

## Performance and Subversion in Kathak

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### Abstract

Kathak is considered a dance of the Northern region in India. Kathak started as a dance for upper caste Brahman men belonging to the caste called 'Brahman Kathak' which is also where the dance gets its name from. It draws from Hindu mythology and scripture and is said to explore the very complex ideology of spirituality. Kathak believes in the philosophy of *advaita* which means 'oneness' or whole. In the context of Kathak this implied that male Kathak dancers performed both the male and female acts of the dance. It is this argument which has enabled scholars to claim Kathak as an androgynous space. This kind of claims on performance and dance directs us towards unexplored aspects of sexuality and gender which Kathak as a dance tries to evade. Making these concerns the premise, I am exploring and examining the space that Kathak provides to women on and off stage. It is dealing with sexuality of the characters and performances where the woman is able to express male sexuality without any boundaries but while performing a female act she is constrained and remains a man's fantasy. The essay in the end discusses various possibilities of subversion to challenge and explore new spaces for the voices of women dancers.

Keywords: Kathak, Sexuality, Gender, Performance studies, Dance Theory, Subversion.

## Introduction

Everyone has heard that performing is simple but it is performing in front of an audience that causes your heart to beat faster, even when darkness submerges the audience into nothingness. The nervousness and anxiousness on stage is not simply to perform but to perform perfectly. A perfect performance requires the complete embodiment of characters because dance forms narrate stories. Each story has many characters, many versions but what remains common in them is the perception, construction and performance of gender (Butler, 1999). As a woman who learnt Kathak<sup>1</sup>, an Indian classical dance form, for a decade, I have imbibed gender not only from the social order of things but from the arrangement of societal values in the narrative of Kathak. This mutual contribution between Kathak and social structures has happened over hundreds of years and hence one can claim that they co-produce as well as anchor each other.

Kathak emerged in a postcolonial India that was trying to shape itself as a ‘modern nation state.’ This ‘modern nation state’ was providing patronage to various dance forms in India which were branded under the overarching institution of ‘Indian Classical Dances’. The state successfully promulgated official histories of all the dance forms including Kathak to the nation as a dance that was “pure” and “sacred” (Chakravorty, 2008). Kathak as a dance form is not only associated with movement, *bols*<sup>2</sup>, *taals*<sup>3</sup>, and tempo but has embedded itself in depicting social realities at multiple levels. It does this through the dancer’s body which it writes upon (Allegranti, 2011). This writing is not in terms of only techniques, like stated earlier, but uses a socio-cultural context. In this context Carter states, “the relationship between dance and its socio-historical context is complex, for dance does not simply ‘reflect’ the value systems, customs, and habits of

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<sup>1</sup> Kathak is a North Indian classical dance that traces its history to Ancient period. It belongs to the brand of other Indian classical dances which are defined by *Natyashastra*.

<sup>2</sup> *Bols* are syllables like: dha dha, dhin dha, dha dha, dhin dha (these bol belongs to a sequence called teen taal).

<sup>3</sup> *Taal* is a sequence which constitutes of *bols* put together in a rhythm -- which dancer uses while dancing on that particular series.

a society but actively constructs them. It produces as well as reproduces; speaks about society, and to it (Carter, 1990).” This pushes a complex relationship between the dancer’s body and society which puts the performer in an ‘in-between space’. The notion of in-between spaces is used to problematize binary oppositions so that the body can exist in ambivalence rather than occupying one position or the other (Briginshaw, 2001), which makes subversion possible. Here, the dancer is told to move beyond societal obligations by transcending the materiality of everyday life. At the same time she<sup>4</sup> is asked to follow and embody social realities to connect to the audience and her inner self to achieve transcendence, as Kathak believes in the ideology of *ananda*<sup>5</sup>. This culminates in the performer embodying the everyday reality and experiences as a mode of community. This socio-cultural writing on a dancer’s body produces many aspects of what lies within and beyond the society, and one of them is gender.

Kathak as a dance form produces gender, gender hierarchies and makes gender operational in multiple ways. One of the ways it has done this is through its association with a sacred text called *Natya Shastra*<sup>6</sup> which elucidates norms on performance by a male author who defines the role and function of women vis-a-vis men. Secondly, it does so by confining the dissemination and learning of Kathak in the tradition of *guru-shishya parampara*<sup>7</sup> which provided space for *gharanas*<sup>8</sup> to evolve. Gharana system has restricted women to occupy positions as authors and *gurus*, which in turn has devoid them of position that defines the narrative of Kathak and has left them at the

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<sup>4</sup> The paper uses the pronoun as she because the semiological order is always around the father which is signified as a he/him. To inverse this order, the paper is using she/her.

<sup>5</sup> *Ananda* is an ideology that believes in reaching in a level in your mind where you transcend material life and move towards a spiritual life.

<sup>6</sup> *Natya Shashtra* is considered a Hindu sacred text which elucidates the norms of every ‘Indian Classical Dance’ and how it needs to be performed. Thus, it guides the dance in various aspects of the dance by describing each component in detail.

<sup>7</sup> *Guru-Shishya Parampara* is an old tradition where a student unquestioningly surrenders her/himself – mentally, physically and socially, conditionally to the teacher to learn the art form perfectly.

<sup>8</sup> *Gharanas* are various thought schools within Kathak which mark different styles of performing. These schools are named after the city where they evolved, like Lucknow, Jaipur, Banaras and Raigarh.

bottom of the power hierarchy. This is because *gurus* are the owner and creator of the dance whereas women are just merely looked upon as a medium to perform their authorship – this position provides women with no power and control over entering the institutionalized space of Kathak. Thirdly, the historiography and content of Kathak has been derived from Hindu mythology (a work of men that has oppressed women for centuries) (Chakravorty, 2008) which has resulted in making the performance and learning space of Kathak extremely gendered since the embodiment of characters are ‘modeled’ after so-called righteous men of Hindu society. This goes on to suppress women, making their visibility a mere existence instead of an agential subject. While these are the different ways I have theoretically and experientially elaborated on the patriarchal nature of Kathak, as a dancer the closest experience of having felt gender play out in Kathak has been through stories. This is not to say that the pure dance sequences like *Tirana* are not gendered but they surface the hierarchy in a more subtle manner. As Desmond states, “Movement serves as a marker for the production of gender, racial, ethnic, class and national identities. It can also be read as a signal of sexual identity, age.... (Desmond, 1998).” However, I focus on the episodes performed through Kathak. This is because it is here that most dancers perform gender and it is the same location where many scholars make their claims for this dance form to be having liberating power.

These episodes are composed of the *abhinaya*<sup>9</sup> aspect of the dance which is drawn from the Hindu mythological narratives. They provide the dancer an opportunity to play the roles of both<sup>10</sup> male as well as female characters, even though Kathak is popularly known for being performed as a solo form. But the primary question that surfaces here is: does this mean that we transcend gender because the body gets to perform ‘both’ the genders? This raises another

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<sup>9</sup> *Abhinaya* means expression. *Abhinaya* sequence in Kathak is part of sequence which engages in performing expression with the dance movement. The most popular form of *abhinaya* is *thumri*.

<sup>10</sup> This is because the patriarchal order of the society functions in binaries and has recognized only two genders.

pertinent question regarding other genders. Does the space of performance become gender neutral because both the binaries of gender are performed by one performer? Purnima Shah, a dance scholar, argues that Kathak's ability to let the dancer transform gender roles through a performance makes the space androgynous and in turn is able to transcend gender (Shah, 1998). Her claim to the phenomenon of transcending gender is premised on the idea of 'oneness' or non-dualism, also known as *advaita*, which is performed through the *abhinaya* aspect of the dance. According to her this provides an opportunity for belonging to a gender neutral experience because Kathak provides dancers with the space to use cultural symbolisms to achieve 'oneness' or *advaita* of her mind and body (Shah, 1998). In this argument, Shah fails to overlook the space of Kathak in its entirety and its performers' subjectivities and therefore claims it as an androgynous space. Studying spatiality in dance and performance through subjectivities, Valerie Briginshaw states that,

Space then, like subjectivity, is a construct, a human or social construct, and so it cannot be explored without reference to human subjects. Possibly the most immediate relationship of subjects to space is through their bodies since 'it is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived – and produced (Briginshaw, 2001).

Furthering Briginshaw's argument that space is a 'human social construct' it becomes apparent that so is a dancer's body. This is because the body exists in a society which provides it with meanings and social values which are represented through everyday activities. Hence when a gendered body performs in a space which is also produced by similar structures, performances invariably reflect the socio-cultural context which is inevitably patriarchal. Therefore, Shah's argument (as stated earlier) which is based on the performative aspect of the character and the dance form fails to look at the complex relationship between dancer's body, stage and the socio-

cultural 'realities'. She furthers her argument by explaining that as a dancer one has to change the behaviour and performative aspect to connote a different gender. She states,

Gender difference is expressed through the manipulation of body movements, expressions and gestures. For instance, broad shoulders and chest, uplifted face, straight spine, and a direct look in the eyes are some of the male physical characteristics; the female may be depicted with relaxed shoulders, slightly drawn inwards, thighs closed together, eyes lowered with a slightly bent head, and so on, as the case may be. Masculine and feminine qualities of movements may alternate according to the nature of the characters that is, refined, heroic and virtuous, or demonic (Shah, 1998).

Shah elucidates that gender distinction needs to be embodied while performing, she reinstates that the embodiment of both the genders makes the space androgynous and therefore transcends gender (Shah, 1998). The major flaw in this argument is that she completely disengages and negates the relationship between performance and culture. She assumes that a dancer's body is easily able to embody characters and as easily able to disembody it. She does not examine the culture in which the characters are embedded and re-embedded. In her argument, she pushes aside the fact that the dancer herself is rooted in culture which makes her experiences and engagements pre-embodied. This is to contend that when a performer performs, her body is not devoid of her multiple identities, experiences and values but these are embodied by her through everyday existence. Therefore, while one does get to perform both genders, one has to examine a dancer's experience of gender in terms of the socio-political culture she is situated in, her relationship with the texts she is performing and her experience of embodying characters. Does she experience a conflict while embodying genders or is she able to engage with them with as much ease and perfection as Shah claims?

I argue against the generalisations made by Shah by analysing the experience of Kathak dancers, including myself, who perform *abhinaya* episodes in Kathak. One of the most popular aspects of *abhinaya* is *Thumri*. I am engaging with *Thumri* as a specific genre because the dancers (whom I interviewed<sup>11</sup>) preferred performing *thumris* as they found it to be the essence of Kathak. This is because *thumri* demands *abhinaya* or expressions which require an outward flow of emotions like no other genre in Kathak does (Chakravorty, 2008). *Thumri* is a genre practiced by both Hindustani musicians and dancers. In the following section, I will discuss the context in which *Thumri* emerged, the components that form *Thumri* as a genre, its relevance in today's time and why women have formed certain associations and attachments with *Thumri*.

*Thumri* as a genre can be understood in two phases; one that was performed in Mughal<sup>12</sup> and colonial<sup>13</sup> times and the other that came to be performed in post independent India. The differences in both kinds of *thumris* emerged in regard to the content and was through the lyrics and music. This change and censorship has been beautifully captured in the documentary 'The Other Song' by Saba Dewan (Dewan, The Other Song 2009). The pre-independence genre of *thumris* were sexually explicit and placed woman as a speaking subject – with agency – whereas the post-independence *thumri* has been desexualised and sanskratized<sup>14</sup>. This process took place when nationalists took on the project to make dances and music in India classical. I am going to

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<sup>11</sup> I interviewed women Kathak dancers who have been trained in Kathak on authorial and performance aspects of Kathak. Most of these women have learnt Kathak as students, performers or teachers of the dance form, for at least five or more than five years with either female or male gurus.

<sup>12</sup> Mughal period was a phase in India's history following the sultanate period. The phase lasted from 15<sup>th</sup> century till early 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was ruled by emperors who followed Islam and spoke Persian and Urdu.

<sup>13</sup> Colonial period was a phase following Mughal period. It lasted from early 18<sup>th</sup> century till mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. British ruled in this phase and brought in the Western systems to India. There was complete submission of Indians to British rulers. The language that the British spoke were English.

<sup>14</sup> Sanskratization is a process, and a phenomenon formulated by M.N. Srinivasan, where the lower caste groups emulate the upper caste people through rituals and customs for an upward mobility as well disassociation with stigma associated with belonging to the lower caste.

explore- through an ethnography- the sanskratized *Thumri* because it is practiced in classical Kathak and has been performed by the dancers I interviewed.

### **Sanskartized *Thumri***

*Thumri*'s birth is associated with liberation. It was born out of the Bhakti cult as an erotic subject matter based on devotion (Bose, 1976). Mandrika Bose states, "the inspiration behind the evolution of *Thumri* was the cult of Vaishnavism particularly that of Krishna which portrayed divine love. In later years, the philosophies of Vaishnavism and Sufism were the guiding force in the evolution of both *Thumri* and Kathak (Bose, 1976)." *Thumri* as a genre emerged after *khayal*-a genre in music. *Khayal* is a rigorous musical genre that demands constant practice and guidance by the *Ustads* (professionally trained singers) without any space for improvisation (Banerjee, 1986). According to Projesh Banerjee, musicians started performing *thumri* to provide themselves with "breathing-space" and to get out of the 'shackling laws of *Khayal*' (Banerjee, 1986). Elaborating on the birth of *thumri*, Banerjee explains that "they [artists] craved for poetic sensuousness, and hence birth of *thumri*, a music in which lyrical expressions come into play, not confining the song to any one particular *Raga*<sup>15</sup> only. Then, in order to introduce added beauty to it, several *Ragas* were mixed in one tune (Banerjee, 1986)." Therefore, the cornerstone of *thumri* is expression or what Kathak calls *abhinaya*. *Thumri* was popularized in Lucknow *durbars* (Bose, 1976), the most popular one being that of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah's court in 1847-1856 (Manuel, 1986).

Banerjee elucidating about the content of *thumri* explains that this genre usually uses *Shringara Rasa*<sup>16</sup> to surface the sensuousness it is associated with but at times uses *Karuna Rasa*<sup>17</sup> as well. The

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<sup>15</sup> A raga uses a series of five or more [musical notes](#) upon which a [melody](#) is constructed.

<sup>16</sup> A Vaishnavite sect developed new *rasas* based on earthy emotions and reduced the primary eight emotions to five which surfaced the erotic love between Radha and Krishna (Massey, 1999). These five emotions were called *shringara rasa* and were characterized to be earthly, sensuous and transcendental (Chakravorty, 2008).



beauty of *thumri* lies in its, “ability to convey musically as many shades of meaning as the words can bear (Banerjee, 1986).” *Thumri* is also considered as an ‘effeminate type of music’ and provides a link between classical and light music (Perron, 2002). This is why *thumri* has been ostracised by Classicists because it deviates from rigid masculinity that the Hindustani music embeds itself in and women get associated with it because of the kind of frivolousness it is imagined with (Bose, 1976). Therefore, it has been recognised as a ‘semi classical’ genre and not classical (Manuel, 1986). Lalita Du Perron states, “the gendering of a genre is likely to reflect societal preconceptions and prejudices as to what constitutes masculinity and femininity, incorporating a hierarchical perspective (Perron, 2002).” Banerjee adding to the defense of *thumri* and criticizing classicists states that,

From the classical point of view it is decadence and regression, but if we look more closely into the verbal texture, it is an enrichment of music by fresh content which in terms of the common emotions of daily life may sometimes be described as ‘literary’, non-musical and impure, but which in the light of its apt musical garment still possess sufficient musical appeal for the unsophisticated many (Banerjee, 1986).”

*Thumri*’s essence lies in *Sringara Rasa* which speaks of love and romance located in Brij/Braj, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, where the saints composed these verses to describe the amours of Radha and Krishna and pranks of Krishna (Banerjee, 1986). This is the reason why most of the *thumris* are in *Brajbhasha*. *Thumris*, being an effeminate genre as claimed by Banerjee, uses all eight *Nayikas*<sup>18</sup> in its compositions. The emotions embedded in different *Nayikas* are expected to be

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<sup>17</sup> *Karuna rasa* describes the emotion of pity.

<sup>18</sup> *Ashta Nayikas* are 8 heroines whose situations are dependent on the lover. These are: *Swadhinpatika* (having her beloved in her grip), *Vasaksajja* (the maiden in a state of readiness to receive her beloved), *Virahotkanthita* (the maiden excited by separation), *Khandita* (the jealous and aggrieved maiden), *Kalahantarita* (the maiden who quarrels with her beloved and is then besieged by remorse), *Vipralabdha* (the disappointed maiden whose beloved fails to appear at the time of the tryst), *Proshitipatika* (the pensive maiden separated from her beloved)

played out by the dancer. *Nayikas* are not independent characters but beings that come into existence in accordance with their beloved. The most important aspect of *thumri*, while performing Radha and Krishna or a *Nayika* is its embodiment of the *bhav* or emotions which defines the core of *thumri*. The main motive of *thumri* singers and dancers is to provide grace, elegance and sensuousness to the performance. *Thumri* thus speaks of divine love expressed by the Kathak dancer through spectacular movements, gestures and rhythmic footwork (Bose, 1976). One of the major themes is that of Radha-Krishna. As mentioned earlier, though it engages with romance, it is devoid of crude eroticism and therefore, to appreciate a *thumri* one requires a “cultured” mind (Banerjee, 1986) (Chakravorty, 2008). Perron expresses discomfort with this kind of play between Radha-Krishna. While she agrees that there is no crude eroticism in these *thumris*, she views them as portraying sexual harassment because when Radha tries to refute Krishna he forcefully clutches her, takes her clothes away and watches her bathe when she doesn't want him to. The ambiguity that people discuss in Radha's emotions towards Krishna is rejected by her and says that *thumris* are gendered and justify violence and harassment against women (Perron, 2002).

The ‘cultured’ mind who is trying to engage with the *thumri* doesn't need to only know the words that are being sung but needs to understand expressions through gestures of the dancers, like when she walks like a peacock, or plays the river through her eyes and her walk. Thus gestures are not universal but are pertaining to the parochial upper caste cultural construction from which Kathak borrows. The gestures or *mudras* are expressed through *bhava* by using hands, fingers, eyelids, eyebrows, and the head. Two of the most popular *thumris* that the past few generations associate are from two popular Bombay Hindi cinema blockbusters: *More Panghat pe Nandlal Ched Gayo re-* Krishna teased me lovingly when I had gone to the ghats<sup>19</sup> to fetch water, from the film

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and *Abhisarika* (the young maiden, blinded by love, goes in quest of the beloved or sends messages to him) (Narayan, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> The term ghat refers to a series of steps leading down to a body of water.

'*Mughal-e-Azam*' (Mughal-e-Azam, 1960) and the other one being *Kabe Ched Ched mohe* where Radha is asking Krishna why he keeps teasing her, from the film '*Devdas*' (Devdas, 2002). These films are important not because one can see the stylization of *thumri* outside the classical paradigm but because it has universalised it by taking it to the masses who view popular Hindi cinema (Bose, 1976).

*Thumri* can be performed both sitting as well as standing but the dancer sings the verses again to provide multiple meanings to the same lines. In the classicist paradigm, *thumri* is performed by making every gesture very sharp and clear by wielding one's body accordingly. There is a constant attempt at training dancers in *thumri* so they don't become vulgar or represent a phase that Kathak idealists are ashamed of. I remember my guruji telling me, "*bhav lao beta, bhav se dhayan aakarshit karo, sirf shareer ka upyog karne se yeh Kathak nahi ban jayega, par kuch aur hi kaha jayega*"- (Bring expressions in your dance my dear, attract your audience through it. If you will only use your body, then it is not Kathak but something else). Here the connotation was to desexualise the dance but to maintain the gracefulness of the genre. This is important because as Banerjee states, "As the grace in women is an outward sign of the inward harmony of the soul, dance is nothing but an outward expression of inward human feeling (Banerjee, 1986)." Using this grace and harmony the dancer is supposed to perform each gesture with such measurement that the audience is not distracted but excited to a point that they crave to see the dance again. While it is supposed to keep the audience in her control, the dancer is expected to become oblivious to her own identity and is expected to embody the performance. The act of making oneself enter oblivion is also perceived as experiencing the divine or achieving *ananda* or ecstasy. As a student and performer of Kathak, where I performed *thumri* for more than 6 years, I used to feel elated while performing Radha more than Krishna. But I haven't experienced the divine or achieved *ananda*. This might be because my training wasn't long enough or my guru and I lacked the kind of *guru-shishya* relationship that is required. The divinity that is meant to be achieved is not universal as many dancers have claimed that moving towards attaining *ananda* requires one to

be so perfect in techniques and embodiment that it becomes much more difficult. While some practice Kathak to get in touch with their inner self which helps in experiencing the divinity, others perform it for recreational purposes. In the coming section I will analyse how Kathak dancers, including myself, have experienced *thumri* and other story-telling aspects of Kathak-*gat bhava*. This foregrounds how gender can be experienced in such genres.

### ***Abhinaya, Thumri and Us***

*Thumris* are performed by most Kathak dancers who have learnt Kathak for at least four years in professional capacity. Before I draw upon the experiences of other Kathak dancers, I would like to engage and elucidate on my own experience of performing *thumri*. I started performing *thumri* in my sixth year of learning Kathak. I was around sixteen years old at the time. Before that I used to perform short pieces on Radha and Krishna's story on ghats and forests, which was more about technique rather than expressions. A classical *thumri* demanded expressions and bodily sensuousness which wasn't easy to bring about and it took long hours of practice to coordinate the expressions and emotions to reflect them in my eyes to my smile, to my breathing and to my gestures. The *thumri* I performed the most is;

*Kabe rokat dagar pyaare, Nandlal mero, Kabe rokat*

*Nith hi karat jaghda mose panghat nahi jane daet*

*Dekhe bhai naari more bhaiyaan kabe gabe re*

*Benati karun mein naahi wob maanat sunat naahi bhai*

*Cheen liyo gale ko haar, pangath nahi daet re*

*Binda dekh dheet langar barbas mori laj laet*

*Dungi Dunahi ab hi jayi Nand ke dwaar.*

*Kabe rokat....*

Why do you stop me from going to the river, my dear Nanda?

For no justifiable reason you fight to stop me from going to the river.

Don't you see the prying eyes of other women?

Why are you clutching my hand in front of them?

O He is deaf to my entreaties.

Snatches my necklace and will not return at request

Binda look at Him he is embarrassing me

If you don't stop teasing me I will go to your house and complain about you

Why do you stop me (Banerjee, 1986)

The essence of this *thumri*, rather most *thumris*, lies in the conversation between Radha and Krishna. Here Radha is requesting Krishna to stop teasing her in front of other women, with whom she is going to fetch water from the river. When I was being taught this *thumri* I was told that her request to Krishna is to stop teasing her in public. Rather, Radha wants Krishna's entire attention to be on her, while she goes about doing her daily chores. I was also told that Radha, in most of the *thumris*, asks Krishna to behave while he teases her, while she actually wants to be teased because she desires him. To draw this understanding in modern terms would be equivalent of the notion that 'when a girl says no she means yes', which has resulted in crimes against women. Therefore, I was asked perform anger with a smile, because Radha's anger is sign of her love for Krishna. This is why every time Radha addresses Krishna, it is followed by a term of endearment. Love surfaces when Radha 'requests' Krishna not to tease her. It is never an order.

The reason I enjoyed performing this *thumri* was mostly because of Radha. The *thumri* used to start with a *matka gat* or gait which portrays a woman carrying a clay pot on her head. I used to do the walk around the stage and then look around as if searching for Krishna. This was followed by a swift *palta* which transformed me into Krishna who again does a *gat* while playing his flute looking around. After taking a round of the stage, he stops and smiles, keeps the flute aside and walks towards Radha. Once a *palta* has defined both the characters one doesn't have to

perform *paltia* every time. Now Radha smiles and Krishna clutches her wrist when the lyrics of the *thumri* begin. She struggles and makes him let go of her and performs the *thumri* where she continues to smile at Krishna as he continues to be naughty and flirtatious.

A stark gendered behavior is portrayed between Radha and Krishna, where Krishna is shown as a carefree, fun and passionate man who has no inhibitions of society or the world whereas Radha is shown to be a shy, nervous girl who is cautious of judgments that others would make if they saw her with Krishna. As a woman, I always related, associated and familiarized myself with Radha. This was because I was always told to maintain ‘boundaries’, not to discuss my sexuality with others and was always asked to look and emulate women figures in stories, cinema and music. While watching cinema or theatre I often heard people around me say, “what an ideal daughter, you should always aspire to be like so and so,” or “what an altruistic wife, one always wants a wife like this.” I have grown up hearing the dedication, commitment, love and perseverance of characters like Sita, Radha, Draupadi, Gandhari and others in mythology and have always been asked “to be like them.”

Therefore, performing Radha seemed an easier task than Krishna whose naughtiness I had observed in men but never experienced as a woman. While one is taught to smile coyly and tease, it was never easy to perform Krishna. It never felt like I was transcending gender. Rather, I became even more conscious of my gender identity as I found a contradiction in my actual behavior: of a bounded woman and of a free soul. I found myself struggling to get my wrist free of a man’s clutch easier than trying to be flirtatious on stage. The characters were too starkly gendered for me to experience the embodiment of both characters without any hiccups. This is even more surprising because Krishna is considered an “effeminate” God compared to others, like Shiva and Bramha.

Another reason for this fissure in embodiment of characters might be because the speaking subject here is a male. In this scenario it is Krishna who is made the center of the episode as well as the narrative. Radha is only indispensable if Krishna exists otherwise her existence becomes

pointless. This is to show that Radha is the ‘other’ of Krishna. The ‘other’ can always be replaced and manipulated but the primary subject can’t be – a construction that patriarchy has been operating with from times immemorial. No performance act helped in either perfect embodiment of the characters or the transcendence of gender to achieve the claimed “*ananda*”. But this continuing performance did make me realise that gender in performance is embedded in everyday reality of performing our socially constructed and biologically assigned gender. Hence, when one performs Kathak one realizes that language of Kathak is entrapped in gendered notions. The question is how will one be able to escape gender? Clearly for me, Kathak is not about escaping gender and why should one aim at escaping gender? One will always be entrenched in their genders because society internalises the performance of gender at a biological, social, economic and cultural level to the extent that performing oppositional characters is to just strengthen the already existing hierarchy (Butler, 1999).

This is precisely the reason why it has become important to understand how the dancers have understood gender and sexuality in Kathak. Some of them have found performing the same gender as ‘natural’ like my own experience of performing Radha, whereas some have found performing the opposite gender easier because of the experiences they have had in their lives. But what is interesting is that no one argued that it was easy to perform both and transcend genders. Some did stress that if one is focusing on the spirituality aspect of Kathak then the emphasis on gender and its conscious performance is not as ostensible. To understand this phenomenon more elaborately, I will engage with the experience of the Kathak dancers I interviewed as part of this study, using ethnography. The following discussion is a dialogue between the current practitioners of Kathak and me who once performed Kathak and is now engaging with it at an academic level.

Payal Das<sup>20</sup>, one of my interviewees and a Kathak dancer, believes that women as a category were subsumed at a later stage in Kathak's history. This was because their need was perceived at a much later stage. She explained that the codification of Kathak in its present avatar has been developed by contributions of many phases of which some are memorialized and some erased. Out of these phases the one that has given women space is that of *thumri* which emerged with the idea of sensitivity and sensibility, because in a Mughal court dancing for or performing Hindu deities wasn't an option. When *thumris* were initially performed, they were taken up by men and male gurus to perform Krishna, who wasn't considered as masculine as Shiva. On the other hand, Radha was a feminine character and hence transformation wasn't at extremes. This is why fluidity at the time of transformation between characters of different genders seemed smooth. My explanation to this smooth transitioning of gender is that men were performing both the genders and already had access to expressing themselves without the boundaries that a woman experienced. Also, they were much more comfortable in occupying public spaces than a woman could ever be.

Das refuted my point by stating that,

When women started to perform Kathak they were also able to experience the fluidity and attain a certain masculinity which otherwise was completely denied to women. This made Kathak a fluid dance form. The popularity of *thumri* is because both the characters don't assume extreme masculinity; this helps women associate with *thumris* and claim to transcend gender.

Das noted that the importance of gender fluidity in Kathak and its perception differs from individual to individual. She started by stating that, "to experience and realise gender fluidity in Kathak is a long and difficult journey which is not easily attainable outside the dance space." She explains that the performance of Kathak on stage is a magical moment where every movement is

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<sup>20</sup> The names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their identity and maintain anonymity.



an art as well as a transformation. But this transformation becomes fluid, is unnoticeable and is an intrinsic part of the dance form. This is because Kathak, that follows the Vaishnavite tradition, works with aspects like *thumris* which are not conventionally masculine and are rather effeminate. For instance, Krishna has feminine traits which makes the transformation between Krishna to Radha to Gopis and back to Krishna fluid. Shivalini Agrawal, an interviewee and a Kathak dancer, claims a completely different gender experience. She didn't perceive Kathak as a fluid dance form. Rather she learnt feminine attributes from it which helped her in day to day activities and dismissed the masculine traits that were being taught. She explains that while society influences the dance, dance also contributes to the larger society by altering the dancer's life. Hence, according to Agrawal the dance isn't as gender fluid but is a space where resonance can be found with acts you perform in everyday life or characters you want to reflect in your personality like grace. Therefore, for her gender exists both inside and outside the dance form, the only difference being in Kathak you perform gender much more consciously than in actual life where its assumed to be 'natural.'

Yamini Patel, interviewee and a Kathak dancer, agrees that if you consciously think of your gender you will realise it is easier to perform one's own gender. But the dance form is not about thinking about gender but forgetting it. She states:

See I do this *abhinaya* piece where I show Krishna is pining for Radha rather *Braj*. He has come to Dwarka. I used to do it earlier and wanted to perform it again. I never found it difficult to perform but now that you mention it, maybe it is simpler to get into the skin of Radha and have more occasions to do it.

Contrary to Patel, Agrawal's explanation can be understood in the terms that dance constructs gender in accordance with society and hence has to be performed carefully enough to give an illusion of fluidity without disturbing the order or challenging patriarchy on which it is based. Zunaili Khan attributes another reason as to why it is important to perform different genders so fluidly. She explains that classical Kathak's ultimate aim is more than *ananda*, it is to attract and

sustain the audience through entertainment. When entertainment becomes paramount the entire art gets trapped into the category of bourgeois consumption. Here the appealing stereotypes are played out, like performing female and male characters in certain ways as described by Purnima Shah (Shah, 1998), so that the audience relates and can approve of the existence of Kathak which then demands its patronage from the State.

Another argument made by Das is that gender is a construction and when you realise that, you figure that your body can coexist and become fluid because the construction of gender makes it possible to embody both the genders. Agrawal observes this phenomenon to be completely dependent on the performer. She explains that, “great performers and guru’s like Birju Maharaj ji are extremely skilled and professional and because of their stature you don’t care to notice the gender they are performing. But when it comes to personal experience I any day would prefer being a Radha than a Krishna.”

Ratnika Manjarekar, drawing from both Das’s experience as well as Agrawal’s, states that there is a difference between the gender fluidity you perceive on stage when professionals dance and when it comes to performing it yourself. She, like Das, perceives the Radha and Krishna transition to be effeminate and states that,

I think when Krishna is portrayed there is a certain femininity to him, he is portrayed with this very attractive elegance as well as charm. But most importantly he possesses male elegance whereas Radha is mainly (I never got to play Radha), what I have observed, is played with innocence and femininity. The playfulness of both the characters is what is noticed by most people.

Manjarekar explains that while Radha and Krishna are placed on the same platform as protagonists, characters- such as the Gopis<sup>21</sup>- that provide Krishna with grandeur, are totally

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<sup>21</sup> Gopis are women of Vrindvan who Krishna is said to flirt and have sexual relationships with.

marginalized. The Gopi as a performer has got to perform only as a Gopi and the power relationship between Radha and Gopis are also gendered. In this context, Ratnika states,

Gopis are generally choreographed to be in awe of Krishna, in a very literal sense of worshipping. They are not given any sense of identity. Their identity is with Radha and Krishna. They are made into a homogenized group, at least that's the feeling I got. Playing a Gopi you never get noticed as an individual.

Manjarekar notes a new politics of representation where gender hierarchy is not just clear cut between men and women but exists between women. Here, Radha is an upper caste and class woman whose illicit sexual relationship with Krishna is justified, but Gopis are always seen as fragments of the story, instruments that Krishna uses to excite Radha. She explains that her experience of performing characters remained gendered because she got to perform mostly one gender; but she felt comfortable performing it.

I feel when you're performing a story you need to adapt most of the behaviour patterns, as narrated in the story. When I was Krishna and told I was supposed to relate in a certain way to Gopis – I realized I needed to embody that behaviour. But when you play the role of the Gopi you seem to get dissolved with the background. I have always felt that. This is because Radha and Krishna are the center of attention whereas Gopis become as invisible or visible as the background. Krishna has this elevated sense of pride. He is desired and worshipped. You feel noticed and visible. That's why when you play a Gopi it is a step down the ladder. Not to say Krishna is superior in any sense but you feel you are being blended with the background and as a performer you don't feel as important.

She furthers her argument by explaining that Kathak is predominantly occupied by women. Das and Manjarekar are embedded in different positions as women. While Das thinks that one can go

beyond gender because it is just a construction, Manjarekar is uncomfortable with the idea that gender can be molded so easily. She believes that the narrative of Kathak is so patriarchal – as it uses gendered mythologies and stories– that to transcend the gender hierarchy becomes difficult.

Changing the perspective of the argument, Das states that while a woman dancing is seen as a natural phenomenon, men have been stigmatised because they are assumed to be ‘gay.’ Ila Banerjee, an interviewee and a Kathak dancer, agrees with this and explains that the audience usually has a bias against seeing men perform unless they are figures like Birju Maharaj. Furthering her argument, she states that,

It is tougher for a man to portray the feminine side than for a woman to portray masculine side. I still feel that men have to go through a lot more social rigidity when they have to portray women roles. There are people who feel squeamish about watching men perform, they don't enjoy it.

This is a problematic understanding of sexuality and gender which most dance forms haven't been able to resolve. Patel agrees with Banerjee and questions ‘is the true aim of Kathak to be analysing gender transformation? The aim of a serious dancer is not to dance out of context and maintain the integrity of the dance. The question that one needs to ask here is what is the ‘true aim’? Who defines it and why is there one? The answers are hidden in the narratives and historiography of Kathak.

The important question that remains to be discussed and given a proper platform is whose subjectivity we are looking at while this transformation is occurring. Is it a male's attitude that the dancers attain or is it a woman's understanding of society that is depicted through the performance? This is a question that according to Das depends on many factors. For her what is important to be discussed in Kathak as a performance art is the philosophy of *advaita* – oneness, including that of gender which makes the stage androgynous. She gives the example of *qawwali*. She explains that *qawwali* is usually assumed to be performed by men in what is considered to be

a very feminine act of expressing love and passion for God. When the *qawwali* is performed by women it stitches the gender gap and blurs the gender difference for God who is then marked as a non-gendered entity being desired by a devotee and not a specific gender. Therefore, when one is engaging with any kind of performance, gender becomes superficial, a state of being and a given form, according to Das.

Zunaili Khan is in disagreement with Das, because she explains that spirituality is more of a belief than an experience and hence she doesn't believe that any ideology can lead to the achievement of divinity. For her every action is a performance and is about performativity. She states

Surely dance is uplifting at times but mostly it makes one really contemplative. It is the translated script of the heightened human emotional expression but still I don't know how to comment about the spiritual aspect of it. It is a huge word for me. I would rather say that performance is an imperative for me. I see the world in terms of performativity: every ritual, every action is performance and the world is performing a choreography. Nietzsche says, and I am paraphrasing, that God has to be a Dancer.

Agrawal, shifting a bit away from what Khan is claiming states that for her spirituality is something that one understands as one matures with the dance. While she was growing up, Agarwal perceived Kathak as simply a dance form. It was only later in life that she experienced it as something that could be used to escape the humdrumness of life. Yamini Patel claims that Kathak didn't emerge as a randomly performing movement but the idea was to reach the divine through spirituality. According to her, when one is performing on stage a moment arrives where everything is forgotten and you dance without consciousness of the surrounding. At this stage, one experiences joy and the presence of the body in an unworldly way. This is the attainment of *ananda* for Patel. She notes that this moment occurs at some point in the performance and the

experience doesn't stay throughout the performance. She adds that all classical dances have the spirituality aspect intrinsic to them but only the best of performers can achieve it.

Ila Banerjee discussing spirituality states that it depends which end of the spectrum one is standing; those who are not religious view it simply in terms of an art form and think of Kathak as a medium to escape everyday mundane life whereas those who believe in a higher power or religion tend to lean towards spirituality, like her.

Banerjee's goes on to claim that it is the dancer's choice to relate to the dance in terms of an art form or a medium to attain divinity. This then suggests that spirituality is not intrinsic to the performance of Kathak and not every dancer can or wants to attain that divinity. Therefore, claims made by dancers and scholars of Kathak that go beyond gender by the attainment of *ananda* through spirituality (Shah, 1998) are challenged. In this sense, Kathak for women who don't engage with spirituality, like Khan and me, is a dance form that derives itself from the patriarchal text of *Natya Shastra* which uses brahmanical stories which demand women and men to conduct themselves in a prescribed manner. These prescriptions mark the conduct and boundaries of women and men in everyday life and hence Kathak is about depicting these everyday stories through mythology which is rooted in patriarchy.

Therefore, the dancers speaking here are the ones who have experienced Kathak as performers as well as women who view performing as a gendered experience. They all agree that Kathak is rooted in patriarchy which produces gender and its performance. While some challenge the stereotypical performance of gender and question certain associations with the characters, others argue that Kathak isn't about gender performance but about trying to remain true to its aim: that of attaining *ananda*. As a dancer I agree with those who argued earlier that spirituality is a construct that not every dancer believes in. Hence the claim that Kathak can be used to transcend gender fails at multiple levels.

While it has been established that Kathak is a gendered form, what also emerged was that classical Kathak provides a space where one can change the embodiment within the same gender

role or look at Kathak's past and draw aspects of it which are not as patriarchal. In other words, Kathak provides a space for subversion where women can become a speaking subject.

### **Subverting History and Embodiment**

Kathak, as an art form, provides various possibilities of subversion. Subversion is a necessity because women in Kathak have never been made the speaking subject. The attempt is at visibilizing the embodiment of women or other characters. This helps in providing them with voice and agency that has been denied to them. The idea of subversion becomes particularly important because the idea of escaping gender in Kathak is unimaginable. There is a need to change the narrative of Kathak and make prominent women's voices. This attempt will then enable a change in authorship of Kathak and its texts.

Subversion can only happen when women will perform what they write which includes their experiences and beliefs. The space for performance of women is marked by patriarchy both in everyday life and on stage. Susan Melrose, discusses that the space provided to women in performing arts is very complicated because, "we are damned if we do act like women, damned if we don't. But how do we act like women if acting is indeed one aspect of patriarchal institution" (Melrose 1998). The agency to write, read, and view the performance has been controlled. Julia Kristeva, cited in Jeanie K. Fort, suggests that to break this practice we need to invert the semiotic order so that the woman becomes the semiotic which will then place her at the center of every understanding (Fort 1998). She claims that history has solidified women in the area of performance to the extent that every representation by women perpetuates the dominant ideology. Therefore, she argues that one needs to place emphasis on women as a site of subversion through language which should be the tool of subversion so that a woman can become the speaking subject.

Cixous and Irigaray, cited in Jeanie K. Fort, agree with Kristeva and Adshead-Lansdale's analysis of Lacan's theory that we acquire patriarchal values through language, but assert that it is

therefore possible to dismantle the patriarchy through language, specifically by encouraging and exploring women's language, a language rooted in the female body and female sexuality (Fort 1998).

Women performing Kathak are limited by dominant social order about how to perform. The boundaries are laid down before one even starts to perform. Moreover, drawing from the Hindu scriptures which have been authored by men has placed limits on every aspect of performativity which continues to exist as heteronormative values in the underbelly of Kathak. This can be seen in the case of a *thumri* where Krishna can express himself and his desires clearly but Radha's sexual desires are repressed and her conduct is defined and placed in social order.

The way to subvert this patriarchal order is to perform pieces that were performed by *tawaifs* and *baijis*<sup>22</sup>. We need to perform versions of the *thumri* that are sexually explicit and reflect woman as having agency. By doing this we are reclaiming "fallen" women within classical Kathak which then blurs the line between "petty nautch"<sup>23</sup> and golden "classical dance." We also need to give voices to those women characters who have been neglected in patriarchal authorship like Kali, Durga and Surpnakha. These women are not always characterized as good or bad and this is why one should perform women like them who have reflected power and agency. I will take this discussion further by discussing it with other dancers and how they view subversion in Kathak as character embodiment.

## Embodying Subversion

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<sup>22</sup> Dancers who belonged to lower rung of the society and performed Kathak were known as *tawaifs* who entertained men at the *kothas* (a space where *tawaifs* dance and sing) and then engaged in a sexual relationship with them (Chakravorty, 2008). The head of the kotha who managed the *tawaifs* were called *baijis*. *Baijis* are very accomplished in the art of dance and music.

<sup>23</sup> Nautch was a term coined by British in the colonial times. Nautch signified dance of lowly women which was a precursor to soliciting sex.



Talking to different women I realised that there is a need to perform characters that are silent yet strong; strong enough to speak of gender discrimination, violence and patriarchy and at the same time be graceful, powerful and elegant because as stated by Yamini Patel, “we as women are required to be elegant and sophisticated in our performances.”

The definition of grace and elegance I will work with doesn't fit within the mainstream understanding of women and behavior, but it would fit with characters like Surpanakha, who has been called ugly and unwomanly because she was a demon. Figures like Kali and Durga when performed seem drastic because Kathak narratives perform ‘docile’ and ‘domesticated’ women like Parvati, Draupadi, Yashoda, Radha and others. While I am not negating the power and contribution of these women, I am attempting to surface those characters that have been ostracised and silenced completely. Giving them voice and subjectivity is inverting the semiotics or symbolic order. Julia Kristeva, cited in Jeanie K. Fort, suggests that to break this practice of producing Symbolic order, one needs to invert the semiotics in place so that the woman becomes the semiotic and everything then places her at the centre of understanding (Fort 1998).

I am working with the character of Surpanakha (Ramayana<sup>24</sup>) who represents women in the system, who are also considered the ‘Lack’. Making her a speaking subject would not just be inverting the semiotics, but going beyond it. Surpanakha the demon who initially tries to seduce Rama (the *dharamic*<sup>25</sup> man) and Laxmana (the unconditional devotee of Rama) has been called many names including lusty, a sexually driven ‘fallen woman’, ogress, foul mouthed, hoarse voiced, one with coppery hair, amply endowed on the upper deck and capable of changing forms at will (Maddy, 2011). The stance taken on Surpanakha is rooted in the image of women either as a demonic man destroying woman or as a devotee of the *dharamic* man. In either case her construction is based on men and their perception of her (Dance, 2010). My subversion wants to

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<sup>24</sup> Ramayana is a Hindu text to remind upper caste women and men of their *dharama*–duties.

<sup>25</sup> A man who is committed and devoted to his duties as prescribed by sacred Hindu texts.

change this perception. My Kathak wants to show Surpanakha as a woman, who engages with pleasure in her beauty (without transforming into a conventional woman) and like every other woman, has the best and worst of men getting attracted to her. Being a demon, she possesses enough power to destroy or mutilate. This roots Surpanakha in womanhood and also it doesn't take away her identity as a demon. The multiple identities are to make her more powerful and influential rather than culminating in the double oppression of being a woman demon.

I would perform Surpanakha, in a similar way to how one imagines Radha. Radha is performed in a luxurious manner; where she is aware of her beauty, her behaviour which attracts Krishna and her impact on him. In a similar way I would perform a *gat* with long and wide steps after which I would show Surpanakha enjoying the wilderness by smelling flowers, bathing in the river and playing with other demons and creatures of the forest.

After that I will perform with a *palta*, Rama walking in the forest with fear in his eyes and looking around for any signal of threat. At this point he reaches the river and bends over to drink water. In the river he watches Surapanakha bathe. Her hair is long and lustrous, her big eyes are gleaming in the sun, her long fingers are soaping her body in elegant swipes, her breasts are heaving and her voluptuous body is wet and glimmering. Rama is instantly attracted by her and continues to stare at her. Surpanakha catches Rama's eye, smiles at him and invites him in the river. Rama is tempted but is worried that Laxmana might see him with Surpanakha. In frustration of not being able to act on his desires he calls her a lusty and 'fallen woman' for seducing a married man. Because he is in love with Surpanakha and is worried about being caught for cheating, he sends Laxmana to mutilate her. The idea behind Rama's decision is that if he can't have her nobody should find her as grand and beautiful.

Laxmana arrives at her hut and demands her to come out. Surpanakha inhibited, comes out and at this point they both fall in love with each other. Laxmana like Rama is not able to resist her beauty which is grand like no other woman he has met. Surpanakha invites Laxmana inside the

house and undresses herself. Laxmana despite being a loyal devotee of Rama succumbs to the desires of Surpanakha and his. The sexual relationship with Surpanakha makes Laxmana weak because he believes that Rama would kill him for disobeying whereas Surpanakha doesn't care either about Rama's *dharamic* principles or Laxmana's devotedness. But when Laxmana collapses out of fear and cries for Surpanakha to mutilate any part of her body so that he can go back to Rama and Sita, she fulfils Laxmana's request because she doesn't want him to get killed for providing her and himself pleasure. She cuts her nose and gives it to Laxmana and demands that neither he nor Rama should ever visit her again.

Therefore, in my Kathak, Surpanakha is not mutilated for being a demon woman but she gives her nose as a gift to a man who begs for his life. She fulfills her feminism by accepting her particularistic character of sensitivity (associated with femininity) while at the same time being strong enough to be inhibited in front of a God and his brother (not usually associate with femininity). Therefore, in this narrative Surpanakha lives on her terms. She is powerful and self integrated to the extent that she does grant them life, even though she is a demon. She is given agency, power and humbleness that demons are expected to be devoid of. While Surpanakha's character is remolded to present subversion in Kathak that challenges the gendered performance and authorship of it, there are characters in Hindu mythology which are very powerful and that's why they are not discussed and performed.

In Kathak, the performance of Radha, Draupadi and Yashoda becomes a day to day affair. Their stories are performed thousand times over but most of the stories depict them as vulnerable, threatened and dependent on their husbands or Gods like Rama for safety and security. Otherwise, women are depicted in feminine domesticated roles as mothers, wives, and sisters. But Kali is a change from all these characters. She is usually not associated with docile feminine roles but with darkness, death, and destruction (Smith, 2003). However, unlike Surpanakha, she is not born a demon. This is because her femininity is supposedly chaste and virtuous and

therefore she kills creatures who offend her femininity. Kali's character has schisms that lead to the exploration of her character that go beyond her being a virtuous feminine character. This is because she epitomizes feminine power which is fearsome and awesome.

She is fearsome because she can swallow the world into darkness, like her name which means darkness. Her power of reducing everything into nothingness creates fear in others but peace in her followers (Smith, 2003). It is this complex role Kali plays in mythology that inspires me to perform her. In Kathak, we perform Shiva's *tandav*<sup>26</sup> over and over again to show his anger which can destroy the world and this is precisely why we should perform the counterpart of Shiva to suggest that the world is not revolving because a man is holding it but also because a woman who is as powerful is not destroying it. While Kali is a feminine power that needs to be represented in Kathak, I will not call her a feminist symbol though she has been reclaimed by feminists.

The two examples stated above describe how Kathak can be performed differently and how it can challenge the gendered performance by not escaping but changing the authorship and giving voices to characters that have been ostracised or not performed because they threaten the patriarchal authorship. These are the only two examples I have explored here but there are many characters in mythology and scriptures who can be used to create alternative narratives and stories or can be given a voice to change the subjectivity and which more often than not overlaps. My attempt at providing subversion is personal and political whereas the dancers who engaged with me have agreed that it is important to explore spaces in Kathak if not necessarily in terms of subversion.

Payal Das who has performed Kali and Durga explains that subversion is intrinsically associated with subjectivity. For her to subvert is to change subjectivity but she doesn't see it to be

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<sup>26</sup> A form of dance within Kathak paradigm, Tandava expresses Shiva's anger and grandiosity.

important enough in Kathak because she feels that in Kathak you are able to embody all the characters. She doesn't link embodiment with subjectivity and explains that dancers can be graceful and bold, like transforming from playing Parvati to Shiva. While subversion is just not about techniques, she added that subversion needs to be understood in terms of how the audience perceives the subversion in performance. She explains that what is subversion for her might mean nothing to others. This was the reason that subversion is more often than not personal but political. People might refuse to recognize my subversion, but for me I negate the gendered space of Kathak through subversions. Ratnika Manjarekar on the contrary explains that because the scriptures, mythology and Kathak as a text itself is a creation of man, the space for subversion becomes limited, though the attempt at subversion does challenge the shackles of patriarchy. She states that,

The way scriptures can be interpreted and choreographed are limited. There is a bit of scope in exploring new space in Kathak but most of the times dancers are bound by terms and framework that has already been established through structure of narrative. Therefore, there is some space of subversion but not entirely as you don't have control over the preset tradition that besieges a dancer. You end up abiding by these structures which makes it the dance form it is. Otherwise what is Kathak?

She suggested that another way of subversion is displacing the importance we give to the *gurus* of Kathak.

First of all, women have to be seen as a more significant contributor to the tradition of Kathak. The audience understands Kathak through the performers' body and explanation of it... Thus performers should be given more importance. If you think of performer as a subject of study and give her a voice, then dance embodies her perspective and the authority of men as gurus and authors is negated. Hence, performer

interprets the tradition and gives it the perception. Therefore, there would be no Kathak without the performer.

Ila Banerjee is skeptical of subversion if performed in a drastic manner. She believes this because according to her if the entire story and characters are changed, the audience won't be able to relate to Kathak. Therefore, according to her one should use classical Kathak narratives within it in a subtle manner to appeal to the audience. She claims that Kathak does need subversion but it should not overthrow the classical value that Kathak has imbibed over the years. Yamini Patel, adding to the discussion states that she performs subversive characters in Kathak more for exploration and experimentation than subversion. But she explains that whatever the intention behind performing a certain character maybe, what is important is to design characters and give them a voice so that they speak a new language. She also explains that in Kathak experimentation depends on the embodiment factor. This is important because if a woman is playing a negative character but the embodiment isn't full, the power of the character will have no impact. Therefore, for Yamini Patel subversion needs to have full embodiment with a new language that speaks to the newer generation entering the space of Kathak.

While discussing experimentation in Kathak she claims that Radha can be experimented in so many ways. She can be shy, coy, angry, passionate, and lovable. She explains that when she performs Radha, she is a subversion to societal value because even after being married to someone else she meets Krishna and has an illicit sexual relationship with him. While I agree that depicting Radha as a sexualised woman is a subversion in the classical tradition, its performance is justified because Krishna is a God and goes beyond all the boundaries that is set for women. It is the same case with Meera bai who can be dancing naked for Krishna and won't be called a 'fallen woman' but if it was for anyone else she would have been ostracized and maybe killed because she would have dishonoured her family.

Agreeing with the idea that silent women characters in scriptures need to be given voices, Patel explains that everyone needs to be heard. In this context she gives the example of Mandodari-Ravana's wife and Urmila-Laxmana's wife. Mandodari is a powerful woman who has to live with a husband who is in love with Sita and might leave her or might lose him to Rama, who will provide him with Moksha. In either case, she loses her husband therefore depicting and giving her voice is a very powerful idea. In the case of Urmila, she is in a sense abandoned by Laxmana who wants to be a dutiful brother. Once he leaves for the forest with Rama, Urmila is left behind to spend 14 years of her life waiting for him. Therefore, making Urmila speak would be providing subjectivity to a character who is invisible and hence would challenge the larger semiotic order.

Semiotic order according to me can be challenged if Gopis are shown to be busy amongst themselves, playing, dancing, flirting and engaging in sexual relationships and hence discounting the presence of Krishna. It makes a statement suggesting that Krishna isn't inevitable. This homosexual description of an age old narrative also challenges the heteronormative patriarchal culture that Kathak is imbued in. Shivalini Agarwal, while suggesting that this might be difficult to perform, agreed that these kinds of contrasting and challenging pieces need to be performed. Zunaili Khan, adding to the argument states that,

For me if I perform Radha or Krishna, although I mostly try to avoid it, then it is a matter of how much I am able to relate the conjugal love to my own life experience which may or may not be there in the first place, that is why I feel *abhinaya* does not come very easily to me. *Raas leela*<sup>27</sup> is the celebration of love and if I do a new rendition of it I would represent the Gopis to be from the LGBT community.

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<sup>27</sup> Love and erotic sequence between Krishna and Radha

Kathak dancers, while differing on the notion of subversion did provide ways in which alternative spaces and characters for performance can be explored and performed. This suggests that every Kathak dancer experiences certain boundaries and hegemony which they either consciously or subconsciously want to break by providing space and voices to characters that either fall beyond the boundary or do not exist in the system. Therefore, every Kathak dancer has a classical space to show skills and every Kathak dancer needs a space to feel liberated and to go beyond the prescribed text which comes with exploration, experimentation and above all subversion.

This subversion is not only performed by dancers because they are controlled by institutions, *gharanas*<sup>28</sup>, gurus, historiography of Kathak and notion of good and evil. To elicit that the everyday performance of Kathak is gendered at different levels rather than succumbing to it, we, as women, need to wield alternative spaces, voices, characters and narratives to represent our bodies, experiences, and individuality which will make us speaking subjects representing our agency. This in the long will present the aim of politicizing a space that has escaped critiques in guise of transcending gender and being androgynous.

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<sup>28</sup> Different schools of thought within Kathak which are depended on locations in which they were born like Jaipur, Lucknow, Banaras and Raigarh.



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