through the use of actual objects arranged on the floor as symbolism for the goddesses, their earthly counterparts and their corresponding energies. The left hand vertex is activated with an image of a large white harp surrounded by three white *Veenas*, the string instrument played by Goddess Saraswati, in varying sizes lit with a white spotlight; the right hand vertex is triggered with *Vels,* divine javelins, of differing heights lit with a green spotlight and the remainder vertex is energised with lotuses in water-filled vases lit with a blue spotlight. The energetic field created in the centre by the interactive forces of this transformative triangulation is palpable.

As a dancer, Ratnam refers to her dance as her eldest child born out of a deep sexual, somatic and spiritual relationship with her own body:

> If you are a woman and a dancer, then dance is your eldest child, you are married to your body and you are mother to movement. That alchemical bond between the spirit, body and the navel of memory is sacrosanct. Married or unmarried, divorced, separated, or in a social relationship you can term 'complicated', there is nothing complex about a woman and her body that absorbs, morphs and shape-shifts as it grows and the dance grows alongside it. You are a parent who nurtures and forms the growing bubble of kinetic clay that takes shape through your limbs and torso. (Ratnam, NCPA April, 2014)

When Ratnam articulates her relationship with her body, and the corporeal intelligence that is in a sense inarticulable, she exemplifies a feminist *jouissance*. As Cixous observed, "The mother, too, is a metaphor" (1976, 881). Ratnam uses the metaphor of the mother to refer to movement born *to her*, rather than movement born *out of her* as in classical Bharatanatyam choreographies. She uses

this metaphor to re-enter the semiotic in the pursuit of a pathway to the intricate rhythms, vibrations and sensations of the unconscious. This quote manifests itself in Ratnam's feminist choreographies where the contraction and release of the muscles in her inner thighs as she extends her lower limbs in yogic positions; the pulsation of the muscles of her pelvic floor harnessed in her *araimandis* and *muzhumandis* (half-seated and full-seated deep squats with her knees turned outward); the resistance of the muscles of her core engaged in torso rotations; the endurance of the muscles of her lower limbs as they trace complex stepping patterns; and the responsiveness of the muscles of her sternum as she consciously engages breath as a dramaturgical device, provide embodied examples of a return to the maternal body in her art if read in Kristevan terms. Ratnam's relationship with her body changed on the unexpected pregnancy and subsequent birth of her daughter Aryambika. She recalls the experience of birthing, the agonising pain in her lower back, the intense spasms and the subsequent relegation of her priorities as a dancer to her priorities as a mother. If this *jouissance* is indeed implied by the maternal, as suggested by Kristeva, then Ma3Ka is the "flow of jouissance into language", for it draws on these repressed impulses in accessing the maternal drive of the body through choreography to let the body negotiate a reunion with the body of her birth mother and her birthed daughter through narrative (1984, 79).

When the spotlight is first lit on Ratnam, she assumes the centre of the triangle in a *Viparita Karni Asana* (leg-up-the-wall pose), a restorative Yoga position, inverting the body. This opening position itself in grounding the spine on the floor sharply contrasts the grounding of the feet to the earth in the preparatory segment of Bharatanatyam, thereby allowing for blood to flow to her muscles from the leg to her head. She then draws the attention of the spectator to the softness of her knees, bending them to make shapes in air, whilst gesturing to the lyrics in classical dance *hastas*. Slowly, she rolls her spine to a seated position. In this seated position, she spins around to face the audience. She rises to her feet. Her angular movements trace the sides of the triangle to the mne-

monic syllables that infiltrate the soundscape. The sacred geometric symbol of the triangle of the set design, marked by its symmetrical sides, is in conversation with the symmetrical and asymmetrical spatial and temporal orientations of Ratnam's dancing body. There is a lightness in her *tattu-mettu adavu*[17], the *thak ka dhimi* variation, that her feet adopt to draw the lines of the triangle. She proceeds to re-imagine the physical and psychological dimensions of her grandmother, mother and daughter through the optic of her self as grand-daughter, daughter and mother. The symbolism of 'mother', of her body and in her relationships, is the common thread in this segment. This sequence reflects the mathematical complexity of the *Nritta* element of Bharatanatyam, labouring to evidence the temporalities of its cardinal numbers along with the spatialities of its angularity, linearity and circumference. This entire segment primarily uses Bharatanatyam vocabulary, as if to use Bharatanatyam itself as a metaphor for the form that is the mother of Ratnam's generated movement. The segment returns Ratnam to her spine, and she assumes the sculpturesque position of Saraswati as depicted in temple sculpture and classical painting, only upside down. Her body seems to playfully reference the subversion of mythology itself in her work by literally turning a mythical figure onto its head. Ratnam is clad in white for the duration of the section and her costume is stitched in a patchwork format from white sarees belonging to her grandmother, her mother, her daughter and herself (Ratnam 2014, pers. communication).

The middle segment is perhaps the most choreographically complex. Ratnam is dressed in a blood-red kitsch brocade jacket with bright gold motifs and silken parallel pants. Ratnam opens this segment with her back facing toward the audience and, as I observed in Chapter Four, this is considered taboo in Bharatanatyam. She takes slow steps toward the back end of the stage, articulating the spine, flexing the arms and gently swaying the hips. A long Kuchipudi plait is clipped to her hair. In myth, there is a reference to the goddess Lakshmi having a sensuous silhouette, especially

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[17] Rhythmically challenging *adavus* or footwork that are performed in five variations and three speeds.

when she walks away from the mortal. This becomes the starting point for Ratnam's re-visioning of the goddess Lakshmi. The plait becomes a co-performer of sorts in an improvisatory segment where she draws the motifs of the *Ashtalakshmis* (8 incarnations of Lakshmi) using the interaction of her torso, spine, shoulders and arms with the plait itself (Refer Figure 5). For instance, the plait is folded into a hanging U shape and swayed from side to side to reference a cradle in her depiction of Santana-Lakshmi or the goddess of progeny, the plait is trumpeted forwards and backwards like a trump from her nose in her depiction of Gaja Lakshmi or the elephant goddess, and the tail end of her plait is used to resemble a writing pen on the surface of her hand in her depiction of Vidya-lakshmi or the goddess of knowledge. The subtlety of these constructions allows for an interaction with the popular imagination of the audiences in the striking visualisations of the symbolism evoked.

Ratnam proceeds to present a series of everyday movements, deconstructing the grammar of the Bharatanatyam body, instead making space for movements that seem to be the result of structured improvisations, allowing for her body to be in a constant state of becoming. There is still a layering of the classical dance *hastas* with this abstract choreography, albeit de-contextualised. Ratnam has been vocal in her call for an Indian contemporary aesthetic, rather than an imitation of modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism in Euro-American dance practices. She has often raised the question of the appeal in brown bodies being eagerly imitative of white bodies (2014, pers. communication). In this sense, Ratnam seeks to be contemporary on her own terms. She is constantly concerned with what she has to say as an Indian, as a Tamilian, as a woman and as a dancer through her dance. At the mid-point of the first side of the triangle, Ratnam pours out coins from the pockets of her jacket, in a reference to the goddess of wealth. At the mid-point of the other two sides, Ratnam does away with the paraphernalia of classical dance, the bangles and the anklets.

The choreography comes to a turning point here through Ratnam's adoption of pedestrian gestures in the constructed performativities of her many *avatars* as ramp model, fashionista, classical dancer, TV media personality, socialite and celebrity. The fissures between somatic identity and cultural identity are bridged in Ratnam's body, and she creates emancipatory possibilities for the *Nayika* on stage. In situating her self in the choreography, Ratnam ruptures implicit assumptions about what constitutes everyday movement and ideal femininity in the social life of a dancing female body. She does not confuse the use of pedestrian gestures with the ones found in Western postmodern choreographies, but is sensitive to the specificities of her socialised and culturally conditioned body. I never imagined I'd see the day where a dancer cat-walks a *Sabha* stage with sunglasses on. An ardent fan of Audrey Hepburn, Ratnam nonchalantly informs me that the choreographic impetus for that moment was inspired by Hepburn's iconic role in the film *Breakfast at Tiffanys* (2016, pers. communication). The many journeys of her own life have led to her identity as a Neo Bharatam performer, an autobiographical strand she explores successfully in this segment. In doing so, she ambitiously tries to synchronise the kinetics of her dance with the cultural influences that lead to sensual subjectivities capable of birthing her individualised genre of movement.

In the final segment, Ratnam enacts the birth of the three-breasted goddess Meenakshi from fire through the adoption of classical dance *hastas*. Slowing down and pacing up her movements, and continuously rotating on a single spot in the enactment of this mythical tale, Ratnam draws our attention to the new kinds of cultural meanings emerging from her hybridised body. She is dressed in an emerald green gender-bending costume which allows her body to explore the length and breadth of its dimensions. Drawing on the male-dominated modalities of performance in Kathakali and Kalari, Ratnam embodies a body in combat. As a female warrior, Ratnam expands her limbs into extensions and opens up her body to the space. Her blows, strikes and kicks engage the entire body, drawing energy from the foot and through the pivot of the torso into her arms and/or legs.

This engagement of the entire body is enabled through a mastery of technique, an aspect I struggle with in my own combat training. Many of the basic *vadivus* or postures from Kalaripayattu are referenced in Ratnam's body in this fighting sequence. The *Asva vadivu* or the horse posture, the *Kukkuta vadivu* or the rooster posture, the *Simha vadivu* or the lion posture, the *Mayura vadivu* or the peacock posture and the *Varaha vadivu* or the wild boar posture, are all identifiable in fragments through the choreography.

Ratnam's body also shields from attack with a sharp hand-eye coordination that depicts mechanisms of defence. The speed of the movements continues to build until the moment she lays eyes on the invisible male god, Sundareswarar, symbolised by the object of the tridents. Ratnam's entire body comes to a standstill. Even the music is tuned out. It feels as if the audience is collectively withholding their breath. Ratnam uses stillness as a choreographic device to build the intensity of that moment. She then inches her way toward the tridents placed on one of the vertices of the triangle in an effort to bring to life her burning desire and the agency to express such desire. In her review of the performance work in the arts supplement of *The Hindu*, Friday Review, noted performance critic Leela Venkataraman queries:

> But what happens to the fiercely independent warrior when she loses her heart to Sundareswarar? The act of removing the headgear, a symbol of authority and draping it round one of the tridents on the side of the stage was very potent. Had love clipped the wings of authority? Did it signify a willingness to share power? Or did it acknowledge entering the new domain of marriage and what it entails? (2010)

Ratnam's work has never been about answers, so Venkataraman's questions remain as valid a response as anybody else's readings. Indeed, a (syn)aesthetic analysis such as this one resists a singular interpretation. As a vocal critic of the institution of marriage in her own life, the closing note of Ratnam's performance work resonated with me as Cixous's perception of female desire as whole, not castrated. To speak in Cixous's tongue, Ratnam wants all of her with all of him (1976). Indeed,

the symbolism of *Ardhanarishvara* in Hindu mythology, is a composite androgynous half-man half-woman figure made from the fusion of the masculine energies of Shiva and the feminine energies of Meenakshi. Ratnam hopes, in an interview in *The Hindu*: "I wish my audience find at least some moments to take back as images, some thread or universal cord between my story and theirs" (Ratnam 2010). By destabilising the signifiers of the female triad, Ratnam allows for these signs to be radically ambiguous and re-visioned anew, by herself and her spectators alike.

5.2 *A Million SITA-s* (2010): Rupturing The Representations of the Canon

A million SITA-s is the story of the sisterhood of Sita—of Manthara the hunchback, of Sabari the tribal, of Surpanakha the monstrous, and Ahalya the stone. Voices silenced in the grand narrative of the Ramayana are given life in this production—women that occupy the fringes of a master frame become agents of their own choice. Their choices are dictated by a complex web of motives, i.e. promiscuity, vengeance, desire and devotion, always underlined by a powerful passion and a subversion of the status quo. Whether as stone, crippled, monstrous and tribal and/or disabled, these women are deeply other(ed) and their bodies are at all times transgressive. Although Ratnam remains true to the characterisations of these figures within the master narrative, i.e. she does not offer an alternative version of the narrative itself, she inscribes her phenotext with "the plural heterogeneous and contradictory process of signification encompassing the flow of drives, material discontinuity, political struggle and the pulverisation of language" (Kristeva 1986, 122). These nonconformist bodies of Ratnam's million SITA-s allow the male spectator no active subject to identify with, other than that of the abuser. Neither do they allow the female spectator an active subject to identify with. What they do enable, however, is the identification of the female spectator with the

inner worlds of these other(ed) bodies. The multi-sensorial experience of being misunderstood and the longing for liberation allows for the active female spectator to partake in the utopic experience. In making visible the invisible bodies of the master narrative, Ratnam resists the strategies of female representation as object and other prescribed by a phallogocentric narrative.

The thematic vignettes of these transgressive female bodies are punctuated by the positioning of Sita as an active protagonist in the Ramayana, as opposed to the passive wife in the epic's heteronormative reading. Ratnam's Sita is assertive, challenging and compassionate, embodying the virtues mirrored in the transgressive bodies of the epic. The subjectivity of these transgressive bodies is constructed through an outward projection of temporal and spatial expressivity, and the subject of Sita herself is imagined through an inward exploration of the cerebral, her corporeality marked by a meditative stillness. Ratnam writes, "When I dance, I reveal myself. I cannot dance out of the sides of my mouth. In life, I am a recluse. On stage, I am all passion, stillness and focused energy" (narthaki.com 2008). Being the choreographer and the performer, her Sita(s) are a metanarrative for her imagined selfhood.

The curtains are drawn shut. A recorded soundscape first engages the aural attention of the spectator. The recording spells out, "This is the story of Sita – the adopted daughter of Janaka. This is also the story of Sita, the daughter of Ravana. Sita, princess of Mithila or Lanka. How could it be you ask?" The rhetorical question is followed by a looming audio filling the auditorium of *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan* in Chennai, recollecting a lesser known version of the epic, where Sita was born out of the nostrils of the demon King Ravana after he was impregnated owing to a curse by Shiva. The soundscape fills the space with the curtains still drawn, arresting the attention of the audience whose very notion of a received Ramayana is challenged at the outset.

The voice continues giving a synopsis of how the show is about the sisterhood of Sita before the curtains draw open. Programmed as part of the *Margazhi Music and Dance Festival*[18] in the heart of conservative Mylapore and in the auditorium of a largely puritan theatre, Ratnam's reading of Sita and rewriting of the epic in that space reshapes the cultural configuration of place itself. Ratnam premieres all her work in Chennai, staking the claim loud and clear that "I am NOT an export artiste" in an interview with dance critic Lalitha Venkat, going on to refer to Chennai as her city, home and cultural constituency **(**Ratnam 2008). As she lives and creates here, she is attached to premiering her work here. Given this context, the centrality of place in her work is of utmost importance. Ratnam is not a South Asian artist, but a necessarily Indian one, inhabiting the home turf of the reconstructed Bharatanatyam and showcasing her work, abstract or classical, in the very same arched proscenium theatre stages and as part of the very same festivals in which the urban elite of India reconstructed the neo-classical dance tradition of Bharatanatyam. In that sense, her choice to premiere her works in Chennai can be seen as a necessarily political one. Dancer-scholar Uttara Asha Coorlawala offers her perspective on the issue of labels, in a published response to dance anthropologist Andrée Grau:

> From my perspective, the phrase 'South Asian Dance' is repeatedly embedded within a discourse of pain and anger, a discourse that interrogates whiteness, and negotiates a place for itself in a white driven power structure. On the other hand, the words 'Indian dancing' invoke a relatively more self-defined cultural space. In this space, another aesthetic, the rasa theory, is a taken-for-granted base from which modernism and its consequents are explored, even when the concepts and conventions arising from rasa are not intellectually defined for the speaker/dancer. Within this safer space, I am able to indulge in the luxury of inclusivity. For example, when I dance within India, 'Indianness' of person is not so much of a commodity as it becomes in the market beyond India's geo-conceptual borders. (2002)

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[18] *Margazhi Music and Dance Festival* is a month long festival of classical music and dance in December-January in Chennai hosted by multiple platforms and festival organisers. The festival traces its first season back to 1927 and is one of the largest festivals in the world in terms of artist participation. Established, upcoming and amateur artists are programmed as part of the festival in multiple slots curated for the season.

I acknowledge here the risk in labelling Ratnam's work as Indian Dance, when her aesthetic borrows from pan-Asian forms such as Tai Chi, Qi Gong, and Butoh, amongst others. However, the situatedness of place; the active engagement with Indian mythology; the inculcation of ritual; the adoption of an identifiable classical idiom (in its myriad constructions and deconstructions); the engagement of pedestrian gestures that are an outcome of socialisation processes within the cultural frameworks of India; and the axial importance of *Rasa*, necessitate a discourse of dance that is not South Asian, that is created and performed within the subcontinent, and that is necessarily Indian. For these reasons, I find Coorlawala's understanding of Indian dance useful.

Feminist performance scholar Sue-Ellen Case famously called for a language that was "elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete." (Case 1988, 129). The language that Case seeks out is discernible in Ratnam's choreography. Her body seems to be always approaching, encroaching and violating the territories of classicism; never reaching, settling or arriving. In that sense, Ratnam's Sitas are always in transit, messing around with the imagined constructs of time and space. The pulling in of the navel to the spine, the articulation of the *mudras*, the complex rhythmic structures of the stepping patterns and the orientation to spatial angles at the outset invoke a familiarity of the *Alarippu* to the seasoned spectator. In doing so, Ratnam reinforces the performativity of the dancing female body, the submission of constructed self to the double construction of cultural codes within a given context. In this moment, the discipline that goes into the development of this dancing female body personally triggers a kinaesthetic response, an evoking of the muscle memory of the deep a*raimandi*, the hand-eye coordination and the leap to the recurring rhythmic structures of the *Tisra* (3 beat cycle) *Alarippu* as the body slowly opens up to the space. Exploring the tensions between the bounds of repression, representation and reflexivity, Ratnam's ability to simultaneously confront

and conform the classical canon she seeks to challenge is commendable. The *sthayi bhava* (literally translated as permanent mood) of her dynamic Sita—a sum of the parts of her sisters—is not identifiable in the purified idioms of dominant feelings afforded to the *Nayika* in her traditional trajectory. Through these multi-layered interventions, Ratnam's Sitas destabilise the dominant discourse of the 'Sanskritised' body. Srinivasan's approach to the study of the body is useful: "I embrace several understandings of the body that inform my work: a body is spiritual, sexual, semiotic, fluid; it moves and transforms. With such understandings, I do not reject the textual body in favor of the phenomenological body. Nor do I dismiss the written text in relation to bodily texts. I consider them all in dialogic relation" (2012, 169). Such a dialogic reaction of the semiotic and the symbolic allows for a combined consideration in a (syn)aesthetic analysis.

Paying attention to both plot and physicality, Ratnam situates her bodily writing as the locus of feminist criticism. The materiality of her body meets the textuality of her counter-narrative, and politicises the sign-systems of traditional theatre semiotics. In that sense, the representational apparatus of Sita and the resistive avant-garde intersubjectivites of her many *avatars* are not viewed as polar opposite projects, but instead re-visioned as a liminal space co-habited by these very layers. Her body attends to Case's beckon "towards a new poetics", becoming the fertile territory that does not lend itself to the battleground of contesting theories and/or practices (1988, 112). Ratnam's Sita refuses to participate in the homeland of a Lacanian phallogocentrism**,** neither labouring to advance the agenda of a theoretical dancing Shiva revisited in the (re)construction of Indian classical dance nor partaking in the patriarchal inscription of a pious emperor Rama, dwelling instead in the borderland of the forest from where she stages her subjectivity.

As in much of Ratnam's work, the *angika* (embodiment), *vachika* (speech), *aharya* (*mise-en-scene*) and *sattvika* (emotional state) are woven together to form a dream-like world. Each of these elements are adopted in varying measures, and serve to both stand alone and work in unison

with the other elements, the conversing itself allowing for the creation of multiple meanings. Despite the interposition of *jathis* and *abhinaya* in the traditional *Margam*, and the momentary rupture of fluidity, there still, by and large, pervades an illusion of seamlessness. In the progression of a linear narrative in classical Bharatanatyam, each of these elements necessarily speaks to each other to create a whole through the tenets of tradition, with the aim always being one of transcendence. Ratnam's choreography, on the other hand, adopts disturbance and disruption as a dramaturgical device. There is a deliberate adoption of these devices to dismantle the dominance of the heterosexual male gaze itself. As Irigaray hypothesises:

> Investment in the look is not privileged in women as in men. More than the other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, maintains that distance. In our culture, the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality (Irigaray 1978, 50).

There is no illusion of a coherent whole in Ratnam's performance work, just metaphors of myth that can be re-visioned individually in the sets, the musical interludes, the abstract dance and facial expression of the body. For instance, the visual field consists of assemblages of images, such as the water-filled glass vases with the lotuses on top and a prayer ritual in the forest created by the dancers replicate with offerings of fruit, flowers, beetle nut incense, camphor, lamp, bells and sacred ash, while the musicians in the background shift into the foreground in the interludes when the dancer disappears from the stage. Such arrangements of images and choreographed movement provide the spectator with a peek into Ratnam's inner landscape. Not one to shy away from ritual, Ratnam evokes images through an otherworldly optic. The act of viewership becomes experiential, engaging the aural, visual, haptic and chthonic states of the spectator, through the continuous negotiation of meanings in the interaction of these signs. She has repeatedly maintained that the perennial images in all her work are woman, goddess, and water, and this is true of A Million SITA-s.

Ratnam's Ahalya, although genteel and graceful, consummates her sexual desire through the transgression of her marital boundary and her moral code with the God Indra, following the traditional narrative of the epic. The explicit eroticism levels the playing field of performance by aiming the sensate experience of her sensuousness at women. In telling Indra to go away before her husband returns, Ahalya expresses a fear of being found out for transgressing the moral codes of a monogamous marriage. Ratnam's Ahalya problematises the perversion of 'purity' in Bharatanatyam. Once turned to stone by her husband, Ratnam's Ahalya seems to realise that merely reversing the power differential does not deconstruct the dichotomy, thereby proceeding to actively make the choice to remain stone. The visual motif of turning to stone is evoked by Ratnam in a contact improvisation of the body assisted by a textured grey cloth. The choreography is constructed like a duet as the cloth takes on a life of its own and Ratnam reacts to the touch of the fabric by initiating, feeling and responding, guided by the sensory perceptions of the grey cloth against her skin. She finally releases her weight to gravity and shrouds her body with the cloth. This disembodied stance is not a defiant one, for it does not deny the materiality of the body *per se*, but her fantasy in remaining stone allows for her to exit the stage as a consumable object.

Where Ahalya chose to remain stone, the stone itself became the weapon of attack on Ratnam's impersonation of the grotesque body of the deformed maid Manthara. Unable to bear any longer the hurling of sticks and stones on the surface of her skin by the vindictive Rama and Lakshmana, Manthara's anger oozes out of her pores and she schemes to obtain revenge through coercing Kaikeyi, one of the four wives of King Dhasharatha, to request her husband to crown her son Bharatha King instead. She succeeds in spurring a series of events that result in Rama losing his kingdom, effective immediately, and being banished to the forest instead. Manthara's rage is expressed in exaggerated gestures and her disability is communicated through the inversion of one of the lotus stalks to convert the prop into a walking stick (Refer Figure 6). Manthara's melodramatic

avowal of revenge draws our attention to her tripartite othering by the interactive forces of classicism, sexism, and ableism.

If Ratnam's Manthara showcased her suppression, her reading of Sabari enacts the fantasies of inclusion even on account of being tribal, woman and blind. Ratnam seems to suggest that the only way for a woman to be visible is through a blind devotion (literally!) to the male god. By incorporating the senses of sound, smell, taste and touch, Ratnam balances the principles of the visual field. Sabari, however, transgresses her line of social inclusion, biting into the fruit to taste it before she serves it to Rama. Culturally, this is an overstepping of the code of conduct, where one must not eat from the food they serve to a god. Additionally, the god must be fed before one feeds themselves. The spectator's eye is lured to the excitement that is created on stage by the powerful allure of the cymbals, props, lights, sweat and tears on Ratnam's face. This sets the scene for the spectator to feel the tactile impact of the tangible bodily fluids, before their imaginations are anchored to sensorily experience intangible bodily fluids. The intangible bodily fluid I refer to is blood in the case of the demoness Surpanakha's violent mutation.

Ratnam's demoness Supranakha embodies a feverish, frantic, frenzied corporeality, a fantastical figuration of feminine sexual desire. Elsewhere, Katrak (2014) draws an informed comparison of the parallels between the passions of Medea, Macbeth and Surpanakha. Here, Katrak examines Rama's (dis)identification of Surpanakha's outer desires as a reflection of Rama's inner demons:

> I interpret Rama's spurning Surpanakha's lust as deeply disturbing to him and Lakshmana as though the demoness' lust reminds them of the seamy side of their own passions, underneath a veneer of civility. They need to cut off any reminder of such negative emotions, hence they disfigure Surpanakha so that her mangled face looks nothing like their own. Their violent act distances from them the dark side of their own nature. (2014, 137)

Surpanakha's sexual desire is incapable of being sublimated in the 'sanitised' space of a representational apparatus. Her pulsating position in the episode, literally pounding the muscles and joints of the body in a primal fashion, leaves the spectator perplexed.

As the dancer-reviewer Kiran Rajagopalan notes in the Indian magazine on performing arts, *Sruti magazine*, "The highlight was Surpanakha, because this segment showcased how movement could be used figuratively in choreography. Armed with only dance movements and minimal facial expressions, Anita was able to capture the essence of Surpanakha's character without having to incorporate sanchari-s. This contemporary approach to characterization was refreshing" (2011). Catharsis isn't a comfort zone available for access. By de-centring the centrality of the gaze in neoclassicism, Ratnam's re-visioning of the productive apparatus, could have been an endeavour to arrive at the essence of Surpanakha.

Exploring essences is beyond the scope of this thesis but if, as Foster says, "Survival depends on the kinds of individual agility and communal solidarity that the dance expresses", then A million SITA-s, through the individual agility of Sita and the communal solidarity of her sisters, is a choreographic act of survival (1998, 15). In between two episodic intervals, Ratnam breaks the fourth wall. She questions the audience on how they see her, as the Sita in their shrine, the Sita from their cinema, the Sita in parliament, just the Sita from their beautifully framed pictures, the auspicious Sita invoked at their daughter's wedding, but not the Sita auspicious enough to be the name of their daughter? These silver-tongued questions form the background score and Ratnam maintains the artifice of the dancer in her outward questioning. However, she also provides the spectator a chance to reflect on their passivity in the reception of a Sita in a hegemonic reading of the epic.

She revisits this idea to reinforce it at the very end of the piece. Here she dances to the Thyagaraja composition, *Seetha Kalyana Vaibhogame*, sung at Indian weddings during the Oonjal ceremony where the bride and groom are seated together on a large wooden swing, with the sway-

ing activated by their family and friends. The beautiful, pious, chaste wife of Rama is invoked to bless the couple in an ideal marriage. Through the lyrics of the song, Ratnam "painted the Ramayana in broad brushstrokes", a visual field she had evoked previously in the production *Neelam…Drowning in Bliss* (2006). However, in Ratnam's delivery there was an authoritative voice of Sita as the agent of her every choice, colouring the brushstrokes danced to these lyrics. Ratnam then reiterates these traditional lyrics within a piercing soundscape. When I witnessed this work, this disruption shifted my attention to the musical accompanists, all of whom were women, apart from a lone male percussionist. This put a smile on my face as a researcher in the field, unaccustomed to this rare sight in a *Sabha* where the female dancer is always being watched by a supporting orchestra of male members, except for instances where a female *Guru* may be watching from the side of the stage, or on those rare occasions where the stage is shared with female singers. Ratnam, and, by extension, her million Sita-s were not dancing to the tunes of a voyeuristic gaze after all. Feeling uplifted by this sudden realisation, the musical score started to build. As the musical notes heightened, Ratnam assumed the basic wide-legged Kathakali stance and slowly inched toward the audience with a palpable intensity. Her gaze remained fixated at a point in the audience.

The musical score then builds to a crescendo and the monologue echoes through the space:

> This timeless story carries Rama's name but if you listen closely you can hear my voice and my name spoken by many through the centuries… This is also my story and the story of my sisters – Surpanakha, Manthara, Ahalya, Sabari and many others, and many others…I am Sita and now I choose to be free, I choose to be me….I am Sita, Janaki, Vaidehi, Mythili, Ayonija …I am Sita of Mithila or Lanka or anywhere and everywhere…I am Sita, I am Anita, I am Subiksha, Viji, Lakshmi, Priya and Rati…Nasreen, Mumtaz…I am also Kathrine, Kausalya and Gurpreet…Sophie, Srilatha, Shehnaz and Salman…Shalini, Sally, Leela, Vimala…Anna and Afshan…I am Sita and you and you and you and you and you and ALL of you…I am a million SITA-s.

The lines "I am a million SITA-s" continue to reverberate through the space as Ratnam ends on a note of bodily repetition, swaying her arms outward and drawing them back to herself, her breath

enunciated under the lights, her embodiment referencing liberation. She resembles a figure attempting to fly forward. By cyclically breaking through the closure of the linear Ramayana, Sarabhai transforms her million Sita-s. As Cixous triumphantly declares, "At the end of a more or less conscious computation, she finds not her sum but her differences. I am for you what you want me to be at the moment you look at me in a way you've never seen me before: at every instant" (1976, 893). The overlapping soundscape of names, multi-religious and multi-ethnic, point toward a secular re-visioning of Sita, in a way she has never been seen before, as the symbol for the specific otherings of womanhood intersected by vectors of caste, class, race, sexuality and ability. Yet, in Ratnam's Sita, the sisterhood is never "lacking" (Cixous 1976, 893). Sita continues to capture the cognisance of the Indian psyche, and Sarabhai and Ratnam bring to the stage radically individualistic re-visionings of a single image, paving the way for many to question the process, package and production apparatus of Sita's sisters, Sita's daughters, Sita's refractions.

5.3 *Avani - A Handful of Dust*...(2011): Embodying a Tamil Female Dancer's Response to a Bengali Male Poet's Verse

Avani - A handful of Dust... is a multi-modal performance work created as a tribute to the cadences of Rabindranath Tagore's verse. Tagore's verse is filled with regionally specific images of India, and his words ignite the imagination with richness in subtleties and gradation in the layers of sub-texts that are not immediately apparent on an initial glance or a cold read. It is a tryst with such verse and its myriad interpretation(s) that concretises the choreographic vision of *Avani - a handful of dust*…. The work was ideated and created on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary celebrations of Rabindranath Tagore, and first performed at the *Alliance Francaise de Madras*. It is safe to say that the audience was made up of artists and intellectuals and a group vastly different to the traditional dance audiences of *Sabhas*. The reception of the work is thus dictated by the venue of its

performance. Ratnam herself unpacks the naming of the work and its choreographic vision in an interview with the *Times of India*:

> Avani is both synonymous with the earth as well as signifies a woman's name. The word originates from Sanskrit. I call the idea A Handful of Dust, for the simple reason that I believe, we all shall tumble down to an urn of ash one day or be reduced to dust after death. Sooner or later, we all have to surrender to our fate. We can't ignore this true facet of life. The entire act is divided into a series of four broadly classified sections. Basically, an embryonic concept germinated into this fascinating ode to Gurudev (Tagore) and his poetry, with the choreography, music and visual-designs being inspired from his penned compositions and their inflections, finer nuances and subtleties (Ratnam 2011)

Unlike most dance-dramas that revisit Tagore's eclectic *Rabindra Nrithya* aesthetic or his successors Manjusri Chaki and Ranjabati Sircar's codified *Navanritya*,[19] Ratnam's performance work is a syn(aesthetic) response to Tagore's literary genius. Neither does Ratnam borrow from Tagore and his contemporaries' choreographic signature nor does she depend upon his iconic feminist play-texts, *Chitrangada* (1936)*, Chandalika* (1938)*,* and *Shyama* (1939), as the backbone for her performance work. Instead, she draws from the power of Tagore's verse, probes the depth of his pan-Asian ideology and celebrates his concern with tapping into a universal consciousness to create a dwelling for her dance in the abstraction of personal interpretations. As collaborative director-choreographer Hari Krishnan notes, Avani is a personal meditation of the artists with Tagore at a "global Shantiniketan" in the 21st century (2011, program notes).

Ratnam is beholden to the community from which she creates—artistic and spectatorial. Historically, the epicentre of Tagore's work has remained a Bengal engaged in the middle of a re-

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[19] Navanritya or New Dance is an expressly codified contemporary dance genre by the mother-daughter duo Manjusri Chaki and Ranjabati Sircar that draws from classical dance, folk dance, martial art and Yoga in the training of the body and for choreographic output. For a detailed discussion on the work of these two women through the lens of modernism and feminism, see Purkayastha (2014).

naissance[20] and the epicentre of Bharatanatyam has remained, and continues to remain, in a Madras steeped in conservatism. Ratnam lives and works from the latter, and hence Avani - A handful of dust… is carefully choreographed to negotiate the tensions between the two historic and geopolitical spaces. In this sense, Avani - A handful of dust… pays homage to the great Bengali male poet and freedom-fighter through the prism of a Tamilian female dancer. This consideration of place is important, as there is an attempt to deify Tagore in Bengal today due to the proliferation of his verse and imagination. Ratnam's Avani - a handful of dust… resists such strongly spiritual undertones. When a member of the audience said he did not receive the spiritual experience he was looking for as a Bengali in a post-performance question and answer session, Ratnam replied, "my performance is not a substitute for your spirituality" (Ratnam 2011).

Bengalis put Tagore on a pedestal and consider him a complete poet, for he has offered them a piece of writing for every stage of their lives, i.e. birth, early childhood, late childhood, adolescence, puberty, adulthood and maturity, even treading upon darker topics such as death. In fact, die-hard Tagore fans have come to propagate a kind of fundamentalism with his verse and believe in the superiority of his writing to other literary works in India. Known as the 'Rabindriks', this group champions the literary issues, ideologies and objectives of Tagore's writing and consider themselves experts on the subject. This zealot obsession of the Rabindriks with Tagore's verse threatens artists from approaching the subject, particularly artists who aren't from Bengal and/or fluent in Bengali. Ratnam was immensely sensitive to this issue in her choreography, and her deliberately non-coherent performance work was created as a "quilt coming together in pieces" (2016, pers. communication). What she offers, then, is a Tamil female dancer's peek into the window of Tagore's world, not the recreation of the Bengali universe of Tagore's writing. In Avani - a handful

[20] A cultural, social, intellectual and artistic movement in Bengal, commonly known as the Bengal Renaissance, in the mid-19th until early 20th century when India was under the rule of the British Raj. The renaissance had reform that denied a politics of exclusion at the heart of its movement and manifested widely in religious, social and cultural outputs.

of dust…the textures of Tagore's text (and translations) are disentangled and the spirit of his writing is dealt with through "five handfuls", or five vignettes capturing the substance of his verse, namely Dust, Words, Flowers, Leaves and Gold. Inspired by his verse, the choreographed vignettes on the chosen words cohere around these literal and metaphorical elements in Ratnam's interpretation. Neither does the choreography set out to subvert a woman in love or a woman as mother, nor does the choreography seek to provide an alternate reading of the othered woman in mythology. Instead, the choreography resourcefully revisits Tagore's words as a potent site of radical resistance, and imbues the hues of his poetry with movement, stillness, breath and energies.

Complicating the relationship between language and translation and subjectivity and meaning and motion in her performance work, Ratnam does not reify the polarities of masculine and feminine energies, but instead charts a journey of embodied exploration in ways that are reminiscent of Tagore's writing to show how Tagore came to occupy the position he did in the Indian psyche at a moment of transition from colonial to postcolonial India, and how his legacy continues to find relevance in contemporary contexts. In this sense, Avani - a handful of dust… is vastly different from much of the Krishnan-Ratnam-Rex collaboration which consistently deals with goddess mythologies and/or philosophies from the Indic schools of thought, i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Nonetheless, in the last danced sequence that extols Tagore's composition on Mother Earth as protector and destroyer, and relies on symbolism expressing the cyclical consciousness of humanity itself, the trio return to goddess mythology in their re-visioning of the earth as a feminine energy.

The performance work is set in an intimate setting with the backdrop of a clothes line dotted with clothes in red, white and black being hung to dry and a tree in the shadows, invoking a sense of the familiar backdrop of a *verandah*, the domestic sphere, where intimate conversations amongst women typically unfold in the average Indian household. Three women—the female Bengali story-

teller Averee Chaurey, the female Tamilian actor Akhila Ramnarayan and Ratnam—are juxtaposed against this backdrop. Chaurey and Ramnarayan occupy opposite ends of the stage, and converse in a candid manner, unpacking the poetry, politics, purpose, philosophies and passion of Tagore and his work. Their back-and-forth is reminiscent of the Upanishadic practice of question and answer between the *Guru* and the *Sishya*, a safe space provided for the *Sishya* to practice his faculties of critical reasoning. Ramnarayan is persuasive as an actor, addressing the concern on stage that even a year into the development of the performance work, she only feels like she is beginning to "scratch the surface" of Tagore's oeuvre. This instinctive moment convinces the spectator that their engagement is indispensable to the making sense/*sense* making process of multi-sensorial interpretation. In this seemingly commonplace interaction, Tagore and his world spring to life and the dancer enters to fill the void of the space with fullness of movement against a screen where Tagore's verses play out as the "principal protagonist" (2011, program notes). When Ratnam enters the stage, she brings with her a cloth, and Chaurey and Ratnam begin to bind this cloth together, twisting, knotting and furling the opposite ends of the fabric ever so gently and then making the ends meet for the beautiful bind to amalgamate into the set. This wringing, squeezing and compressing of the cloth becomes a metaphor for the performance work itself where Tagore's text is dealt with in a similar fashion to bring together seemingly antithetical material, such as a Bengali male poet's verse and a Tamili female dancer's body, so as to extract essences, distil images and press out interpretations. The scenographer Rex writes about his creative direction:

> Tackling Tagore on stage is a Herculean challenge! How does one manifest/articulate his singular genius through dance while retaining his resonance in a contemporaneous vein? After much "head banging on the wall", I chose to design a text-based environment in which to house the interpreters thus allowing them the grace to borrow the essence/energy of Tagore's eternal words. Gurudev's writings incarnate as the principal protagonist animating fellow travelers on a non-linear, pioneering, mystical journey to inhabit his forever pertinent, renaissance world. I hope "reading" our Avani will leave you with an aching heart akin to the one that Tagore's poetry kindles…. (2011, program notes)

The scenography establishes in deft strokes the realism of a domiciliary backdrop but infuses it with a contemporaneity that moves the performance landscape forward by singular words/short phrases projected on the black screen behind the dancer. The words are displayed in a way that invites readership and/or interpretation in relationship to the action unfolding on stage. In retrospect, this literal layering of the verbal and the visceral firmly establishes the return to Tagore's text in the choreography, not as an act of nostalgia but as a contemporary negotiation of relationships with text. In watching the rehearsal processes of Ratnam-Krishan-Rex in 2016, I was struck by the transnational collaboration through Skype and the way in which discussions of literary works, photographs and letters inform the choice of words, images and motifs for choreographic, dramaturgy and visual design inspiration. At this stage in the process, they typically possess three copies of the same materials so there is a concordance in the various verbal, visceral and design elements that communicate the performance world they seek to create on stage.

[Opening - Dust]

The performance work begins with Tagore's words from his seminal work, the *Gitajanali*. A translation of the poem 18 is uttered by the actor:

> Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens. Ah, love, why do you let me wait outside at the door all alone? x (2)
>
> In the busy moments of the noontide I am with the crowd, but on this dark lonely day it is only for you that I hope
>
> If you show me not your face, if you leave me wholly aside, I know not how I am going to pass these long, rainy hours
>
> I keep gazing on the far away gloom of the sky, and my heart wanders wailing with the restless wind.

> Clouds heap upon clouds and it darkens, and my heart wanders wailing with the restless wind…

Emotionally charged moments of love and longing, grounded in the *Abhinaya* of Bharatanatyam, convey the expressive intentionality of sensations such as "longing, separation, memory, loss, pain, hope" (2011, program notes). The choreography is contemplative and careful not to crowd out the words, ensuring that indulgence does not seep into the interpretative framework. The feeling invoked is utterly humanising, and there is no space for *Bhakti-Sringara* in the dance, revelling only in the longing of a love that is real—never divine. Ratnam follows the path of the *Sapta Nada*, often woven into the Varnam, where the dancer delineates the lyrics of the composition in an S-like curve across the stage. However, it is not a direct representation of the lyrics that are unfolding in the proscenium arch in this instance, but an apprehension of the moods of a love soaked in the shades of longing. Along the path of the *Sapta Nada,* Ratnam's body interacts with the clothes that are hung to dry in the set. I remember that the choreography of this opening vignette gives the impression of being woven around the set, rather than the other way around (Refer Figure 7). Time is drawn out as it often is in the recollection of feeling in a flashback or dreamscape. Clad in black and white, the English and Bengali words projected on the screen—Gloom of the sky, HEART WANDERS, The restless wind, BREATHE, Your pleasure, Frail vessel, Fill it with life, Mango groves, Gentle breeze, YOU MAKE ME ENDLESS—reflect and refract off her costume, sanctioning a cross-pollination of text and body that produces rich results in the visual field of the spectator. The words are also often repeated on the multimedia projection in various zoom levels, speeds and patterns speaking to the "feminine tense" of the quality of Tagore's text (Ratnam 2016, pers. communication). I understand her use of this phrase as a kind of feminine sensitivity in his ambivalent, circular, heterogeneous writing, with an attention to emotion, responsiveness to instinct and an openness to interpretation. Tagore's words produce the results of a feminist *jouissance* that opposes phal-

logocentrism in a lyricism that can be read as an example of an *écriture féminine.* Ratnam says, "Tagore's words speak to a woman's heart" (Ratnam 2016, pers. communication). It is perhaps this quality of his writing that lends itself to the experience of female subjectivity in his verse. Hence, the strewing of Tagore's texts to serve as the backdrop is an appropriate choice on which to anchor the entire production. Ratnam speaks on stage, directly addressing the audience, something she seldom does in her performance works, and narrates a tale of another maiden waiting in anticipation for her beloved to arrive with the stride of a magnificent peacock. Here, the movements are agile, sprightly and joyous as opposed to the quiet, ponderous and ruminative movements of the abstracted emotions in the aforementioned text. Following an episodic structure, the movements also shift from abstraction to direct representation, albeit staying true to the vocabulary of Bharatanatyam in both instances. Woven through this segment are anecdotes from the life of the Tamil nationalist, journalist and fictionalist, Kalki Krishnamurthy. An endearing slice of history connects the paths of the Bengali poet and the Tamil writer, passionately retold by his great-granddaughter, the actor on stage. This autobiographical strand in the performance work, the actor Krishnamurthy later explains to me over coffee, made her incredibly uncomfortable, but nonetheless served as one of the poignant points of entry for a Tamilian to connect with the words of Tagore (Krishnamurthy 2016, pers. communication). The reference is also a rather brave one, as it notes the retraction of the Tamil poet's earlier statement that Tagore was superior to his South Indian contemporary, Bharathiar.

[Transition One - Words]

"You make me endless, such is your pleasure." (*Geetanjali*, Poem 1)

This rather short sequence uses complex adages to draw away from the inspired story-telling of traditional Bharatanatyam, and soak instead in the interplay between rhythm and movement so there is a re-examination of the relationship between music and motion in classical dance. The currents of the geometric choreography make for compelling viewing, and the *Nritta* of Bharatanatyam is the sole influence for this sequence. While the sequence had interesting moments, it chose not to depend on narrative at all, persuasively locating the pleasure that Tagore speaks of in the dynamism of the dancing female body. By drawing attention to the lack of a pleasure bound only by language, and locating that pleasure instead in the locus of the Bharatanatyam dancing body, Ratnam challenges the domination of the hegemonic male discourse. She liberates the Bharatanatyam dancing body from narrative, and imagines the pleasurable possibilities of teasing apart and synthesising angles, lines and circles in the Bharatanatyam body and its interaction with space. She lets her *Nritta* guide where the movements lead, allowing the spectator to experience *Nritta* with fresh eyes as she gives a roundedness to the movements through her breath and energies. In altering the spatial orientations of the *adavus*, Ratnam re-imagines them anew. She also locates the source of her dancing body in Bharatanatyam and gives in to the pleasure born of pure rhythm in *Nritta*. It would have been good to see Ratnam push this idea further by somatically attempting to trace the impulses, instincts and intuitions that birth this feeling of pleasure in the bones of Ratnam's Bharatanatyam-trained body. Ratnam could have accessed her training in Butoh, body-mind centring and Yoga to detect these traces. However, she has previously noted that she likes to keep the bodily articulations of different vignettes of her performance work separate for the spectator to discern the shifting moods of the performance landscape (2016, pers. communication). So, I understand the decision to limit the body to Bharatanatyam in this vignette on words.

[Transition Two - Flowers]

"Enchanting Mohini, your eternal beauty mesmerises the world." (Tagore)

This is a Bengali verse that was composed by Tagore in the same musical melody as one of his favourite Sanskrit compositions by Tamil saint and composer, Muthuswami Dikshitar. On a visit to Madras on the invitation of Rukmini Devi Arundale of Kalakshetra, Tagore happened to hear the composition that extolled the praise of Goddess Meenakshi sung by Carnatic singer Savithri Krishnan, then a 14-year-old girl.

"Regal Meenakshi, you are the sole refuge for all of humanity." (Dikshithar)

In fact, Dikshitar is said to have breathed his last to a rendition of this Carnatic composition. Tagore was so mesmerised by Dikshitar's song and Krishnan's tune that he then invited Krishnan to come to Bengal to study at *Shantiniketan.* Krishnan went to Bengal and sung Dikshitar's verse for Tagore to inspire his own composition. Tagore responded, in turn, by compiling a cultural intertextuality that was in dialogue with Dikshitar's composition. The intertextual text followed the same syntax as Dikshitar's original but extolled instead the virtue of *Bashonti*, Spring. Ratnam's choreographic genius lies in seeing the referencing of the one composition in the other, not just as interesting, but as inseparable in the making of meaning. The romanticisation of Spring haunts the imagination of Tagore who writes of his terraced gardens with the specific imagery of the flowers grown in the days spent with his muse and sister-in-law, Kadamabari. Ratnam enters the stage, Chaurey garlands her with a string of burnt orange kadamba petals. Ratnam, who performs the entire section seated on a low stool, begins the choreography by delicately spilling the petals of bright yellow champa, burnt orange kadamba, blush pink oleander and pure white tuberose around her from the woven basket she holds in her hand, evoking the interconnectedness of a ritual where the devotee offers flowers to the deity with the sensitive, secular understanding of Spring. Read side by side to the classical Bharatanatyam repertoire where the solo dancer dons all the characters in the narrative and denotes the transition by altering the orientation of the dancer in the space, Ratnam moves in a similar fashion between a deity in praise of the divine goddess and flickering images that capture the

quintessential qualities of Spring. In moving quite literally in two directions by working the upper body in isolation through the rotations of the torso employed in Mohiniattam, Ratnam deploys the *pada-artha* technique of Bharatanatyam to *translate* the meaning of Dikshitar's verse on Meenakshi, and the *vakya-artha* technique of Bharatanatyam to *transmute* the pith of Tagore's verse on Spring.[21] Her profound sensitivity in handling this intertextuality results in the eventual merging of a 360-degree orientation that delights in the union of Tagore's verse with the dominant narrative in Ratnam's body and she concludes this sequence by stepping off the pedestal that she was performing from and showering the pedestal with the assortment of flowers from the basket. It is a rare pleasure in the context of Indian dance to be offered such moments of sheer sensory excess, numbing the intellectual need for interpretation.

[Transition Three - Leaves]

"O Tree, daughter of the sun, hymn to the light" (*Briksha Bandana*)

Tagore was profoundly inspired by nature and much of his writing is testimony to this fact. The storyteller and the actor unpack the source of this interest and draw parallels between Tagore, a Wordsworthian style, and the doctrine of the English Romantic poets. In the choreographic sequence that unfolds, Chaurey reads from Tagore's *Briksha Bandana* in Bengali, Ramnarayan offers a literal English translation of the verse and Ratnam performs, adopting a single hand gesture, the *Pathaka Mudra*. They are seated as if belonging to three concentric circles. As the program notes describe, "The choreography plays off the words of the actor and the quiet counterpoint of a single hand gesture that moves, sweeps, evokes, conjures and suggests the many worlds that occur around trees - a silent and static witness to humanity" (2011). The choreography summons the sensations of my own (brief) bodyweather training where structural ambiguity, anti-technique and, as Min Tanaka

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[21] *Pada-artha* is the technique of literal translation of each word of the composition with appropriate gestures. *Vakya-artha* is the technique where the dancer translates the line into dance, as opposed to a word, allowing for interpretation of poetic verse, sub-texts and metaphors.

posits, “omni-centrality” are salient features (Tanaka 2006). As I’m mesmerised by the movement of this *Pathaka Mudra*, the very first gesture I was taught in Bharatanatyam class as a child, I realise that Ratnam alienates the *Pathaka Mudra* in the way that it is used in narrative story-telling and brings it back to the source, the beginning. There is intentionality in her use of the *Pathaka Mudra* in the sustained movement that unfolds on the floor.

The sempiternal movement is as much about process as it is about progress. Tagore writes of this particular strain of progress in his critique of nationalism in the essay, “Nationalism in Japan”: “You have to judge progress according to its aim. A railway train makes its progress toward the terminus station - it is a movement. But, a full grown tree has no definite movement of that kind. Its progress is the inward progress of life. It lives, with its aspiration toward light tingling in its leaves and creeping in its silent sap.” (Tagore, 1917, n.p). It is this substance of the trees that Ratnam tries to inhabit in her choreography. Given the Japanese connection to that particular train of thought, Ratnam’s adoption of a Butohesque aesthetic reads as relevant. Ratnam here labours to dance the DNA of the tree, the structural anatomy of its roots, stems and leaves. Values are assigned to this tree as a member of the community and the tree is made sense of through its relationships with the earth, the sky, the wind, the sun, the traveller and the creative spirit itself.

Ratnam’s protracted movement seems to purposefully seek the creation of silence as a discursive strategy to counter the embellishment of tree as a decorative backdrop in Bharatanatyam where the tree exists only as the environ in which heterosocial and heterosexual romantic narratives play out. Further, there is only a depiction of a tree in Bharatanatyam, never an embodiment, i.e. a specific way of extending the hands in *Tripathaka Mudra* to portray the shape of the tree is the only way a tree is represented. However, in Ratnam’s embodiment, she remains low to the ground. Pulsing on the floor and guided by the movement of the *Pathaka Mudra* at an extremely slow pace, she is inspired by images such as “how does a seed feel when you water it, how does it germinate, how

does it sprout, how does it move in the soil, how does a stem shoot out of it and how does it break free" in a free-form improvisation with no parameters except the time limit (Ratnam 2016, pers. communication). By using the image as stimuli in structured improvisations, Ratnam radically breaks free from choreographic processes in Bharatanatyam where strictly codified vocabularies inform the portrayal, depiction and representation of images.

[Final Transition - Gold]

"Today at the altar of a day's end, as it blows in a last salutation, I make you my obeisance - accept it, O Earth" (*Prithibi,* translated by Tarak Sen)

Evoking the earth as Usha (Dawn), Sandhya (Dusk), Annapurna (Goddess of Abundance) and Annakrita (Goddess of the Terrible) a powerful portraiture of Tagore begins to surface in his epic poem *Prithibi* on Mother Earth. This poem formed the catalyst for Ratnam's choreography and was the first section to be created in the performance work. The choreography for the entire evening was pieced together later tying the various elements of independent ideas (Ratnam 2016, pers. communication). In a sense, this vignette functions independently as a complete piece. Ratnam's body follows the shifting arc of the poem itself in its non-linear, unbounded and rhythmic lyricism.

Ratnam kneels down on the floor. She draws her hands close to her face and traces her fingers in a circular motion around the floor returning back to the centre. She repeats this motion and pours her hands over her head. She then extends the right arm outward as if in service as she lifts her body to stay seated on her knees, with the left arm cupped around the elbow. She draws the shoulder of the right arm inward in a jerking motion. She explores the possibilities of movement of the right wrist, twisting it by contact with the assistance of the left hand that traces the length of the

right arm and moves back toward the elbow. The right hand is flipped upward and over, circulated, swayed in a response to the sensorium of the skeleton. She then slides her right leg straight toward the audience, while balancing herself on her left knee, and lets one arm swing to come in contact with the other to produce a clapping sound, each time allowing for the other arm to be propelled to movement only by sensory touch. The left arm is extended in the *Mushti Mudra*, before it is opened up and the right arm swings backward in a circular loop to slowly come meet the cusp of the now unfolded left hand. Ratnam crosses the fingers of both her hands and draws them toward her chest. She then extends the left arm and right arm outward in diagonally opposite directions with the palms turned upward. Tagore's epic poem *Prithibi* begins with a salutation to the Mother Earth before there is a darkening of the verse. The choreography echoes this arc and begins with the abstract movement described above that loosely references the *Namaskaram* in Bharatanatyam where the dancer pays her homage to the Mother Earth for allowing the dancer permission to dance on her surface and providing her body with the energies obtained from contact with the ground. A presence of humility fills Ratnam's body in this opening in a way that moved me to tears when I saw it performed in 2012.

Ratnam then brings the arms back to the opening *Natyarambha* position of Bharatanatyam. She folds her extended right leg inward, and flexes the knee toward the audience as she would in a deep squat, whilst the left leg remains firmly in place. She hinges her body forward, along with her arms, resembling a receding tide. She opens this body up, now resembling a tide surging forward, and recedes back again with a repetition of the previous movement. She then interlocks both her wrists above her forehead with the hands extended in *Pathaka Mudra* and forcefully unlocks them in opposite directions like striking a blow, or two. She now extends both arms in the *Tripathaka Mudra* in free-flowing directions and the pace of her actions pack some speed. It is the first time her gaze becomes apparent to the spectator as she slowly propels her right foot to the right side, inching

her body toward the body of audience. With more than a side profile to go by, the entirety of her gestures are now in full view. She delicately tips the fingers of both her hands around seemingly invisible objects and performs the neck movement *Attami*[22] characteristic of Bharatanatyam. The negative elements of Tagore's poem begin to appear as Ratnam delimits her body from form. The poem, written between the two world wars, was a literal representation of Tagore's tortured state of mind as he came to regret his initial praise of Mussolini which led to him being blacklisted by friends and contemporaries. Tagore came to understand the mass destruction caused by Mussolini and was horrified by the ensuing war. The choreography hints at this disturbed state of being in its directionless, fast-paced and violent movements.

As Ratnam's right foot is extended toward one end of the stage, she jolts her body to follow the incline of her left arm now extended in the *Anjali Mudra* toward the top left diagonal corner. From this diagonal, her fingers flex to capture the flow of water in continuous streams. Her entire body now collapses to the floor and she places her right ear to the ground as if to listen to the earth's micro-reverberations. Tagore's poem on the deceptiveness of Mother Earth is brought to life here as Ratnam seems to question the Earth for the violence, terror and disaster unleashed on her people. Seated with both legs to one side, she holds both arms toward either ear with the *Chathuram Mudra-s* and slowly rotates the upper body. She now springs up on her knees and repeats the motion of interlocking her wrists above her forehead, followed by simultaneous forceful strikes in the space around her. She then extends both her arms outward toward the sky, and drives her left shin off the ground and into a front lunge. Her right arm holds a *Mushti Mudra* above in front of her forehead and her left arm holds a *Pathaka Mudra* facing the audience in front of her chest. She stands up and taps her left foot in a semi-circular motion with the right toes counter-tapping the rhythmic re-

[22] A neck movement where the dancer isolates the neck muscle and moves it from side to side.

sponse. Her body gives the impression of being imprisoned by her senses as the choreography continues to offer images of Ratnam in combat. The brutality of Ratnam's embodiment is palpable.

At one point of the choreography, she clutches, reaches and pulls in a diagonal strip lit by bright white light. Ratnam is in the white light and reaching toward a strip that leads to darkness. Referencing Tagore's dire search for his selfhood, Ratnam's movements echo a desperate attempt to grasp something, anything. At another point Ratnam outstretches one finger like leading a child into the world, accompanied by a soundscape layering the beautiful fluid melody of the flute upon the contrasting, rhythmic chant of the Balinese *Kecak*. She introduces this sound to elucidate the conflict between innocence and lurking danger. Tagore's verse constructs Mother Earth as a deceptive figure who eats her own children, while Ratnam recreates this jagged experience through an embodiment of energies of "violence/stillness" and "equanimity/discord" that filter through her movement and activate the experiential senses of the spectator (Ratnam 2016, pers. communication). Ratnam is inspired by images such as the "female cat who destroys her own sickly kitten" and some species of the "female spider who devours her own children" in the sinister choreographic signature of this section.

From here, she surges to occupy the entire expanse of the stage in ceaseless movement. Ratnam is ostensibly reaching for a vocabulary that coalesces a Butoh meditative stillness, a Tai Chi/Qi Gong/Kalaripayattu/Yogic approach to the incorporation of breath and energy, a Kathakali/Mohiniattam inspired rotation of the torso, and Bharatanatyam poetic dimension. The entire sequence lasts about 20 minutes, and ends in a note of hysterics with Ratnam loosening her hair, performing martial movement and letting herself be caught in a state of frenzy. This entire frenetic choreography produces disturbatory effects to create the experience of destruction in the spectator through the performer's body, in the absence of reliance on *Abhinaya*, as Ratnam's face remains fully covered by hair. Finally, she falls to the ground and draws herself into a foetal position, collapsing from physi-

cal exhaustion perhaps? Or the struggle to intersubjectively interpret the words of the 'Bard of Bengal'? Or is she dancing herself literally into a handful of dust in the lack of hope for humanity? It is hard to say, as the image is left open-ended for interpretation, though her submission is complete. She slowly finds the energy to unfurl out of the foetal position and weightily draw herself toward the front of the stage, in an inch by inch crawl, with her right arm outstretched toward the body of audience. Ratnam leaves it to the viewer's imagination to co-author the final choreography, to determine whether or not another hand comes to lift her up or she is forever left hanging there. All three women come together as they slowly unfurl their right palms to offer a handful of (fake) gold dust to the earth, and revel in each other's spirit, mirroring the manner in which Tagore's words left conclusions open-ended with the voices of his actors and the bodies of his dancers. As Ratnam reflects in my interview with her, "Gold is auspicious, gold is an offering, gold is about acquiring, gold is about adorning and gold is even purity" (2016, pers. communication). The gold dust came together as an offering of Tagore's words to the audience, resonating with the final lines of his poem where he offers his words to "you", leaving the you open to personal interpretation whether it be a singular you to a God/Mother Earth or a collective you to humanity.

It seems appropriate to end this section with an excerpt from Yeats' introduction to Tagore's seminal work, *Gitanjali*, which first appeared in 1913: "These verses will not lie in little well-printed books upon ladies' tables, who turn the pages with indolent hands that they may sigh over a life without meaning, which is yet all they can know of life, or be carried by students at the university to be laid aside when the work of life begins…" (Yeats 2011, 8). Well, it is safe to say that the verses definitely did not just lie in little well-printed books upon Ratnam's table, but rather that they inspired a profoundly sensitive (syn)aesthetic response to a curated selection of Tagore's written word.

5.4 *Padme* (2014, 2016): Co-choreographing an Erotics of the Body

Padme is a collaborative, devised work-in-progress, choreographed by Kalpana Raghuraman and Anita Ratnam, where they worked with a group of young dancers trained in one or more forms of classical dance. The collaboration came about as part of a three-year project co-commissioned by the *Korzo* in The Hague, Netherlands and Ratnam's own *Arangham Dance Theatre*. Korzo is a dance production house that is committed to showcasing young talent in contemporary performance. Kalpana Raghuraman is a Netherlands-born Bharatanatyam dancer of Indian origin who has invested her energies into breaking open the vocabulary of Bharatanatyam and developing contemporary contexts for its performance and production. An earlier project conceptualised, choreographed, and created by Raghuraman inspired Ratnam's concept for *Padme* and in the paragraph that follows, I pay some attention to the performance work that set the stage for their collaboration.

Raghuraman, during her time as resident choreographer of Korzo, ideated a project titled *Door de ogen van mijn stad or Through the eyes of my city (2011).* As a choreographer, Raghuraman facilitated a rehearsal environment where 20 *Hindustani* dancers, from a variety of different movement styles, were stripped off their 'safety net' by subtracting traditional structures, narratives, music and paraphernalia in the studio in the Netherlands. Instead, they were encouraged to explore their own identity in a changing political environment and cosmopolitan landscape and express this identity through the language of their bodies. The disorienting line between personal identity and cultural identity is constantly shifting, and the dancers were encouraged to stage self-reflexive interpositionalities. Postcolonial cultural theorist Stuart Hall discusses this intersectionality:

> Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is wait-

> ing to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (1989, 70)

If Bharatanatyam and other neo-classical dance forms are a project of this 'recovery', then endeavours like *Door de ogen van mijn stad* and *Padme* are a project of continuous *play.* Following the success of the process and public performance of *Door de ogen van mijn stad,* the process was replicated in Singapore with local dancers. It was in the incubation phase of *Door de ogen van mijn stad* that Ratnam happened to be visiting Korzo, and urged Raghuraman to replicate the process within India on classically trained bodies after auditioning dancers across the length and breadth of India. Raghuraman agreed, and *Padme* was born as a sequel to *Door de ogen van mijn stad*. Raghuraman and Ratnam began working with the dancers in India in 2014, after a national call-out for which they received 40 responses from the country and "not a single one from Chennai", as Ratnam makes it a point to note in a public showcase of the work-in-progress at *Spaces*.[23] After a day of auditions held in Bangalore, nine dancers were initially selected, further reduced to seven dancers over the course of the making of the performance work. The final choreographic output of the process is to be premiered in Kolkota in the month of November, couched between Ratnam's solo performance work *Prism* and a contemporary dance performance by the platform inviting the dancers to showcase their work. Ratnam notes that she feels she has found her feet as a mentor through this facilitation and the incubation process with dancers, as she loves working with young people but does not think teaching Bharatanatyam is necessarily for her.

Interestingly, this is the only one of Ratnam's works that I discuss where she is not the solo dancer/ensemble performer on stage. The six female dancers that made the final cut for *Padme* in India were trained in Bharatanatyam and/or Odissi and the one male dancer was trained in

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[23] Spaces is an arts foundation that was set up in 2000 by the dancer/choreographer Chandralekha, the artist/designer Dashrath Patel and the photographer Sadanand Menon.

Kathakali and contemporary dance. Raghuraman gave the dancers the image of the lotus as a starting point, an image that pervades the philosophies of the Hindu and Buddhist schools of thought. Rooted in the earth, the lotus stems through the waters and floats to the light. The dancers were asked to mediate their own relationships with religion and spirituality through an introspection into their muscle memories (Meenakshi 2016). The single hand *hasta* of *Alapadma*, or the fully bloomed lotus, is also one of the most often used codified gestures in the classical repertoire of Bharatanatyam and Odissi. The *Biniyoga* (a Sanskrit sloka detailing the use of the *hasta*) for *Alapadma* captures its uses as a fully bloomed lotus, wood apple, circular movement, breast, yearning to the beloved, mirror, full moon, beautiful form, hair-knot, moon pavilion, village, great anger, water body, cart, type of bird, murmuring sound and praise. As pointed out in Chapter One, there is *Biniyoga* for each of the single and double-hand gestures in Bharatanatyam, and *Padme* works to de-contextualise these gestures. Ratnam says of the work in an interview with *The Hindu*: "Padme is not just a flower. It is what lies beneath the seemingly calm lotus pond. That is why there are no lyrics and it is based on mood music. You need to have a vibrant outlook but that need not translate into speed and frenzy. It's time we fill raucous urban spaces with some meaningful silence" (Ratnam, 2014).

Further, it is obvious that the posture and pliability of the performers are pushed to their limits, as opposed to Ratnam's own work, especially in recent years, where she opts for a nuanced poetic dimension instead through working with non-linear narrative, facial expressions and fragmented notions of the familiar in Bharatanatyam. She states that she has stopped thinking about Bharatanatyam as units of movement, and this is apparent in her own choreographies, yet Padme seems to do just that. Ratnam's choreographic signature intervenes relationally to the body of movement that the trained dancers bring to the rehearsal space. She also observes that the process enabled her to trial ideas on the bodies of the dancers that she could not trial on herself owing to age

and/or rehearsal direction (Ratnam 2016, pers. communication). Her signature in shapes—lines, angles, circles and other patterns not subject to restrictions; spaces—saturated, vacant, positive and negative; temporalities—before, of and after linear time can be read as embodied responses to Cixous's call:

> Women must write though their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reverse-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word "silence", the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word "impossible" and writes it as "the end". (Cixous 1976, 886)

The dancing female body has long been oppressed in Bharatanatyam by this construction of "the end" that came hand-in-hand with the 'Sanskritisation' of the dancing body within the performance format of the sanitised *Margam* in the constructed classicism of the 1930s in India. Invoking a metaphorical move of "breaking that famous thread", Ratnam and Raghuraman push the bodies of the dancers to the edge of the possible by exploring unfamiliar uses of time, space and shapes to the classically trained bodies (Cixous 1976, 886). The bodies in motion almost seem anarchist in comparison to the bodies in classical dance, troubling traditionally understood notions of fluidity and form, and constructing a bodily writing that meanders with the idea of the impossible.

In the public showcase of the work, the dancers are dressed in fitted beige dresses, loose red tunics and black t-shirts with black tights under their respective tops. Their hair is pulled back, they wear basic eye makeup and earrings are their only accessory. Even though the open-air performance space is square, the orientations of the choreography draw our attention to the circumference, cardinal directions and indeterminate points of the space, reminding one of the configurations of a compass rose. The first thought that informs my reading of this performance work is the obvious influence of Chandralekha's choreographic impetus from one of her most celebrated choreographies,

Angika (1985). Ratnam, upon her return to India, closely observed the work of Chandralekha, but chose not to join her ensemble as she did not subscribe to the politics associated with being a dancer for Chandralekha. She decided that she needed to find a more personal response to her art and life. It is without doubt that much of her earlier choreographies of the late 1990s, such as *Adhirohana* (1998), *Dust* (1998) and *Movements Monuments* (1998), bear echoes of Chandralkeha's approach to process. In *Padme*, the dancers are given various compositional assignments, including body-mind centring exercises; task-oriented prompts, such as deconstructing the *Thillana* from their classical repertoire; and the use of different stimuli and modes of self-expression, such as the cue of the symbolism of lotus as a departure point for structured improvisational choreography.

Four female dancers enter the performing space and seat themselves on the floor with their legs crossed, thumb and index finger tips joined together and the other three fingers stretched and without gap in *Chin Mudra* or *Gyan Mudra* position, with the wrists of both arms resting on the knees, elongated spine, shoulders rolled back and head erect with a neutral gaze outward. Attention is drawn to their breathing before the right arm makes a vertical anti-clockwise rotation assuming the *Shikara Mudra* and the left arm follows in inverse making a vertical clockwise rotation assuming the *Shikara Mudra* upturned. The gaze remains static. The left leg then seems to imitate the rotation of the right arm, unlocking itself from the cross-legged position and sliding its foot toward one side. This is followed by the left leg being drawn back inward to its earlier stance and the right leg, now free, mirroring the sliding movement of the left leg. This time the hand gestures with the *Shikara Mudras* erect and upturned are flipped upside down, drawing the gaze of the viewer to the *Solar Plexus Chakra* of the dancers, while the dancers' gaze follows the extremities of their toes. The *Solar Plexus Chakra*, the third *Chakra*, is situated between the navel and the solar plexus and is the nucleus of the self's identity and ego. There are seven fundamental *Chakras* in the body and movement practices such as Yoga, Kalaripayattu and dance and they work to activate these energy

centres. Having significance in both the physical and the spiritual planes, the *Solar Plexus Chakra* allows for the harnessing of personal power to veer inertia and torpor toward locomotion and movement. The right leg is then drawn back in through a gliding movement with the foot leading the semi-circular motion, bringing the body back to a cross-legged seated position. The *Shikara Mudras* are then curved in a semi-circular motion from the left like a sun that rises from the east and settles straight atop the crown of the head. The *Mudras* here change over to the double-handed *Kapotha Mudra* and unfold to reveal the Lotus or *Padma Mudra*. The right hand then extends the *Alapadma Mudra* in a curvature to the floor and springs back up to reveal a nearly-opened lotus, at which point the dancers extend both their legs outward weightlessly and throw their spine toward the floor. Whilst the legs are drawn back inward into the opening stance, the dancers fling their arms inward and outward with the fingers folded into the *Hamsasyo Mudra*, like they are performing the butterfly stroke in swimming out of water. This movement is replicated along the Y-axis too and the dancers charge the space around them with rotational kinetic energy. Here again, there is a return to the 'Burmese' seated position (named after temple sculptures of Buddha in Burma) of *Kundalini* Yoga. The dancers then extend the right arm straight in front of them in an opened *Alapadma hasta*, whilst the left arm is extended in an opened *Alapadma hasta* straight behind them. The arms revolve around the body to exchange positions. The arms are then folded backwards and with the palms placed against the floor, the dancers extend their spine and throw their head backward toward the sky, elongating the body which is now empowered by the connect with the floor of the knees and the palms. The right leg, whilst still seated, is then stretched outward and balanced on the heel of the foot, whilst the left leg remains drawn toward the pelvic region. The right arm is outstretched in the *Alapadma Mudra* and the dancers stare at it intently as they contract each finger toward the palm in slow-tempo. The dancers then sensuously touch their own shin, running their fingers from the knee toward the ankle of the outstretched leg. At this point, they repeat movements already performed and glide to face their back toward the body of audience.

All the movements possess a meditative quality and a clarity of intent, and each movement bleeds into the other to offer a gradual unfolding of the body. The intent defies interpretation as the focus on the muscles and joints draws the attention of the spectator to the range of motions from the infinitesimal to the monumental. The activation of the muscles by contraction, release and resistance builds heat around the bodies of the female dancers. The anatomical articulations of the dancing female bodies force the spectator to notice corresponding sensations initiated in their own kinetics. The meditative quality is born out of a focused attention on breath that seemingly connects the inner experience of the dancer so that the movements feel whole, not empty. The unpredictable nature of the moving bodies resists any search for meaning. The dancing female bodies reject the idea of the mastery of the body in classicism, yet in a certain sense, their bodies seem to engage their subjectivities more fully. *Padme* opens as a pathway for journeying into the semiotic, "by way of rhythm, mimesis, intertextuality, and linguistic play" (Cook 2004, 437).

In stark contrast, the sole male dancer enters the charged performance space and his aggressive/commanding presence takes up one half of it. The cool meditative energies of the female dancers are combatted by his fervent mobilising energies. Intersecting their slow focused concentration is his rapid and seemingly unthinking scattering of the mobile body. He leaps like a (Western) contemporary dancer, he swirls like a ballerina, he breaks a one-hand air baby like a b-boy and counter-balances the order the women have infused in the space with chaos. Much like the Indic traditions that reflect the belief in the equilibrium of creation and destruction, his energy is disseminated through the spaces his body cuts across. Slowly, he begins to interact conversationally with the female dancers. He varies the tempi in his movements, embodying the opening energies of the centred and expansive Kathakali stance. He continues to play with the capacities of the body even in his interactions, slipping between form, pace and balance in a manner that is rather tongue-in-cheek. His choreography, although technically sound, is relatively messy, and in parts it seems to

the spectator like he is making it up as he goes along. Yet, the fluidity of his form and the flow of his formlessness draws attention to the principles of classicism that are unfolding moment-by-moment in the bodies of the female dancers. His contrasts are not completely unconsidered either, evident in moments as when the female dancers occupy the wide-legged squat or *Araimandalam* of Mohiniattam or Kathakali with their heads bent forward and their arms extended in the *Anjali Mudra*, and he opens up toward the sky with his arms outstretched, his chest extended and the balls of his feet lifting off the floor calling for his balance on his toes. These counterpoints offered moments of magic, and held promise for the premise of such choreography.

Even though there is a sequential ordering to the work, identifiable in segments, the illusion created is one of seamlessness, as if the choreography is one unending 30-minute loop of dancing. The dancers ebb and flow like a perennial river and the transitions are smooth, and counter some of their stark movements within phrases. The male dancer now takes his place amongst the body of audience by sitting with them. There is no hyper-stylisation in their exits and entrances. Two female dancers coolly call upon each other to take leave whilst the performance continues in the space, never stopping for a second, and two other female dancers slip in to assume position. In this sense, the performance work seems wholly inclusive, rather than elitist. The dance becomes a shared experience amongst the performers and the body of audience. The sequence that follows is the crowning moment of the choreography. The dance sequence with the four female dancers is given a rich musical texture layered with a range of movement vocabulary inspired by the *Nritta* elements of Odissi and Bharatanatyam. By dismantling and re-mantling movement phrases from these two neo-classical dance traditions, the performers sometimes reach virtuosic heights and at others a deconstructed minimalism. The precision of the rhythmic units showcases complexity in footwork that retains its influence from neo-classical *Nritta*, even in its postmodern turn of phrase. The symbiosis of the bodies moving in time/space matrices evidence a passionate politics of collaboration, rarely wit-

nessed in the largely solo performances of traditional Odissi and Bharatanatyam concerts. The cognisance of the dancers to the disparate elements of their dancing is the strength of this segment, as they are able to break open tightly bound classical concepts of strength, resistance, control, coordination, effort and release in and through the body. Dancer Keerthana Ravi speaks of being involved in the process:

> As classical practitioners, we often bind ourselves down to the dogmatic approach to movement and our limited perception of what dance ought to be! Padme has helped ease this conviction and, in a way, coerced me to be open to newness and embrace change, rather than be alarmed about it. The manner in which Kalpana gradually pushed us to realise our body and capacity was organic and enjoyable. Anita's energy, enthusiasm and attention to detail played an important role in the shaping of Padme. (Ravi, programme notes)

Padme's choreography subverts the notion that the narrative tenet of neo-classical dance is central and non-negotiable. Instead, it liberates the female dancer from the narrow roles carved out for them as *Nayikas*. The strategic positioning of this segment also seems to overthrow the idea that the *Nritta* element is only suitable for preparatory segments, rhythmic interludes or final outbursts, i.e. the way it is traditionally incorporated in the phallogocentric linearity of the *Margam*. Glimpses of images specific to the Indian imaginary—rowing a boat, playing catch with a ball, aerating a pour-over coffee—allow for the poetics of everyday experience to be embodied within the dance. Further, the assemblage of footwork, hand gestures, neck movements, spinal articulations and androgynous energy infuse the mood of the compass rose with a *Rasa* that is body-based. It might have enhanced the experiment to draw the dancers out of their comfort zone when it comes to *Drishti Bheda* or eye movements. The impression was that there was an attempt to create a kind of asymmetry with the gaze, but one that was not fully realised in the iteration of the choreography I viewed. I make the assumption that this is one of the harder things to alter on the classically trained body, as it is so ingrained for the dancer's gaze to follow the hand, and is a difficult aspect to reverse as it is

trained through a dependent and additive quality. So, the dancer's line of sight unwittingly follows the hand, and the reversal of this trained gaze will need to be rehearsed to cause ruptures. However, the dancers effectively challenge the conventional viewing paradigm through the gaze, evident in moments when some dancers move smoothly into a seated position within the performance space, and watch the other dancers perform a series of steps. The 'to-be-looked-at-ness' of the female dancer is thus disrupted as she participates in a mode of viewing that is intersubjective, situating her self in the experiential subjecthood of the dancers in motion. This rupturing of the conventional viewing paradigm is further toyed with in the section that follows.

Three female dancers now crowd around two other female dancers, centring them in a triangulated formation where they stare at each other intently. The female dancers on the vertices of the triangle continue to perform dynamic physical movement. At the apex of the activated triangle, akin to where the heart is in the mystic triangular plane of the body, one female Odissi dancer and one female Bharatanatyam dancer perform what appears to be a contact improvisation sequence. Weight-exchange, counter-balance and alignment are some of the starting points of investigation in this sequence, where homogeneous and purified notions of the spiritual as romantic are erased and the *devadasi'*s sensuality and passion are infused in the dance instead, albeit as an expression of, amongst and between female sexualities (Refer Figure 8). The interstices of silence in a stringed jazz and percussive staccato musical score heighten the sensuousness of this homoerotic moment. Simultaneously, another female Odissi dancer and the male contemporary/Kathakali dancer enter the space and execute a more flirtatious speedskater-like movement while they hold on to each other. This synergy harks back to Chandralekha's *Yantra* (1994) which in itself recollected traces of Balasaraswati's sensual *Sringara*, involving drawing upon strategies that propose the adherence to or challenging of binary sexed relations, music/movement interdependence, narrative frameworks and other such ideologies, concepts and syntaxes of movement from preceding neo-classical and

contemporary dance practices in India. Nevertheless, the choreography escapes the formalisation of 'bourgeois' art, and the breath, touch and space, or lack thereof, between the dancers seemingly stimulate the erogenous zones of the dancer's bodies.

The performance work is concerned with making a political statement through the intensely personal, and although it engages with theoretical concerns, it is careful not to intellectualise the dance. Seemingly risqué moments, like when the female Odissi dancer slides between the wide-legged squat of the female Bharatanatyam dancer, straight under her skirt, her gaze fixated upward, before she topples her to the floor vitalising female power, agency and desire, is a poignant moment in the choreography. The male dancer then joins in, and networks of sensuality that transgress moral and religious codes are suggested. Another duet exists, as an interstice between the seemingly final sequence of the work-in-progress. Here, the dancers' interactions exist without touch and a distance between them that seems magnified in comparison to the previous proximity of their physicalities and bodies. The final sequence, befittingly, is a melting point of movement practices that provoke articulations of the body through its intimacy with the self. All the dancers embody the condition of joy without exhibiting the expression of joy, as the lone dancer does of the lotus itself as the finale moment. Her limbs trace the line of intention of the stem of the flower that propels the lotus to life. She seems to follow impulses for movement guided by the image of this lotus seeking the light. She releases herself to gravity and engages the space around her, letting herself be led by the impulse to follow momentum. She breathes into movement and finally re-enters the symbolic from the semiotic in twisting the two *Alapadma Hastas* into full blossom vertically over her head. Silence ensues.

The re-examination of acceleration and deceleration, allowing the correspondence for rhythm to meaning, can be read as a direct application of the feminist *jouissance*. By not suppressing what Kristeva refers to as the semiotic chora, the choreography attempts to unsnarl the semiotic from the symbolic. The basis for the choreographic vision itself seems to be an indebtedness to the

very voices that it has silenced—the dancing female bodies of the practitioners past and present. While the critical responses to the performance work in the Indian press were far from analytic, with the only engagement being the lauding of the work as contemporary, it evidenced the inability of systems of signification to comprehend simultaneous strategies of visibility and subversion within a discharge of bodily drives. Kristeva probably twitched her lips in a smile somewhere up above!

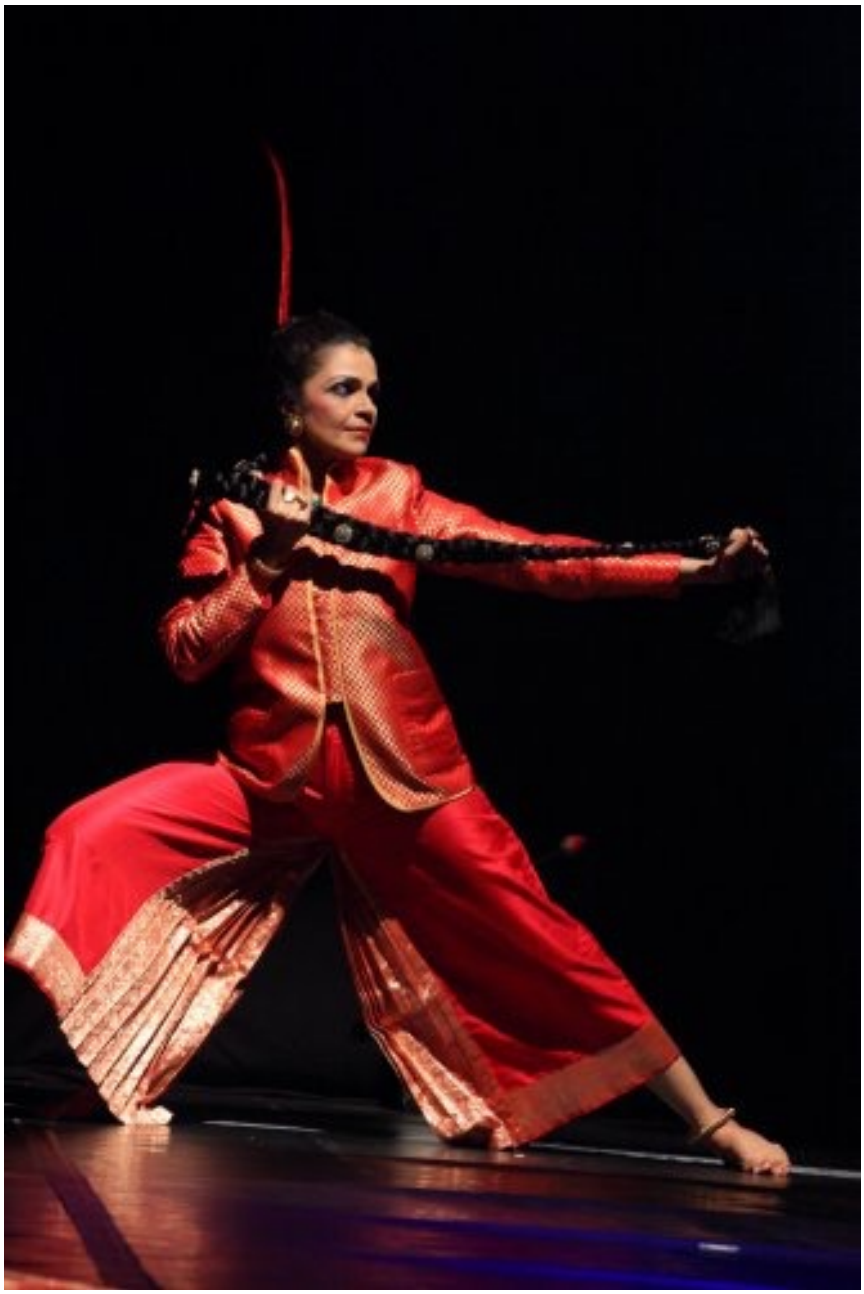

Figure 5. This photograph shows Anita Ratnam in *Ma3Ka…The Triad Supreme* (2009) using the Kuchipudi plait as a co-performer in interaction with her toro, spine, shoulders and arms to depict one of the *Ashtalakshmis*. Photographed by Chella (courtesy of Arangham Dance Theatre and Saigan Connection)

Figure 6. This photograph shows Anita Ratnam in *A Million SITA-s* (2010) donning the role of Manthara with an inverted lotus stalk acting as the walking stick. Photographed by Raja Ghosh (courtesy of Arangham Dance Theatre and Saigan Connection)

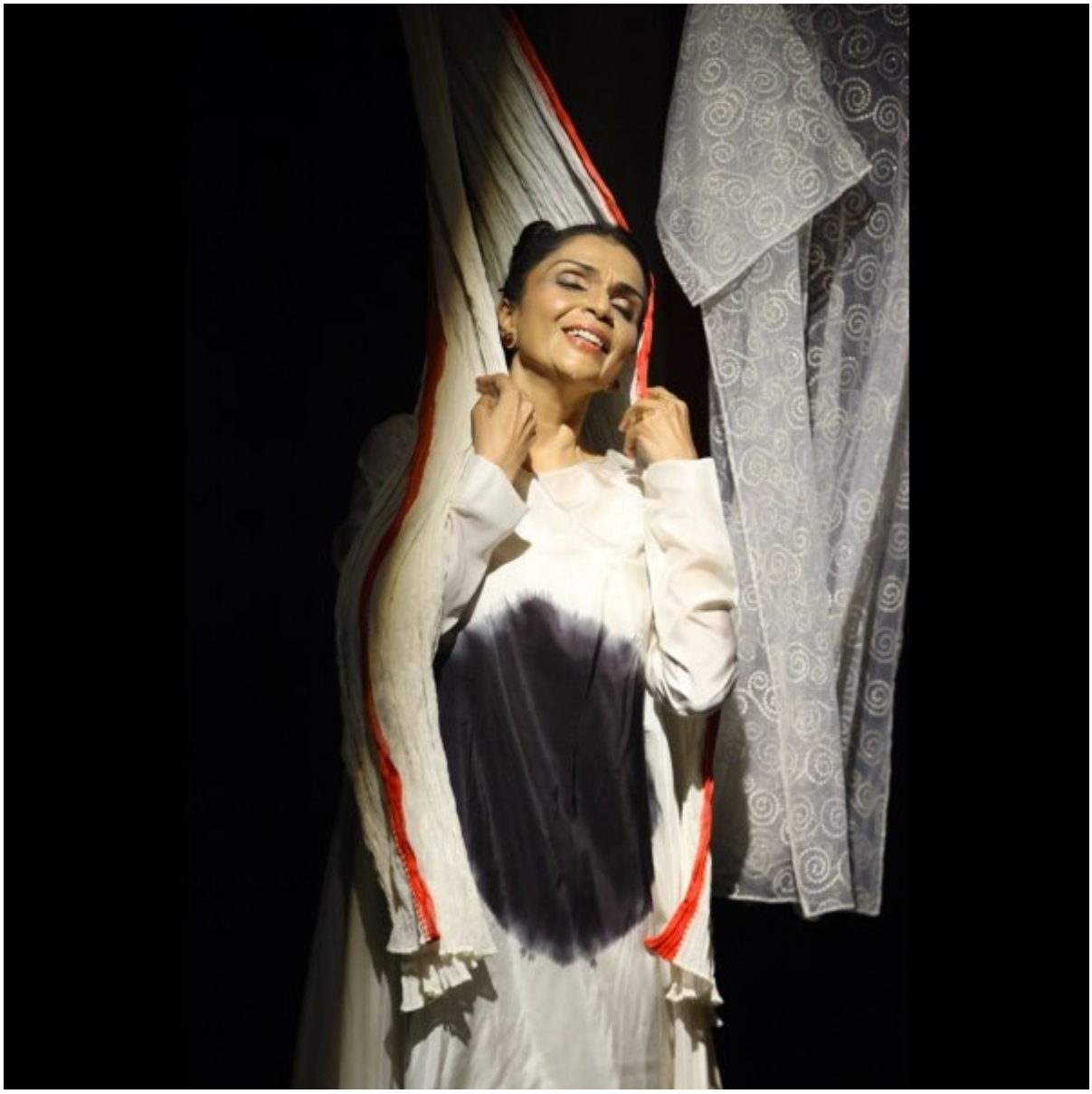

Figure 7. This photograph shows Anita Ratnam in *Avani - A Handful of Dust*... (2011) weaving the choreography around the set of the clothes hanging to dry to evoke moods of love soaked in shades of longing. Photographed by Sam Kumar (courtesy of Arangham Dance Theatre and Saigan Connection)

Figure 8. This photograph shows a female Odissi dancer and a female Bharatanatyam dancer performing a rehearsed contact improvisation duet in *Padme* (2014) referencing the *Devadasi*'s sensuality and passion, albeit with hints of homoeroticism. Photographed by Santosh Kumar of Sant's Photography (courtesy of Arangham Dance Theatre and Saigan Connection)

Chapter Six: Conclusions

Much has changed in the years since the December 2012 gang rape of *Nirbhaya*[24] in India that shook the world. Some progress has been made in India: the Justice Verma committee was appointed by the Supreme Court to create a comprehensive report on rape to effect real-time changes in the judicial system and the speedy introduction of new anti-rape laws; a bill was passed in 2013 on the basis of said report promising swift justice and protection for the victims; all six of Nirbhaya's attackers were tried in the court of law—one of them committed suicide, one of them was sentenced to a mere three months in a juvenile centre (owing to being a minor at the time of committing the crime) and four of them were handed the death penalty; a special women's police division was created to help women overcome instances of domestic violence; and legislation was passed to hold the police force accountable for the manner in which they record complaints of sexual assault. Furthermore, an abundance of support schemes and services available to victims has cropped up in the last few years. State-led initiatives, such as the one directed at public transportation employees in Delhi requiring them to undertake gender-sensitisation programs, and people-led initiatives, like women across the country taking self-defence lessons in order to take matters into their own hands, represent steps in the right direction. Yet, this seemingly promising picture only hints at a glimmer of hope for the future. Much remains to be changed.

First, there are many whom who the laws do not protect—minors, married women, sexually assaulted men and transgender people. Despite the passage of new laws and an increase in awareness through protest marches, media-generated campaigns and user-generated content, rape in India

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[24] Nirbhaya, translated literally as Braveheart, was the pseudonym given to the rape victim who succumbed to her injuries and died in the December 2012 gang rape in Delhi, India. On her third death anniversary, the family released the victim's name to the press as Jyoti Singh expressing that the victim should not be the one whose identity should be hidden, but it is the offenders who should be ashamed.

has seen an alarming rise each year since 2010, after seeing a relative evening-out of the graph in 2009. In Delhi alone, the city that the *New York Times* reported as the "rape capital of India", as many as 2,095 cases of rape were recorded in the period until December 2015 for the same year. The *Indian Express* wrote in a report on January 5th 2016: "Last year's statistics are the highest in 15 years". In the previous year, 2014, the *Thomson Reuters Foundation* reported that 90 percent of rapes in India were committed by someone known to the victim. Sadly, sociologists, social-workers and academics agree that the situation has become significantly worse, contrary to popular belief.

For their part, the arts community responded to Nirbhaya's rape in a variety of ways. Indian dramatist, performer and teacher, Maya Rao, devised a solo performance, *Walk*, that called upon women to walk the streets without fear and take "hold of the night to think, reflect, talk to each other" (2013). Montreal-based South African playwright Yael Farber invited Indian women to tell their stories of trauma and survival that she wove together in a testimonial theatre production entitled *Nirbhaya* that premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the following year, and the work has been touring the UK, India and the USA since. Indian visual artist Shilo Shiv Suleman formed the *Fearless Collective* to bring together artists, activists, photographers and filmmakers who adopt art as interventions to counter gender violence (incidentally one of her works of graffiti art dons the entrance wall of Sarabhai's Darpana) and to reverse the rhetoric of fear that began to surface in the aftermath of the heinous gang rape. Indian sand artist B. Hari Krishna created a multimedia work based on his sand art that delved into the emotions of women across the country in the wake of the gang rape incident, while stressing the importance of a change in society more than a change in law. Indian Kathak dancer/choreographer Aditi Mangaldas created a dance work called *Within* as a journey inward to revisit the brutalities that reside within a humanity capable of such heartless crime. Indian Bollywood actor, screenwriter and performance artist of French ethnicity Kalki Koechlin performed a monologue at the *India Today conclave* in 2014, addressing the prison of patriarchy that Indian women are subject to each day. Amateur experiments had a massive reach as well, for

example, the female Indian duo who call themselves *Bombaebs* angrily worded their frustrations in a youtube video titled #Rapagainstrape that went viral on the internet. Immediately after the 2012 gang rape, when I was in Chennai, Anita Ratnam referred to the overarching shock, rage and gloom that pulsated across the nation in the wake of the gang rape in her address to the audience on the first day of her four-day performance conclave EPIC WOMEN. Two years later, in 2014, Bishnupriya Dutt of Jawaharlal Nehru University delivered the keynote address titled "Performing Protests: Spaces of stratified resistance "at the *IFTR World Congress 2014* in Warwick, discussing some of these performances of protests in response to the December 2012 gang rape of Nirbhaya. As I write this conclusion, a docudrama by Deepa Mehta titled *Anatomy of Violence,* a fictionalised account of the incident focusing on the intersecting factors that breed perpetrators of violence in patriarchal societies, is scheduled to premiere at the *Toronto International Film Festival* in September 2016. There are speculations of the film being banned in India, following the ban on British filmmaker Leslee Udwin's documentary, *India's Daughter*, on the incident in 2015. This is particularly ironic, as India lifted its ban on pornography in 2016, yet Udwin's appeal to lift the ban on her film has been dismissed by the *Delhi High Court* (Udwin 2016).

Considering that rape and mutilation are a direct violation of the body and its sexual drives (most often the female body), why has there been only one major dance response to such an extreme violation? After all, dance is the only art form we have that is entirely body-based and totally dependent on the sense organs. Further, where were the body-based responses when society needed them the most? The chilling contrast of watching extreme objectification, virtuosic movement, esoteric heterosexual narratives and engendered ideas of beauty play out over and over again on the bodies of female Bharatanatyam dancers in the prestigious *December music and dance season* (a month-long multi-site classical music and dance festival in Chennai, hosted by various platforms and considered one of the largest festivals in the world due to the number of performers) in 2012, running parallel to the widespread coverage of the gang rape of Nirbhaya, allowed artists to become

allies through their choreographies of complicity. The 'eye-rony' is not lost on the gaze of the emancipated spectator. On the classical stage, women's experiences were rendered invisible, women's subjectivities were blatantly denied, women's sexualities were painted monochrome, women's narratives were positioned within an overarching structure that prioritised the Name of the Father and women's bodies were intensely fetishised. Even in a space that is largely claimed as their own, the classical Indian performance stage, women still have no power or agency in their own representation. What chance did they ever stand in the world outside those doors?

The Justice Verma committee consisted of a three-member commission headed by Justice J.S Verma, former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Justice Leila Seth, former Judge of the High Court, and Gopal Subramanium, former Solicitor General of India. The committee was appointed to provide recommendations in an urgent manner so as to enable legal reform in the following session of the parliament. The report was compiled in 30 days, after consultation with survivors, victims and their families and acquaintances, academics, women's social action groups, law graduates and members of the public who responded to the public notice by the committee inviting suggestions. The report is comprehensive and, remarkably, places the onus of gender bias on social frameworks, cultural systems and educational practices, construing the law as only a guide to good governance, not the site for a transformative politics. I will specifically discuss the suggestions of Chapter Fourteen of the report, dealing with educational reform in culture and society, and respond to the suggestions of the report through illuminating the feminist choreographies and aesthetic philosophies of Ratnam and Sarabhai as contributory projects to this reform. I once again reiterate the unorthodox nature of this conclusion, but setting their practice of embodied politics within a wider frame of discussion on the unfolding of extreme objectification, assault and violence on women's bodies in an India deeply entrenched in patriarchy is vital to the central arguments of my thesis.

The laws that were passed following the recommendations of the Justice Verma committee did contribute to some paradigmatic shifts in how we think about violence against women. New

crimes were added to the definition of violence against women, and these included stalking, eve-teasing (a South Asian euphemism for unwarranted comments and/or advances made by a male to a female), acid violence, disrobing and voyeurism. The report submitted on January 23rd 2013 defines voyeurism as: "Whoever watches a woman engaging in a private act in circumstances where she would usually have the expectation of not being observed either by the perpetrator, or by any other person at the behest of the perpetrator," while the punishments are set out as both a fine and a minimum of one year imprisonment and a maximum of three on the first offence, with subsequent offences require a fine and three years' imprisonment, which may extend to seven years (437).

> Explanation 1: 'Private act', in the context of this provision, is an act carried out in a place, which, in the circumstances, would reasonably be expected to provide privacy, and where the victim's genitals, buttocks or breasts are exposed or covered only in underwear; or the victim is using a lavatory, or the person is doing a sexual act that is not of a kind ordinarily done in public.
>
> Explanation 2: If the victim consented to capture of the images or other material, but not to their dissemination to third persons, such dissemination shall be considered an offence within this section. (2013, 437)

Whilst the report indicates a fairly broad application of what a "private act" means, and advocates strict penalties for voyeurism, it is the use of the term itself that I am interested in and the way voyeuristic practices of viewing the female body are strengthened in Indian classical dance repertoires. I will highlight the way this practice of voyeurism is dismantled in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, and make specific applications of their performance works to Chapter Fourteen of the report, which deals with educational reforms and avenues to change the dominant perspectives of women by men and the social condition of women in a patriarchal order. Interestingly, concepts such as voyeurism and desire from psychoanalytic theory have long had implications and applications in dance studies. As Adair observes, "Dance provides an ideal opportunity for the voyeur. Sitting in the dark of the auditorium, the spectator is offered the body endlessly dis-

played to gratify the desire of the looker. The woman is not as remote as she might appear to be on the screen. She is there in the flesh, constantly exposed." (1992, 79). In the dark of the proscenium arch, where the female Bharatanatyam dancer labours alone throughout the duration of the performance, she is typified as essential woman, thereby privileging the hegemony of the symbolic. Whilst men are only taught to be the consumers of such images, how will a spectatorship that feeds their fantasies not pour over into the 'real world'? If the invisible male in the auditorium is active/subject and the visible female dancer on the stage is passive/object, why would watching a woman engaging in a private act then seem too far-fetched? If classical dancers continuously affirm the symbolic and deny the semiotic, why will the gaze of the voyeur not seek the fulfilment of such visual pleasure? Albright weighs in on the subject: "Despite the fact that dance does not construct the female body in quite the same way as camera angles do, dance does questionably position 'woman': woman as a spectacle, as an object to be admired, as a vision of beauty, and as a site of pleasure." (1990, 34)

Ratnam and Sarabhai, as this study on their work has indicated, figure their own method of feminist praxis as choreography to mediate, fragment, appropriate and ultimately re-vision Bharatanatyam and its other. Whilst the gaze theory has much to offer dance studies, it is of benefit not to get too caught up in the exclusivity of the rhetoric that does not allow the female choreographer or dancer a way of redemption, reclamation or resistance. Daly's rebuttal in the critique of the gaze on the work of Isadora Duncan is worth remembering:

> The male gaze theory forces the feminist dance scholar into a no-win situation that turns on exceedingly unproductive "succeed or fail" criterion. We expect the choreographer to topple a power structure that we have theorised as monolithic. The dancer or choreographer under consideration will always be condemned as a reinforcement of the patriarchal status quo, despite any transgressive behaviour, because, by definition that which is communicated arises from within the fabric of culture, that is to say, within patriarchy. (Daly 1992, 243)

Despite the construction of the *Nayika* in Bharatanatyam lending itself excessively to the workings of the male gaze, it would be unwitting not to consider Ratnam's and Sarabhai's repertoires that establish themselves in the borderland of Bharatanatyam, as ruptures of this "monolithic" gaze through conscious transgressions. By subverting the structures of patriarchal power that challenge the gender-based prejudice dyed-in-the-wool of classical dance, Ratnam and Sarabhai politicise the bodies on their stage (including their own) as a site for radical resistance to the systemic sexism of the 'sanitised' Bharatanatyam space. Both Ratnam and Sarabhai interrogate the language of Bharatanatyam itself, whilst finding alternative ways to rigorously engage the form. Their performance works have varied agendas and different manifestations, but both succeed in making a case for restoring race, class, nationality and gender as pressing concerns for consideration in the challenging of the status-quo. Ratnam, through her self-reflexive practice of Neo Bharatam, imbues a "feminist consciousness" in her body of work that she permeates with a "transnational modernity". Sarabhai, through her solo performance work and her directorship of the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, employs choreography as a crusade for social justice and proposes a transformative model of artivism. As she articulately exclaimed in her TED talk in 2009, "You have treated the arts as the cherry on the cake. It needs to be the yeast."

In Chapter Three, I have set out and expanded on the ten ways in which the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai, despite their differences, can be read through an alternate framework. As the conclusions of the Justice Verma committee suggest, artistic practices in India, (and, I argue, especially dance), offer great potential to initiate dialogue with the findings of the report by creating a gender-equitable space for practitioners and performers in India, pioneering self-organised responses, and setting in motion a dance form trapped in the relics of its religious imagination. Mrinalini Sarabhai's work *Memory is a ragged fragment of eternity* (1963) showed us this was possible as early as the 20th century, where legal reforms came about as a reaction to her artistic response to the practice of dowry deaths. Mallika follows in her mother's footsteps, and her choreo-

graphies in works such as *Colours of the Heart* (2003) offer a self-referential critique of the condition of women in the various spaces they occupy. The embodied nature of the resistance enables the dancing body to enact its own representation. Solanki, one of the principal dancers, observes that "the process was like going through therapy" (pers. communication, 2014). By choreographing culture-specific lived experiences as archetypal movements, the performance work is clearly cathartic for the dancers themselves, also shifting the conversation into a multi-sensorial one, where the oppressed women embody a commentary of unique yet universal experiences of othering.

Chapter Fourteen of the Justice Verma committee report dealt exclusively with education and reforming the existing perceptions of women by men. This section detailed twelve points of consideration under preventing stereotyping, fourteen points of consideration under recognising discrimination, nine points of consideration under building an alternate framework, one point of consideration under sex education, and three points of consideration under problems with the existing framework. Whilst addressing every one of these points is beyond the scope of this conclusion, I shall respond to a set of recommendations that relate to gender, sex and sexuality put forth by the report for review. The report's consistent insistence on the need for systematic change within the social systems in the country is useful in reading the interventions to the dance landscape in India in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. This helps to situate the work of Ratnam and Sarabhai within a wider discourse of gender discrimination in the legal, political, educational and cultural spaces in India. The report concludes the section with numerous recommendations for review and I list some of the recommendations below, followed by an unpacking of the manner in which the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai foreground the complex issues faced by Indian women in the brutal policing of their bodies.

> In view of human sexuality and relationships at its core, it is important that the attitudes of society and law must not stifle discussion of sexuality and sexual behaviour.

> On the contrary, it is important that sexual and social identities of women must be correctly understood as equal in character. (2013, 404)

Whilst this recommendation is rather lofty and does not elaborate the specifics of what "equal in character" might look like in India, I find it useful to consider how "equal in character" might be reflected in the feminist choreographies of Ratnam and Sarabhai. Bharatanatyam, as it stands today, has become a rite of passage for young girls across India and in the diaspora. Within the walls of these classrooms, archaic ideas of sexuality and sexual behaviour that construct feminine sexuality and sexual behaviour as chaste, docile, innocent, responsive and suppressed remain dangerous in the essentialism of feminine sexuality and sexual behaviour that is endorsed. By challenging these conventions in their own choreographies, Ratnam and Sarabhai, embody an erotics of the body in claiming their subjectivities and steeping their dance in a brew of awareness, desire, intuition, seduction and sensation. Apart from deliberately playing with the possibilities of feminine sexuality and sexual behaviour in their own work, Ratnam, through her facilitation of workshops with young people that lead to public performance, and Sarabhai, through her pedagogy and direction, help develop a healthy sexuality in young women and make an effort to liberate their bodies form prescriptive time/space movements afforded to them in their classical Bharatanatyam training.

> The challenge for sexuality education is to reach young people before they become sexually active, whether this is through choice, necessity, coercion or exploitation. Furthermore, some students, now or in the future, will be sexually active with members of their own sex. These are sensitive and challenging issues for those with responsibility for designing and delivering sexuality education, and the needs of those most vulnerable must be taken into particular consideration. (2013, 405)

Many Indian young people, particularly women, receive their first encounter with anything resembling sexuality education within the walls of the dance classrooms. Indeed, drawing from my own experience, female sexuality was the subject of conversation in discussing the narratives of classic

Varnams, Padams and *Javalis* that are central to Bharatanatyam repertoires. It is here that images such as a stolen kiss on the riverbanks between a female maiden and her male god, the female maiden questioning her male Lord on the nail marks on his chest upon his return the next morning or the female maiden dressed up and waiting by her window longing for her male lover to arrive remain abundant. The only narrative available to the female dancer is a heteronormative narrative within the folds of a dominant Hindu ideology that boxes this experience in the imagined union of the *Jeevathma* (mortal being) with the *Parmaathma* (immortal soul).

In the dances of Ratnam and Sarabhai, young Indian women are offered recuperation by an opportunity to undermine the authority of the male gaze and/or return an oppositional gaze. Here, women become active subjects and express desire, as in the case of Ratnam's Surpanakha in *A Million SITA-s* (2010) who approaches the object of her sexual fantasy in an attempt to gain pleasure; transgress boundaries, as in the case of Ratnam's Ahalya in *A Million SITA-s*, who consummates her desire with the object of her attraction outside her marriage; Sarabhai's self in *The Journey Inward: Devi Mahatmaya* (2001), where the she converses with the goddess who speaks of a self-actualisation as a woman's space too; and Sarabhai's lullaby in *Sita's daughters* (1990), where she encourages her baby girl to fall in love with whomever she chooses, should she choose to fall in love at all. The re-workings of narrative in the work of both women, rather than an abandonment of narrative in dance, are vital forces that fuel change in the cultural sphere. There are avenues to further push this construction of fantasies of sexual and gender roles in the work of both women. Chandralekha, through her recalling of the *Yoni Mudra* in hand gestures and corporeal energy in *Sharira* (2001), and the invoking of alternative female sexualities in *Yantra* (1994), attended to this need in a manner that performance texts in India, even today, shy away from.

> We are of the opinion that perceptions and social norms need to be revoked at and revamped…The use of theatrical resources and films in school workshops has proved to be extremely effective in gauging students' responses towards understand-

> ing of gender relations and we recommend use of audio-visual material to encourage respect and understand for all genders/sexes. (2013, 407)

This places an onus on the government to introduce models of education that are progressive, and include artistic engagement and output, to re-vision "perceptions and social norms". Initiatives like SPIC MACAY[25] do a commendable job of taking classical music and dance to schools, but the focus remains the promotion of culture and mysticism embodied in Indian heritage. These models need to include an artistic responsibility that contributes toward having an effect on students in positive ways. The report is clear that it places the "onus of social transformation on the society" (409).

As a recommendation, the report quotes American legal academic, Andrew E. Taslitz:

> Law is naturally conservative; it relies on precedent and background assumptions and seeks interpretations consistent with those assumptions. Legal change is, accordingly, generally incremental…. Because of that, the nature of legal training is likely to perpetuate historically dominant cultural tales that have previously penetrated the law and are a brake on rapid change in the master narrative. Patriarchal rape tales will not give up the ghost easily (409).

Historically dominant cultural narratives, as witnessed in the received versions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, are patriarchal. As history has taught us, the arts are usually the first place to challenge the status quo of the cultural fabric of a society. Our classical dances quite simply fail to do this. So concerned are they with the project of preservation that they become implicit partners in this perpetuation of the hero narrative. This is where the goddess trope, a strand in the work of Ratnam and Sarabhai, becomes a practice for the representation of female power, desire and agency. The goddess trope activates a range of different movement material in the choreographies of these

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[25] SPIC MACAY stands for the Society for Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth and is non-political, nationwide, voluntary movement founded by ex-IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) professor Dr. Kiran Seth in 1977. The aspects of Indian culture and heritage are passed on through curated programs of Indian classical music and dance, folk art forms, regional theatre modes, traditional paintings, crafts and Yoga in schools and colleges and are rendered by professional and upcoming artists within formal educational settings. For more information, visit: http://spicmacay.com/

women and reflects sexual difference in both form and content. Sarabhai addresses these patriarchal rape tales, quite literally, in her feminist choreographies *Sita's Daughters* (1990), *In Search of the Goddess* (2000) and *Colours of the Heart* (2010). In *In Search of the Goddess*, the cosmic goddess as creator is invoked only to haunt the plight of the particular woman in India. By emphasising the creative energies of the goddess, Sarabhai seduces the audience into her fold before constructing less romanticised conceptions of the goddess on stage. Draupadi, as the goddess who missed the mark after a lifetime of injustices, Savitri, as the goddess whose name is invoked erroneously in heinous wars against women's bodies, and Mahishasura Mardhini, as the go-to goddess, are the saving grace of symbolism in a patriarchal order. By negotiating ambivalent identities of the multiple goddesses, Sarabhai makes a clear statement on contemporary phenomena, such as rape and sati, emanating from historical master narratives heavily skewed by the patriarchal order.

Ratnam, too, inhabits her stage with goddesses, as witnessed in her feminist choreographies *Ma3Ka…the triad supreme* (2009), *A Million SITA-s* (2010) and *Avani - A handful of dust…* (2011), amongst others. In all these productions, the metaphysics of the goddess is embodied through choreographed energies, stillness and silence. This ideal of silence becomes an aesthetic signature in Ratnam's works as she remains committed to the power of negation. As Sontag noted, "the ultimate weapon in the artist's inconsistent war with his audience is to verge closer and closer to silence" (1969, 8). Manipulating time, inflated pauses, inaudible soundscapes and energised presence are strategies Ratnam regularly adopts in the other-worldly manifestations of her goddesses. By allowing her audiences to experience silence, Ratnam embodies a bleak, cold and stark response to the dominant cultural tales of the hegemonic order.

> Further for adult education we feel that community projects were made more effective when occurring alongside a broader engagement eg. through national government campaigns, which for example made use of celebrity figure of authority. (2013, 408)

Sarabhai has continuously used her status as celebrity to hybridise the arts in a manner that may not be immediately accepted if the project was to be embarked on by a classical dancer without that stamp of celebrity. She has unquestionably seen her position as a privilege from which to make a difference on the ground. Using her body and voice as a performer, she has appealed to large masses of the adult population to balance the asymmetry of power on multiple levels. In her TED talk, *Dance to change the world* (2009), she drew the attention of the power of the arts to induce social and political change. She extended this power of celebrity to run for office. It is also worth highlighting a feminist model of economics that Sarabhai has introduced as the Artistic Director of Darpana Academy of Performing Arts. As mentioned in Chapter Four, the professional wing of the academy is solely sustained by the earnings of Sarabhai and her ensemble on tour. With the axing of funding by corporates and private patrons, the institution survives on a cyclical distribution of income. Even more remarkably, *Cranti*, a division of Darpana that is actively involved with campaigning for the marginalised and taking legal action on their behalf, was also spearheaded by Sarabhai and continues to operate on funding obtained by the monetisation of her dance. Thus, in the production, packaging and circulation of her feminist choreographies in a capitalist economy, Sarabhai has found a feminist model of an economics of compassion through the renegotiation and redistribution of funds for the purpose of political activism on the field. Evidently, she walks the talk advocated in her feminist choreographies.

Similarly, Ratnam draws upon her status as celebrity through her online portal narthaki.com, which is perhaps the only widespread critical forum for practitioners of dance and performance art to engage in debate, discourse and discussion on Indian dance. On the platform, she writes a monthly column that dissects her own engagements with the realm of art, reflects on her process and practice and, albeit problematically, offers commentary on the performance works of Indian artists in the homeland and the global diaspora. Whilst her critical reviews of the choreographies of other artists

raises eyebrows, as she is an artist circulating her work in the same national and transnational spaces, it nonetheless remains one of the few platforms where money and influence do not dictate the responses to an artist's work. It also remains a space where a reviewer possesses the embodied knowledge and nuanced vocabulary to unpack the work in a context-sensitive manner.

> If self-autonomy is encouraged as a constitutional creed, indeed it is true for all psychologically liberating and emancipating experiences, we think that such an opportunity must be available for both men and women on equal terms. (2013, 210)

The gendered space of Bharatanatyam calls for a curbing of this self-autonomy, not just within the studio space, but as an extension afforded to the image of the Bharatanatyam dancer in a wider context. Personally, it is this split that I felt between the *Nayika* within the studio and the self-autonomous subject within the world outside, and the desire, the want, the need to make those worlds meet, that caused me to embark on this research journey. Many artists have reflected on these markers of identity, i.e. race, class, gender, sexual, social, ethnic and national, to dissect how they are choreographed by culture, and how they, in turn, choreograph culture, as reflected in the words and works of noteworthy artists like Chandralekha, Shobana Jeyasingh, Akram Khan, Mrinalini Sarabhai and Aditi Mangaldas. Ratnam and Sarabhai are significant additions to this list.

By inculcating the autobiographical I into the dance, they are able to create choreographies by themselves, for themselves and of themselves. Both women weave memories, feelings, images, motifs, intuitions, perceptions and sensations from the self into their choreography. They offer the body as a political site and the stage as a political space for the Indian woman to access her constitutional creed. In *Colours of the Heart* (2003), Sarabhai performs a solo to the lyrics "Ek Shehar Pukhartha Hai" about a city that is calling from the outside, whilst she remains in hiding, wondering how to set foot in daylight, for she knows she will be arrested. This auto-ethnographic critique was performed to members of the police force, many of whom received direct orders to arrest her, in the

aftermath of the case against her being dropped. She references the monumental difficulty in dancing to the very spectators she felt threatened by (2016, pers. communication). Her *Abhinaya* invokes inner torment, not in separation of the *Nayika* from the *Nayak* as it is referenced in Bharatanatyam, but in the struggle of a woman estranged from her society. She maintains a deeply grounded stance, scratches her face, touches the faces of her co-performers, falls to the floor in an attempt to push against resistance and pierces the audience with her silent scream. Her writings of the body give the audience a window into postures of pain and articulations of anger through which her struggle for safety and self-autonomy come through clearly.

In *Padme* (2014, 2016), Ratnam approaches choreography as a project of deconstruction and gives us glimpses of the shared and unique elements of the various constructed classical dance forms of the 1930s. By presenting the work-in-progress itself as a display of process, Ratnam explores the potentialities of the spine, the hips and the pelvic regions of the dancers in dialogue with open space, in synergy with other bodies and in contact with the floor. In doing so, the dancers bring physical experiences of their being into the embodied subjectivity in space, and discover the ability of their bodies to incite, excite and transform responses to stimuli. A keen self-awareness of the sensuality and sexuality of the dancing body begins to surface, as opposed to the spirituality alone of the body in Bharatanatyam. She also humanises her dancers by affording them the space to explore inner depths as opposed to purely reaching virtuosic heights. By democratising her choreographic process, she encourages her dancers to be active agents of choice within and beyond the walls of the studio.

The report also recommends that experiences should not be gendered, i.e. “a certain way of playing or relating cannot be considered as masculine or feminine, but merely as an experience” (2013, 384), and points out that power is experienced differently by individuals and individual forces operating in society, while also targeting remnants of entitlement found in the process of socialisation, and renouncing the notion of biological superiority claiming that “*this is*

simply sexism in practice" (2013, 286). Further, it condemns stereotyping on the basis of gender, speaks out against internal policing (the widespread practice of reinforcing gender binaries in society, especially prevalent in the dissemination of Bharatanatyam) and berates the "cult of masculinity" we live in. The report also explicitly states that "'Gender' (and the associated idea of 'masculinity' and 'femininity') is a social (not biological) construct" (2013, 390-91) and calls for the building of an alternate framework and inclusive pedagogy that draws upon training methods consistent with the international standards set out in the WHO report on *Partners In Life Skills Education*. The Justice Verma committee report is, by and large, a positive outcome for the achievement of gender equality in society; its findings must now be weaved in through the warp and weft of the tapestry of traditional dogma and bias. The borderland of Bharatanatyam remains a fertile territory in which to sow these seeds of change. Ratnam and Sarabhai show us how.

Refusing to be confined to the territories of a propaganda based on partition, the no-woman's land is reclaimed by Ratnam and Sarabhai as yielding ground for cultivating a crop of contemporary choreography. The denial of entry they face into the purely classical realm is mirrored by the hostility toward their work in the purely contemporary realm (that largely draws its inspiration from Western postmodernism). Yet this borderland allows them the freedom to draw inspiration from the integration of the semiotic and the symbolic that is afforded to their bodies in the space beyond Bharatanatyam.

The political stake of this project has been clearly evidenced in the flow of this thesis. My personal wish for artists is to continually push these parameters of possibility in Bharatanatyam and other Indian forms of classical, folk and contemporary performance. My personal wish for academics is to engage with this messy in-betweenness that produces rich bodily responses and reflections for research. Irigaray famously made the claim "And as Antigone has already told us, 'between her and him nothing can be said.'" (1985a, 211). Maybe, just maybe, Sita, through her daughters and her million avatars, found a way to say something between her and him by reversing the

power differential in the conversation. Hopefully, in her future figurations she will continue to find ways not just to speak to him, but also to em, per, sir, them, ver and zim.

Appendix A: Single Hand Gestures in Bharatanatyam

The 28 single-hand *hastas/mudras/*gestures in Bharatanatyam and a description of how they are formed with the fingers are listed below. The visual depictions of the mudras can be found at mudrasofindia.blogspot.com.au and may help the non-specialized reader to imagine the descriptions and analyses of the dances of Ratnam and Sarabhai through the course of the thesis:

1. *Pathaka*: All the fingers are held up straight and stretched out like a stop sign with no gap between them at all.
2. *Tripathaaka*: Same as Pathaka except for the ring finger which is bent forward
3. *Ardhapathaaka*: Same as Tripathaaka with the little finger bent forward in addition to the ring finger
4. *Kartarimukaha*: The little finger and ring finger are pressed against the thumb and the index finger and middle finger are stretched outward resembling a pair of scissors
5. *Mayurasyo*: The ring finger and the thumb come in contact whilst the other fingers remain stretched outward with no gap
6. *Ardhachandra*: Same as Pathaka, except the thumb is held straight and with gap from the other fingers
7. *Araala*: Same as Pathaka except for the index finger which is bent forward
8. *Shukantundakaha*: Same as Araala with the ring finger bent forward in addition to the index finger

9. *Mushti*: Closed fist position of the palm with the thumb placed either over the pressed fingers or inbetween them and the palm
10. *Shikhara*: A thumbs-up sign
11. *Kapitta*: Bending the index finger and pressing it over the thumb of the Shikhara
12. *Katakaamukaha*: The index finger, middle finger and thumb are in contact. The ring finger and little finger are raised at varying degrees of acute angles
13. *Suchi*: The middle finger, ring finger and little finger is placed against the thumb. The index finger is held straight upward
14. *Chandrakalaa*: Same as Suchi but the thumb is released and held outstretched
15. *Padmakosha*: All the fingers are stretched and drawn closer together
16. *Sarpashirsha*: Same as Pathaka but the tips of the fingers are bent inward to form a hollowed palm
17. *Mrigashirsha*: The thumb and little finger are held out straight, and the three fingers in the middle are bent from the knuckle
18. *Simhamukha*: The middle finger and ring finger are pressed against the thumb whilst the other fingers are held out straight
19. *Kangula*: The ring finger is bent inward whilst the other fingers are stretched outward
20. *Alapadma*: All the fingers are outstretched and held at a distance from each other
21. *Chatura*: Same as Mrigashirsha but the thumb is held at the base of the index finger, middle finger and ring finger
22. *Brahmara*: Same as Katakaamukaha but the index finger is curled and placed in between the middle finger and thumb
23. *Hamsasyo*: The tips of the thumb and index finger touch each other whilst the other fingers are stretched outward, separated and held straight
24. *Hansapakshikaa*: Same as Mrigashirsha but the thumb remains slightly bent

25. *Sandamsha*: Closing the fingers together and then opening them out continuously
26. *Mukula*: All five fingers are brought together to touch each other at the tip
27. *Tamrachuda*: Same as Suchi but the index finger remains bent forward at an angle
28. *Trishula*: The thumb and little finger are folded to meet each other and the index finger, ring finger and middle finger are held straight, stretched outward and separated

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