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Bharata Natyam: A Dialogical Interrogation of Feminist Voices in Search of the Divine Dance

By
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She cannot forget her ideal, her history, and asks her reflection: Am I any different from my devadasi mother, forced to leave the precincts of the temple? Has history repeated itself? Has the pattern come full circle? Am I now like my devadasi mother, becoming essentially expendable, valueless? She pauses, but briefly. It is time for the next performance.
(Avanthi Meduri, "Bharata Natyam -- What Are You" 19)

Avanthi Meduri speaks from experience; she is a Bharata Natyam dancer and choreographer. She is also a soul-searching female scholar who raises significant questions regarding the place of Bharata Natyam as danced by a modern-day woman. The above quote represents a feminist investigation within a contemporary dance framework, yet the potency and persistence of such queries are timeless for any female dancer. When India's Bharata Natyam revival and reform movements gained momentum in the 1920s and 30s, dialectical tensions arose between the separate camps, their ideologies, and their activities; for the "perverted" dance of the devadasi was reconstructed as a nationalist emblem while the devadasi, herself, was legislatively barred from her religious profession. Interrogating this potent time period, many feminists have deconstructed the development of contemporary Bharata Natyam. They use material theory to point to the dancer's exploitation, commodification, and marginalization as the temple dance became secularized and the dancer became objectified, inscribed within patriarchal or Orientalist paradigms as a gendered, emblematic, or sociopolitical Other. These constrictions and inscriptions have also influenced modern choreographers as they tried to reclaim and empower the dance form by further reconstituting it, absorbing its "formal" technique and corporeal vocabulary into their own choreographic theory and dance compositions.

But, where does God fit into these arguments and strategies? Especially critical is an acknowledgement of both the devotional, spiritual journey which constitutes the art of Bharata Natyam and, more generally, the transcendental power of dance. This is where a divine tension

lies which can empower the dancing, female body. Significantly, when the dance is disconnected from its divine potential, it may sit as an inanimate object, ready for commodification and control. Further, when the dancing body is discussed separately from the spirit, it can be positioned as a material site of exploration and deconstruction by theorists. Yet, in Bharata Natyam, such concepts of dualism are nowhere to be found. Its dance journey is both religious sacrament and divine conduit, resulting in a realization of the oneness of self and the cosmos. In this same vein, the erotic/sexual (*shringara*) element of Bharata Natyam represents synthesis between opposites by which a new empowered entity can arise, exceeding each isolated binary unit. When genders maintain separate, fundamental essences, the energetic movement through multiple significations may result in a complex composition of wholeness. In this paper, I dialogically engage with feminists who have critically examined the material significations of Bharata Natyam in its contemporary configuration. I argue that aspects of their critiques fall short when they ignore the metaphysical power of the devotional dance. For a woman may progress through stages of Bharata Natyam; and in a sublime, performative moment -- a moment that has been achieved by "gendered" agency -- she may rise to the level of the superior being. In order to combine with Shiva, she meets him on the same plane.

According to Hindu belief, dance on earth would not have happened without the woman. As recounted in the *Natya Shastra* (100 BCE - 200 AD), Brahma, the Supreme One, created the fifth *Veda* (the scripture of drama) and presented it to Bharata who then composed the first drama and sought "the help of Shiva for the steps of the dance. Shiva taught the steps to his disciple Tandu and to Parvati [Goddess and consort/wife] and the harmony of the masculine and feminine in the dance was blended symbolically."¹ Thus is suggested a gender synthesis which underpins all dance; however, the female is not completely sublimated within this phenomenon. According to many legends, dance exists in its earthly incarnation thanks, in great part, to Parvati who "was the first teacher of dancing who brought the art down from the heavens to teach it to the people of the earth."² Dance, therefore, embodies harmony countered with gendered interplay and tension -- the force of which obliterates the ego while realizing

¹ Mrinalini Sarabhai, *Understanding Bharata Natyam* (Baroda: M. S. U of Baroda P, 1965) 2-3.

² Sarabhai, *Understanding* 1.

divine wholeness. In her article "Feminist Perspectives on Classical Indian Dance," Judith Lynne Hanna writes: "With pleasure he [Shiva] exuberantly dances out the creation of the universe. [. . .] Shiva's frenzied Tandava (virile, manly) dance causes chaos and represents the destruction of the world. For his creative dance, his consort Parvati's (tender, womanly) dance is imperative."³

Although legends such as these may suggest an essentialist reading regarding the "feminine" aspect of dance, another Goddess manifestation of Parvati -- Kali -- is the very antithesis of "tender, womanly" qualities. Goddess Kali is a powerful, destructive force which allows creation to occur. She is the ego destroyed -- a ground-scorching pathway to divinity. Dancer and scholar Kapila Vatsyayan speaks of the ideal Indian dancer who "rides the body" with the "fire of experience" in a quest toward obliteration of self toward "spiritual transcendence."⁴ This concept is beautifully conveyed in the hymn to Kali recounted by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: "*Because thou lovest the Burning-ground, I have made a Burning-ground of my heart -- that Thou, Dark One, haunter of the Burning-ground, mayest dance Thy eternal dance.*"⁵ Thus, Indian dance is inextricably connected to a multifaceted, female image of divine power. This mythic and spiritual connection can also speak to material strategies by feminists who wish to address the dance in its sociocultural context. Hanna writes:

Female images of the divine may empower some women both spiritually and socially to take control of their lives. Perhaps, as in other cultures with rituals of rebellion, powerful goddesses serve to present complementarities, compensation and alternatives to the male dominance models as well as to remind men not to exceed acceptable limits in their behavior towards women.⁶

³ Judith Lynne Hanna, "Feminist Perspectives on Classical Indian Dance: Divine Sexuality, Prostitution, and Erotic Fantasy," *Dance of India*, ed. David Waterhouse (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1998) 199.

⁴ qtd. Hanna, "Feminist" 201.

⁵ Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Dance and the Lived Body* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1987) 141.

⁶ Judith Lynne Hanna, "Classical Indian Dance and Women's Status," *Dance, Gender and Culture*, ed. Helen Thomas (New York: Macmillan, 1993) 129.

As stated above, sociocultural perspectives cannot be ignored when addressing feminism and dance in India. Specifically, a critical scholar must address and engage the Indian context in which Bharata Natyam was born and with which it is most often identified. Yet, this exploration can sometimes prove daunting and depressing for women. For, if Goddesses figure powerfully in the ancient Hindu scripture of India, their earthly counterparts do not fare as well. Scholar Wendy O'Flaherty looks at the scripture-sanctioned devaluing of women in the *Vedas* and major Indian epics and legends which were authored or controlled by high-caste males and are kinetically visualized by dance. She states that the image of a woman in the texts is that of an "insignificant receptacle for the unilaterally effective male fluid [. . .] -- a thing to be possessed."⁷ Further, Hanna cites ancient Indian law which specifies that "in childhood, a woman must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband and, when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent."⁸ In 1989, Vanaja Dhruvarajan stated that "while Indians have high regard for women as mothers, they devalue them as persons. The female principle is worshipped; yet in flesh and blood, females are humiliated, depersonalized, and dominated."⁹ The material realities of many Indian women today -- many of which may be learning, teaching, and/or dancing Bharata Natyam -- do not often bespeak power, agency, or freedom from gender-scripted confines:

Indian women are routinely sold into marriage, and brothers are almost invariably favored over sisters. Successful and affluent women are sometimes unaware of the problems of the terrorism of drunken husbands, brutal landlords, or the starkness of poverty. Suman Krishan Kant's Women's Grievances Group organization receives complaints and directs investigations of attacks on women, many of them involving burning and scalding of brides by in-laws who feel they were short-changed on dowries.¹⁰

⁷ qtd. in Hanna, "Feminist" 204.

⁸ Hanna, "Feminist" 204.

⁹ qtd. in Hanna, "Feminist" 205.

¹⁰ Hanna, "Feminist" 221.

Yet, a specific female model from India's past suggests the possibility of sociocultural prestige and spiritual empowerment for the dancing woman. This model is the devadasi; with her lineage traced to India's classical or Sanskrit period, she is oft said to represent a 2,000-year-old tradition of temple or devotional dance. Historically attributed to the Tamil region, the devadasi danced a form of Bharata Natyam under the original moniker of *sadir nac*, *sadir attam*, or *dasi attam*. Dedicated to God through temple ceremonies, the devadasis became constituents of the temple as brides and devotional servants to the deity. Hanna writes that although a daughter might be given to the temple by her family to fulfil a vow or for financial reasons, a woman could also "offer herself out of devotion, for the prosperity of her family, or out of weariness of her husband or her widowhood." Thus, even though the devadasis came from and belonged to a hereditary community of temple dancers, musicians, and teachers (*isai vellala*), life as a devadasi could sometimes be a matter of choice for the woman. Hanna also details specific freedoms and modes of empowerment accorded the devadasis; they "learned to read and write, an opportunity denied other women. Furthermore, some dancers acquired wealth through gifts from admirers, owned land, and made large donations to temples."¹¹ Within this economical system, the devadasi also wielded power in her household where she was the primary wage earner, materially supporting her family. Furthermore, her public sphere reflected her private sphere; for in contrast to greater Indian society, the *isai vellala* was, by and large, a matriarchal community. Included in this fiscal/material paradigm of authority and agency was the devadasi's oft employed career strategy of inviting the solicitation of patrons (e.g., Brahmins or rulers -- never an Untouchable) who could provide additional assets in return for sexual or consort relations. Dangerous is the contemporary interpretation of this arrangement as prostitution with its connotation of victimization and powerlessness, however. For even more crucial than material wealth was the psychological security accorded the devadasi by her *respected* status in society. Scholar Amrit Srinivasan historicizes the place of the devadasi as follows:

As a woman with the protection of a living husband -- the deity and lord of the temple corporation -- the devadasi was provided with the excuse to enter secular society and

¹¹ Hanna, "Classical" 125.

improve her artistic skills. [. . .] As a picture of good luck, beauty, and fame, the devadasi was welcome in all rich men's homes on happy occasions of celebration and honor [. . .] -- i.e., an adjunct to conservative domestic society, not its ravager.¹²

Yet, Srinivasan is also careful to point out the flip side of such a "revered," potent place in a society of men who had the power to revert icons to objects in order to proprietarily "own" a degree of sanctity. The following quote is lengthy but paints a vivid picture of the commodification of the devadasi by a *patriarchal society*, sanctioned by a *patriarchal religion*. Here, a devadasi's proclaimed freedom and empowerment may have been trumped by her conversion to pawn by the male powerbrokers with whom she necessarily dealt:

The fascination of a "wife-of-the-god" may be mythic just as the fascination for a bed in which Napoleon slept or a saint's relic. [. . .] It converts itself into exchange value when the socialite-client, collector or believer wishes to own the commodity in question or touch it for himself. Intimacy with a devadasi consequently demonstrated public success which visibly marked a man apart from his peers. Seen in this light, the devadasi represented a badge of fortune, a form of honor managed for civil society by the temple. [. . .] The temple for its own part was no disinterested participant -- the patronage extended to the devadasi was by no means passive. It recognized that her art and physical charms attracted connoisseurs (in the garb of devotees) to the temple [. . .]. She invited "investment," economic, political, and emotional in the deity.¹³

The conception and evolution of "devadasi as prostitute" became even more pervasive and problematic under British rule where "the imperialist hold economically weakened the Indian rulers who patronized the dancers." Further, the constitutive philosophy of temple dance (*sadir*), "wherein sexual ecstasy is a path to spirituality, was an anathema to the British."¹⁴

¹² Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance," *Economic and Political Weekly* 20.44 (1985): 1870.

¹³ Srinivasan 1870.

¹⁴ Hanna, "Feminist" 213.

By the turn of the 19th century, the devadasi subsisted, as Avanthi Meduri writes, within an "uneasy political atmosphere with her former generous patronage vanishing;" thus, she was "forced to choose between economic necessity and man-made [British] rules of decorum." Significantly, Meduri lauds this "female professional" who, in the face of a changing political and social climate, became less discriminate in patron relations, choosing to "live on her own moral terms."¹⁵ Unfortunately, such individual, gendered "moral terms" were ignored, obfuscated, or translated by the "moral authorities" (read "male moral authorities") of the day. In 1927 (at which time, there were still 200,000 temple dancers in the Madras Presidency alone), reform-supporter Mohandas Gandhi wrote: "There are, I am sorry to say, many temples in our midst in this country which are no better than brothels."¹⁶ Thus was provided the ultimate patriarchal, authoritarian declaration of devadasi decay and spiritual bankruptcy. Indeed, male authority had often inscribed and dictated the traditional role of the devadasi, compromising the agency or power she may have believed herself to have. Hanna goes so far as to describe the hereditary devadasi community as a "reproduction of patriarchy ensconced in religious sanctification." She writes: "Male Brahmins, the priestly caste, initially 'choreographed' the dance (received from the gods) which male professionals, non-Brahmins who came from hereditary families of teachers and musicians (*nattuvanaras* or *gurus*) [. . .] then taught to the devadasis."¹⁷

Was the devadasi simply fooling herself, believing to possess spiritual and secular authority that was all the time allotted, controlled, and measured by her male patrons, conductors, teachers, and authors? Are we fooled today as we idealize her social, sexual, spiritual power? Did this woman even exist? Srinivasan cites the power of the traditionally male guru who "exercised control over the dancer" while the dasis "feared and respected" them as "teachers and artists and informal religious leaders of the community whose curse could ruin a girl's career and prospects." Furthermore, returning to the "commodification" argument, power over the dasi often seemed to equate money and/or acquisition of property for men.

¹⁵ Avanthi Meduri, "Bharatha Natyam -- What Are You?" *Asian Theatre Journal* 5.1 (1988): 6.

¹⁶ Rina Singha and Reginald Massey, *Indian Dances: Their History and Growth* (New York: Braziller, 1967) 61.

¹⁷ Hanna, "Feminist" 211.

Srinivasan describes the *dasi* as the "proverbial goose that laid the golden egg" for male teacher/conductors, for if "handled properly," she could yield "dividends over the years in the shape of fees and gifts."¹⁸ This relationship, in many ways, persists today and must be reconciled with the "empowered" *devadasi* legacy claimed by the contemporary Bharata Natyam dancer. Hanna writes that a modern-day guru still "expects respect and credit for a piece he has taught a dancer. [. . .] He tends to be jealous if one studies with another teacher or creates her own dances. If a dancer wishes to be creative, she breaks the dependency mold. Then the dancer has to find another [teacher]."¹⁹ This gendered social tension between male authority and *dasi* recognition could also be seen within her hereditary community as male members became increasingly frustrated by their lack of complete dominance over their women. "The privileged access of women artists to rich patrons and their wealth underscored more sharply their absolute non-availability to their own men. The antagonism felt [. . .] was in recognition consequently of the power and influence the *devadasis* had *as women* and as artists."²⁰

The debate over the role of the *devadasi* in society reached a boiling point in the 1920s and 30s as she was denounced by British colonizers as a seedy symbol of a perverse and backward Indian culture. Yet, what is more complex and troubling is her appropriation by Indian nationalists in their fervor to declare an independent state replete with ancient, holy traditions. As factions were formed, the "reformist" (or "anti-nautch"²¹) group squared off against the "revivalist" movement in a "religious" war. Reformists proclaimed the *devadasi* to be a "prostitute" who must be removed, and revivalists claimed her to be a "nun" who must be reconstituted and re-presented to a "respectable" Indian public.²² To both, however, the "sociohistoric complexity of the structure that enabled the *devadasi* to devote herself to

¹⁸ Srinivasan 1872-1873.

¹⁹ Hanna, "Classical" 127.

²⁰ Srinivasan 1871.

²¹ "Nautch" became a term used indiscriminately by the reform movement to lump all street dance, courtesan dance, and *devadasi* temple dance into the same, "low" category.

²² Srinivasan 1875.

perfecting her art was ignored." Each side maintained a "conviction that somewhere a pure custom had been polluted and must be cleansed."²³ Although there were women involved in the debate (famously, Rukmini Devi), many men were also invested in the struggle; they figuratively pulled at the arms of the devadasi, restricting her dance while claiming her as a means to accomplish their own political agendas. Brahmin priests decried the regulatory measures taken by the government to outlaw temple dedications as infringements on their own religious freedoms (not to mention the wealth and power brought to the temple through the dasi). Indicative of this is an account by Rustom Bharucha who describes the opposition to reform by S. Sathyamurthy in the Madras Congress as motivated by "no real concern for the devadasis themselves" but as a "concealed attempt to preserve a Brahmanic hegemony in matters of religion and culture." Bharucha asserts that Sathyamurthy represented other upper-caste men who feared the abolition of devadasis would serve to precipitate a non-Brahmin demand for "the abolition of temple priests, who were Brahmins. [. . .] He was merely safeguarding his community's [Mayruam] vested interests sanctified through religion."²⁴ Not all men were working against reform measures, however. Uttara Asha Coorlawala details the diverse male demographic siding *with* the reform movement:

The non-Brahmin Backward Classes, disgruntled by the educational and professional advantages gained by the pro-nautch Brahmins, and the Untouchables/Depressed classes under British legislation which deliberately fostered casteism, joined the anti-nautch campaign to gain support for their own political ends. This comprehensive group included male members within the devadasi community, who participated in performances as musicians and teachers [. . .] and felt that their own artistic contributions were slighted.²⁵

In any case, the devadasi seemingly lost a battle in which she was ironically relegated to the sidelines. In 1930, Bill No. 5 was passed by which devadasis were absolved of their services

²³ Uttara Asha Coorlawala, "Ruth St. Denis and India's Dance Renaissance," *Dance Chronicle* 15.2 (2001): 132.

²⁴ Rustom Bharucha, *Chandralekha: Woman Dance Resistance* (New Delhi: Indus, 1995) 44.

²⁵ Coorwala 133.

to the temples; their material interests were then converted to land grants or deeds (*pattas*) to be administered by the government. Devadasis had previously been allotted temple land shares as part of their dedication and service. In that men could not previously inherit these shares (as could the dedicated sisters), "the process of converting traditional usufructury rights to public land (attached to office) into private taxable property favored the men over their womenfolk" as men controlled the marketplace and could purchase the previously unavailable land.²⁶ Furthermore, as part of this "liberating" process, the "freed" devadasi was often forced to convert her remaining wealth into a dowry in order to attract a husband and, thereby, acquire social respectability. In 1947, the Congress Ministry dealt a final death blow to the devadasi, passing the Madras Devadasis Act which officially abolished all temple dedications.

In the politically charged period surrounding the 1930 and 1947 legislative acts, the revivalists also scored critical victories which must be taken into account in any analysis of Bharata Natyam as it exists today. As the revivalists worked to return the dance to its "pre-prostitution" glory, their restoration became a zealous project of redefinition, reconstitution, and re-population.²⁷ They renamed the dance Bharata Natyam to remove any nominal vestiges of the devadasi who was inextricably linked to the old moniker, *sadir*. The revivalists -- led by female pioneers such as Brahmin Rukmini Devi -- worked to make the art "respectable" for a new caste of dancers. The Madras Music Academy -- a new academy formed by the revivalists (and still recognized as a prominent Bharata Natyam academy today) -- passed a 1937 resolution dictating that "in order to make dancing respectable, it is necessary to encourage public performances thereof before respectable people."²⁸ With this sweeping declaration, the revivalists moved the dance out of the temple and into the public forum while claiming the dance as property of the upper classes. As Srinivasan points out, however, the "dance technique remained unchanged and was learnt from the original *nattuvanars* [conductors] and

²⁶ Srinivasan 1874.

²⁷ Janet O'Shea, "At Home in the World? The Bharatanatyam Dancer as Transnational Interpreter," *The Drama Review* 47.1 (2003): 183.

²⁸ qtd. in Meduri 12.

performers."²⁹ Therefore, the movement needed to be underpinned by an incorruptible philosophy and, in a sense, protected from itself so that it could not degenerate again as in the past. Rukmini Devi publicly danced Bharata Natyam in concert form and wrote treatise upon treatise as to its purely devotional function (sans "devadasi" sexuality). As more Brahmin women followed suit, Bharata Natyam was re-presented as "art" and danced by a new caste of women positioning themselves as the dance's authoritative guardians of respectability. The dancers and scholars were also intent on "purifying" the tradition by asserting an unquestionably sacred linkage to the *Natya Shastra* and other classical epics; the revivalist camp turned to text as an authoritative means by which to reinvent the dance and its lineage.

Srinivasan notes:

Ancient dance-dramas were revived by Sanskrit scholars and introduced into the female genre. [. . .] The more erotic and bawdy songs of the devadasi's repertoire were excluded. The low-key approach to *shringara* or the artistic convention of love between man and woman in the dance mimetic sequence was justified as a means of reducing its overt eroticism and replacing it with an "inward essence."³⁰

In *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese refer to the revivalists' research and reconstruction process as a "restoration of behavior" which, in some ways, negates the hereditary power often cited by the contemporary Bharata Natyam dancer as part of her sacred history. As Bharata Natyam was codified according to ancient texts, the "new" dance became the definer of the "old" or ancient form of *sadir*; meanwhile, the current form of *sadir* was claimed to be a "faded, distorted remnant of some ancient classical dance" and denied its place as a dance in its own right. Regarding the "smoke and mirror" strategy to reinvent *sadir* as a legitimate Bharata Natyam progenitor, Barba and Savarese write, "The ancient classical dance is a projection backward in time. [. . .] A dance is created in the past in order to be restored for the present and future."³¹

²⁹ Srinivasan 1875.

³⁰ Srinivasan 1875.

³¹ Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer* (London: Routledge, 1991) 207.

Regardless of whether or not ancient lineage can be proven, the contemporary Bharata Natyam, as danced by a woman, cannot be disassociated from its 20th century lineage and revivalist context. Here, I suggest that the revivalist project may be viewed in two different feminist lights: 1) In terms of material feminism, the powerful Brahmin women may represent a socioeconomic group who disenfranchised and marginalized their "sisters" -- who reinscribed the patriarchal order by negating a possible subversion of the norm by disempowering and dismantling the "matriarchal" society of the devadasi. 2) The movement may, however, suggest female empowerment as the Brahmin women claimed a "public victory," saving a spiritual art denoted as "feminine" and raising it to a place of prestige in a secular, male-dominated society. In either case, ownership, authorship, and translation became defining aspects of the dance. Coorlawala writes:

What was achieved by the bill (1947) was to clear the way for nondevadasi women from respectable families to study dance. The reconstruction of the *sadir* dance was undertaken by Westernized and Sanskritized Brahmins. [. . .] *Sadir* was reclaimed as Bharata Natyam, the purest and most "authentic" traditional dance of the *Natya Shastra*.³²

As the above quote refers to the "Westernized" reconstruction of *sadir*, an astute observer might also find inherent in Bharata Natyam the dangerous (and often gendered) phenomenon of Orientalism. In Edward Said's terms, Orientalism is a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. [. . .] The Orient cannot represent itself."³³ When a woman dances, Orientalism becomes another strategy of gendered authority and control. Further, when Bharata Natyam is danced or presented by a female Westerner, the resulting Orientalist paradigm can "reaffirm the West's superiority, as it takes a Western woman to understand and represent the essence of the East."³⁴ Although this interpretation may read

³² Coorlawala 134.

³³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage, 1979) 3.

³⁴ Amy Koritz, "Dancing the Orient for England: Maud Allan's *The Vision of Salome*," *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham: Duke UP, 1997) 141.

somewhat essentialist, limiting, and paranoid (*Only Asian women can authoritatively claim the dance?*), there is historical precedence of Orientalism in the revival of Bharata Natyam, its spiritual appropriation by Westerners, and, consequently, its contemporary configuration. In 1926, American modern dancer Ruth St. Denis, having previously gained notoriety for her "nautch" dances, toured India and created a sensation on the concert stage with these sanctioned -- yet, blatantly inauthentic -- works. (St. Denis' earliest "nautch" dances were choreographed and performed throughout the 1910s and into the early 1920s -- years before she actually visited India and witnessed its nautch dancers.)³⁵ Curiously, she was lauded by the upper, educated classes in India for her respectful and artistic treatment of "Indian" dance. In Orientalist fashion, she stated with religious fervor: "I am beginning to see that I already possessed the soul of India. [. . .] I see that I was sent to the Orient to give a truth as well as receive one."³⁶ Although St. Denis was influential, the 20th century revival movement is more often associated with Western ballet dancer Anna Pavlova who toured India in 1929 and famously asked Brahmin scholars and politicians: "Where is your dance?" This same woman asserted her power as a dance prophet, sent to incite the rebirth of Indian dance through Western dance authority. She stated: "The East had always fascinated me. One of the greatest ambitions remaining to me was to subjugate the Orient to my art, proving its power over people of any race or color."³⁷ Indeed, Pavlova is inseparable from the resurrection mythos of Bharata Natyam; revivalist dancer Rukmini Devi credited Pavlova "with a pivotal contribution to India's rediscovery of its own dance forms."³⁸ Through the "Pavlova" connection, the Western influence and authorship runs deep and was fully realized through the political efforts and dance of Devi, herself:

She [Pavlova] apparently met Rukmini Devi Arundale socially on a luxury liner somewhere between Australia and London, and urged her to study Indian dance. So it came about that Rukmini Devi studied *sadir*, which she later renamed Bharata Natyam and performed in public. This Brahmin lady -- married to the British head of the

³⁵ Coorlawala 151.

³⁶ qtd. in Coorlawala 143.

³⁷ qtd. in Coorlawala 143.

³⁸ qtd. in Coorlawala 142.

Theosophical Society, Lord Arundale -- founded the institution of dance called Kalakshetra in Madras.³⁹

Thus, Western influence, ideology, and appropriation seemingly foregrounds much of Bharata Natyam. But is this situation as dire as insinuated by some scholars and theoreticians? A slap on the wrists for "intrusive" Westerners like St. Denis and Pavlova seems much too simplistic. These were women who loved dance and, seemingly, loved Indian dance. I believe their motives were pure and their work allowed a powerful art form to reach audiences that might have otherwise ignored its presence and complacently allowed its demise. And at the risk of Orientalist blasphemy, I wonder whether Bharata Natyam would have been allowed to die, buried alive by its "rightful owners," without the Western intervention? Dangerous territory to travel, yes, but an invested female dancer has a responsibility to pose such troubling questions, to unearth the complex paradigms, and, thereby, travel risky terrain. Once potentially constrictive and subjugating influences, ideologies, and hegemonies of Orientalism are exposed and explored, the female dancer can acknowledge, negotiate, and then exceed the confinements and inscriptions while progressing along a temporal path toward spiritual transcendence. She is not bound by this paradigm. Further, as a negotiating strategy, the female dancer can recognize the currently employed modes of ownership that may be shaping and controlling a dance so often assumed to be a liberating, empowering force for a woman. Only then can she break through its barriers, confound the East/West binary, and claim the dance as her own to perform without boundaries. In addition to her sensitivity toward these bordered significances, she must also be aware of gender inscriptions and restrictions within the art form itself. Judith Lynne Hanna has written at length regarding the gender coding and potential gender rebellion provided by dance:

Dance may be understood as a medium through which choreographers, directors and producers manipulate, interpret, legitimate and reproduce the patterns of gender cooperation and conflict that order their social world. Dance images may lead to the reinforcing of ongoing models, the acquiring of new responses, the weakening or

³⁹ Coorlawala 124.

strengthening of inhibitions over fully elaborated patterns in a person's repertoire, and the facilitating of performance of previously learned behavior that was encumbered by restraints. Distanced from the everyday, a dance performance also permits exploration of dangerous challenges to the status quo, without the penalties of the everyday life situation.⁴⁰

More specifically, dance sends gendered messages through reoccurring tales and themes. Here, Hanna takes Bharata Natyam somewhat to task. She states that its dancers, mostly female, send the following messages (both religious and secular) to men and women: 1) Women should "accept men's lustful, quasi-divine or symbolically one-with-the-universe freedom to wander outside of marriage;" 2) Women have a "duty to be faithful, giving, and forgiving;" and 3) Women should "serve their husbands as subordinates and bear children."⁴¹ The canonical depiction of femininity in Bharata Natyam is somewhat dictated by its source text/bible, the *Natya Shastra*, whereby eight heroines are codified as "male-defined ideal women." In the resultant repertory, the woman's plight consists of "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."⁴² In addition, dancers may reinforce these "feminine" inscriptions in their physical interpretations of *padam* song verses. The *padam* is one of the most demanding and creative midsections of the Bharata Natyam recital. It is all expression (*abinaya*), containing devotional, narrative songs by which the dancer enacts stories of the Supreme Being and his lovers. The section's gendered themes become embodied by the female dancer as she mimetically expresses exemplary submissive sentiments such as the following: "You alone I desire, you are my protector always. [. . .] Quickly come to me! I am endowed with virtues. [. . .] With deep desire in my heart, I await you. Oh, compassionate one, do not slight me now, but come!"⁴³ Themes such as this one are deeply

⁴⁰ Hanna, "Feminist" 196.

⁴¹ Hanna, "Feminist" 206.

⁴² Hanna, "Classical" 122.

⁴³ qtd. in Sarabhai, *Understanding* 4.

seeded culturally in India through Bharata Natyam. Further, even the "poster goddess" of feminist dancers -- Kali -- can be inhibited and defeated by the gender-coding inherent in dance. For example, following is a legendary account of Shiva, Kali, and their dancing dynamic:

Legends say Shiva and his counterpart, the goddess Kali, compete in dance contests [. . .]. Shiva performed many dances that Kali was able to imitate perfectly. Out of frustration, Shiva exploited her sense of modesty and raised his right foot to the level of his crown and danced in that pose. Kali could have emulated this pose, but feminine modesty led her to withdraw from the contest. Kali lost not because she was an inferior dancer, but because she is a woman and affirmed her subservience in this role.⁴⁴

Thus, the encoding by the Bharata Natyam repertory -- its tales of love for and liaisons with the Divine -- does not stop at the parameters of the performance space but creeps into the cultural, collective consciousness. Amateur dance student Shakuntala voices her desire to embody and emulate Bharata Natyam's "ideal Indian woman." She states, "The dance allows me to act the pleading, teasing, coquettish movements, and they imply female subjugation. The subjugation or deference lies at the very root of the Indian family tradition. So although I couldn't be the person in the dance, I can experience it through the dance."⁴⁵

Although this statement may read like a "feminist nightmare," closer study also suggests female power and agency. Indeed, Shakuntala may interpret her dance as one of subjugation, but she nonetheless *chooses* to dance this interpretation. With the fluidity of interpretation under her control, she may just as easily choose to dance another "meaning." For implicit in Bharata Natyam performance and repertory is a dancer's agency as she embodies the text. Furthermore, in a performative paradigm, female audience members may also employ agency as they translate the dance messages. Hanna admits that many of the Bharata Natyam themes and tales are open to feminist reinterpretation as they "may evoke erotic fantasy, provide avenues for repressed and suppressed energies, and allow women temporary escape from

⁴⁴ Hanna, "Feminist" 205.

⁴⁵ qtd. in Hanna, "Feminist" 216.

human toil (and, a feminist perspective might add from male dominance) through identification with the prestige and freedom of the devadasi." Furthermore, "women may imagine themselves as *Gopis* (milkmaids) who sport with the deity in wild carnal love."⁴⁶ In addition, *padams* may also include tales "of women who are not so resigned, and who vent their anger on the wayward man by taunting him and by denigrating their rivals."⁴⁷ A crucial feminist strategy when negotiating the Bharata Natyam repertoire is the engagement of multiple meanings, especially in the thematic context of divine love and longing. The reoccurring theme of the woman overwhelmed and confined by longing for her lover is just one earthly or temporal translation of what is actually "an expression of the love and longing of the human soul for union with the divine spirit." Even more important is the allowance within the *padam* for "an exhaustive exploration of every possible meaning of a phrase which [. . .] is repeated several times in order that the dancer may interpret every shade of meaning."⁴⁸ Through expression of theme, action, or emotion in Indian dance (*abhinaya*), the dancer is no longer limited by the text but is freed and spiritually empowered through her own creative control and interpretative choices. Dancer Kalanidhi Narayanan describes *abhinaya* in Bharata Natyam as "true emotion" - a phenomenon in which one "lives the situation" on stage. She affirms the freeing power of *abhinaya* which is "like catching the horizon. You have to go on and on."⁴⁹ And dancer/teacher Priya Govind declares that the freedom of the divine journey begins with the control, technique, and, therefore, power of a dancer who has discovered her "inside energy" and who has learned "to pause, to 'throw' with effect, to understate, and to use the grammar of dance" to reach divinity.⁵⁰

The female control and agency displayed through a Bharata Natyam performance has slowly found larger representation in the social setting of contemporary India. During the

⁴⁶ Hanna, "Feminist" 218.

⁴⁷ Singha and Massey 49.

⁴⁸ Singha and Massey 47.

⁴⁹ Naseem Khan. "Who's Afraid of Abhinaya?" *Dance Theatre Journal* 13.1 (1996): 45.

⁵⁰ qtd. in Khan 46.

revivalist movement of the 20s and 30s, women started moving into the formerly male domain of teaching as the devadasi began instructing the new Brahmin dancers. And today, "women are beginning to participate in national political life, become priests, assume guru roles, and choreograph and teach their own dances."⁵¹ Furthermore, Bharata Natyam may be viewed as a vital component of the socialization of many Indian girls by which they also take a public role in a nationalist project of cultural identity. Contemporary dancer and choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh (now living in the United States) recounts her parents' insistence that she take classes as a young girl: "The idea was that by doing that [taking class], we kept faith with something ancient and precious about Indian culture."⁵² Yet, some material feminists would argue that a patriarchal socioeconomic structure currently exists which limits this "personal and political" potential for many women. Meduri writes:

Dance now needs money, which trusts and various arts associations are providing to ensure its continuity. [. . .] Who has the money in the present system? In a traditional patriarchal society such as India, men have always been invested with power and they have always made the rules. The female dancer, then, by returning to this system, is actually returning to man.⁵³

Whereas dance once provided an affirmation of community and a means of professional achievement for the devadasi, the contemporary dance scene seems to impart the impression of a community that is competitive and somewhat fractured. India "cannot provide solo concerts for all of its dancers as the number of dancers outweighs the number of performance slots;"⁵⁴ thus, women are forced to negotiate the world marketplace, marginalizing those without economic means to compete on this scale. Meduri laments the "schizophrenic" modern Bharata Natyam dancer who must dance stories of gods on stage while competing in a "ruthless secular

⁵¹ Hanna, "Classical" 132.

⁵² Shobana Jeyasingh, "Imaginary Homelands: Creating a New Dance Language," *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998) 49.

⁵³ Meduri 14.

⁵⁴ O'Shea 184.

world" offstage.⁵⁵ Scholars continually debate whether female freedom and spiritual agency actually exists for classical Indian dancers today. Specifically, Anne-Marie Gaston explores the still prevalent male control over the female Bharata Natyam dancer:

In some ways, the husband (or even the father) of the contemporary dancer can be said to serve the same function as the patron of the devadasi; his influence, and sometimes his financial backing, help to secure performances for his wife (or daughter). For while teaching Bharata Natyam has become a lucrative profession, there are few dancers who can support themselves as performers alone.⁵⁶

Further, Hanna states that "few married women are permitted to pursue public performance,"⁵⁷ while Meduri deploys the all-important weapon of the feminist when decrying her object position at the hands of the male spectator: that is, the "male gaze." She writes, however, from a personal and potent perspective:

I have had critics review me as a dancer with a "graceful figure" and "a lot of glamour." [. . .] I disdained this reduced position intellectually, but I actually reinforced it in my own action, attitude, and manner. Who was I dressing for, and why? [. . .] In fact, I was taught to dance, to gesticulate, and even to feel by male dance teachers. Although there are some female dance teachers today, most contemporary women dancers are taught by men. Thus, the dancer, in the most impressionable period of her life, is taught to interpret herself and her art through the male filter.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Meduri 12.

⁵⁶ Anne-Marie Gaston, "Dance and the Hindu Woman: Bharatanatyam Re-ritualized," *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, ed. Julia Leslie (Cranbury: Associated UP, 1991) 155.

⁵⁷ Hanna, "Feminist" 214.

⁵⁸ Meduri 14.

Here, I must again intercede as I feel the shackles of objectification imposed by the "gaze" do not need to be resignedly accepted by the dancer, nor does she have to see herself complicit in this male-orchestrated strategy to sexualize and objectify her.⁵⁹ I repeat, Bharata Natyam invites assertion of agency by the female dancer. Famous dancer-choreographer Mrinalini Sarabhai recounts in *Creations* her "rebellion" against a male guru, asserting her own physical/spiritual claim to the dance and its transcendent power:

A particular step he taught me, my body refused to do. My mind also rejected the *adavu*. [. . .] I requested him to change it, which he did. [. . .] "You are a dancer from your last birth," he said. "That *adavu* was not for you. I took it from a film I saw. It is not really Bharata Natyam."⁶⁰

Sarabhai represents legions of Bharata Natyam dancers who have used the dance to negotiate or negate the "gaze;" they acknowledge the mechanism and return its "stare" by examining and performing a more personal, female experience which they own -- *it is their tale to tell*. In one of her dances, Sarabhai depicts a young girl who dances the traditional form of Bharata Natyam; however, once the girl "is snatched away in the midst of her games and play, to be married," Sarabhai incorporates less orthodox movement. She explains: "The *sollukathus* of Bharata Natyam (the rhythmic syllables) became alive for I infused them with expressiveness and stressed the powerful rhythm of each beat. The hatred, the greed, the jealousy are brought out in forceful movement and desperation and sorrow in the accented syllables."⁶¹ Other contemporary dancer-choreographers have become more radical in their use (or nonuse) of traditional Bharata Natyam elements, prompting dance critic Leela Venkataraman to plead with modern choreographers in an interview with journalist Molly McQuade: "You can bring Bharata Natyam forward and do new things with it, but please do not change it beyond

⁵⁹ One must acknowledge, however, the seriously complicated paradigm asserted by Bharata Natyam tradition and texts in which physical beauty (especially for the female) is considered a prerequisite to and measurable attribute in the dance.

⁶⁰ Mrinalini Sarabhai, *Creations* (New York: Mapin, 1986) 29.

⁶¹ Sarabhai, *Creations* 62.

recognition."⁶² Many of these dancers are critical of the lack of physical freedom they find inherent in the dance. Jeyasingh feels the body is too "constrained" in Bharata Natyam and uses modern dance in her choreographic reconfigurations. She recounts: "I wanted to make the dancers roll on the floor and embrace it in a much looser way than doing Bharata Natyam footwork."⁶³ Choreographer Parijat Desat (based in Los Angeles) uses some of Bharata Natyam's external techniques but "resists" most traditional aspects of the dance which she feels reinscribe female subjugation: "What draws me to Bharata Natyam is the linear clarity, from the edge of your fingertips through the whole body -- but I feel constrained by the position of the body in Bharata Natyam."⁶⁴ Probably the most renown Indian dancer-choreographer who incorporates Bharata Natyam's technique, while engaging in a critical dialogue with many other aspects of the dance, is Chandralekha. Often cited as a feminist, Chandralekha takes issue with the repertoire and themes of Bharata Natyam; she "questions the appropriateness of as basic a convention as the yearning of a female dancer for her male lover, her master, her God." Therefore, she prefers "abstract themes" conveyed through modern dance and vestiges of Bharata Natyam's basic vocabulary. Her themes often address gender roles in society. For example, "she performs a duet during which she straddles a male dancer whose head appears from between her legs [. . .]. The role reversal she expresses comes [. . .] from the concept of Shakti as an active female force."⁶⁵

The resistance and arguments by these dancers pose significant problems for me, however. When using a "gendered" paradigm to claim power through their dance, they are also reinscribing said paradigm which may have subjugated them in the first place. Although I applaud the celebration of female presence, I believe the dance should also be recognized as having the potential to exceed the gendered body -- to move dancer and audience beyond these binary, earthly parameters. "Indians say, 'Without Shakti, Shiva is nothing.'"⁶⁶ And it must be

⁶² Molly McQuade, "Diaspora Dance: Bharata Natyam's Evolution," *Dance Magazine* Dec. 2001: 45.

⁶³ Jeyasingh 50.

⁶⁴ qtd. in McQuade 45.

⁶⁵ Rajika Puri, "New Directions in Indian Dance," *The India Magazine* June 1986: 39.

⁶⁶ Hanna, "Feminist" 204.

noted that the Bharata Natyam dancer does not solely become the woman depicted in the songs and tales of the *padams* and *varnams*. She also embodies Krishna and other male deities as she travels a gendered path to divine unity. Hanna notes that "female dancers see themselves empowered as they play both goddesses and gods. In role reversal, there is momentary sharing in power."⁶⁷ Furthermore, as the dancer moves between genders, she becomes powerful enough to rise above them, creating a new form of spiritual energy which is no longer defined by biology or gender. Barba and Savarese cites dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi who refers to the energy as "Shakti [. . .] which is neither masculine nor feminine [. . .]. A performer of either sex is always Shakti, energy which creates."⁶⁸ This complicates and somewhat challenges Chandralekha's choreographic suggestion that Shakti is an energy of only one gender -- that is, female. With both genders present, I believe the energy for the dancer and audience (female and male) becomes more inclusive, multi-faceted, tensioned and, therefore, more powerful and unrestricted by material/physical realities.

The Indian concepts of *lasya* and *tandava* also speak to this paradigm.⁶⁹ "These terms do not refer to women and men or to masculine or feminine qualities, but to softness and vigor as aspects of energy [. . .] -- interaction between opposites which brings to mind the poles of a magnetic field or the tension between body and shadow. It would be arbitrary to particularize them sexually."⁷⁰ This phenomenon is potently illustrated by Ardhanarishvara who is a manifestation of Shiva as "Lord who is half woman," i.e., Parvata. Significantly, the halves of this dancing, divine incarnation are gendered as the following song lyrics to the dance *Shiva Ardhanarishwara* illustrate: "Two gods in one [. . .] The female half jingles with golden arm bracelets; the male half is adorned with bracelets of serpents. [. . .] The female half is capable of

⁶⁷ Hanna, "Feminist" 204.

⁶⁸ Barba and Savarese 21.

⁶⁹ Although the concepts are not considered to be gendered, they are ascribed physical denotations in Bharata Natyam. Tandav is represented by the left side of a body and lasya, the right; further, every action on the right must be mirrored on the left in the classical dance form.

⁷⁰ Barba and Savarese 81.

all creation; the male half is capable of all destruction."⁷¹ But what divine, exceedant power may be manifest through this interplay of gendered energy! Within this image, one may find "expression of the reciprocal action of the male and female elements in the cosmos. The first dance created by Shiva Ardhanarishvara was crude and wild (*tandava*) while the dance created by his Parvati half [. . .] was delicate and gentle (*lasya*)."⁷² Again, more than gender, the energies reflect cosmic opposition and tension -- a colliding, combustible dialectic by which a new entity is created which is free and open, enabling its mergence with said cosmos.

The above paradigm suggests incredible potential for any Bharata Natyam dancer and seems to render moot most gender arguments. For me, the critical feminist question when interrogating Bharata Natyam is as follows: What defines freedom and power for a woman in this dance? I would argue that the release from self as one realizes divine unity with the universe is an *ultimate realization of freedom and power*. Heinrich Zimmer writes that in Bharata Natyam, "the dancer becomes amplified into a being endowed with supra-normal powers [. . .]. The dance induces trance, ecstasy, the experience of the divine, the realization of one's own secret nature and, finally, mergence into the divine essence."⁷³ Bharata Natyam is situated within Hindu philosophy (as is all classical Indian dance), providing a pathway to enlightenment for performers and audience alike. The art can invoke *rasa* which is defined by Abhinavagupta (11th century scholar and authoritative interpreter of *Natya Shastra*) as "a state of union with the universal spirit which both artist and spectator achieve by transcending the pain and pleasure of everyday life." Within this dynamic, "the duality of subject and object disappear through intense introversion and, ultimately, a state is evoked unlike any empirical experience. This state is a transcendental one."⁷⁴ Yet, one does not have to ascribe to the Hindu faith to achieve this state through dance. Theorist Sondra Horton Fraleigh asserts that all dance performance, whether intentionally devotional or not, becomes transcendental; dance cannot help but be a spiritual, communal conduit due to its innate intersubjectivity:

⁷¹ Barba and Savarese 81.

⁷² Barba and Savarese 84.

⁷³ qtd. in Hanna, "Feminist" 201.

⁷⁴ qtd. in Meduri 17.

Because the material of dance is lived within an intersubjective field as the self escapes its boundaries toward the Other, the dancer and the audience both transcend self-limitations in the dance, the dancer in the performance of the dance and the audience in the perceptual enactment of the dance. [. . .] The dancer and audience come together for just this purpose. They seek a common ground of understanding and display a desire for communion, a communion that is tacitly undertaken and lived instantly through the body. [. . .] In one sense, they share bodily lived limitations, those of being body; likewise, they share transcendent possibilities because of the self-transcendent nature of the body.⁷⁵

This is not to suggest that all dancers embrace Bharata Natyam's spiritual power. As previously noted, there is a female faction of the Bharata Natyam community who criticize and resist what they view as restrictive aspects of the dance. Curiously, many of these critics refer to it in purely physical terms, e.g., the contemporary choreographers Jeyasingh and Desat cited earlier in this article. Furthermore, some take issue with the revivalists who placed the dance strictly within the realm of the devotional when reconstituting the dance in the 20s and 30s. In her revivalist fervor, Rukmini Devi stated: "Like the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Dhmmapada*, and other scriptures, Bharata Natyam is a method of spiritual learning for human ends. Therefore, it is not to be expected to reflect modern life and its ways."⁷⁶ To this, feminist dancer Meduri retorts, "Indian dance today functions in a secular reality -- in the gap between philosophic vision and every day reality. Today's Bharata Natyam, with its danced stories of God evoked in a secular world, is analogous to a human being walking forward with his face turned backwards."⁷⁷ The spiritual debate is typified by the differing views held by many in the dance community over the presence of the Nataraja (holy figure of dancing Shiva) on the stage during performance. Devi felt that its presence was necessary to reinforce the spiritual,

⁷⁵ Fraleigh 61, 66.

⁷⁶ qtd. in Bharucha 41.

⁷⁷ Meduri 4.

devotional purpose of the dance. Early Brahmin dancer Nirmala Ramachandran does not advocate having the Nataraja on stage, citing the philosophy of Bharata Natyam pioneer Balasaraswati (a hereditary dancer of *devidasi* lineage) who never brought the Nataraja to the stage, declaring the temple to be "in the mind."⁷⁸ Critic Shanta Sherbeet Singh recently wrote: "Worshipping Nataraja should be private and should not be part of the show. The presence of Nataraja shows the confused state of mind of the dancers."⁷⁹

Yet, do these arguments and criticisms negate the power of Bharata Natyam -- a power that may be accessed by a woman and shared with her audience? I submit that these arguments actually fuel the cosmos. Recognized and channeled, the tensions energize and translate the mortal dance, enabling the woman to exceed earthly limitations. Further inciting the tensions, arguments have also ensued over the sex and eroticism component of Bharata Natyam. Wendy O-Flaherty posits that excessive energy "endangers the universe;" yet, she submits that dance, using a corporeal means (i.e., a sexual body), can facilitate spiritual engagement, control, and expansion. "Like yoga, dance channels violent but useful forces; and, like yoga, it both heightens sexual powers and internalizes them through the use of techniques of elaborately pinpointed physical control and deep concentration."⁸⁰ Therefore, Bharata Natyam would seemingly be robbed of power if denied its *shringara* (eroticism); this element "interweaves dance with sex to convey messages of love for God and find analogy in the bliss of sexual congress, a phase of the soul's migration, akin to mystery, potential danger, heaven and ecstasy."⁸¹ *Padams* are often centered around erotic content concerning desirous women and incarnations of God. Through the dance, however, sexuality becomes spirituality, thus negating the possibility of objectification or commodification of the female dancer by the male viewer. Projesh Banerji writes in *Erotica in Indian Dance*: "No iota of sensual vulgarity or indecency is attached to the doings of the heavenly creatures. Sex is regarded as divine, with complete

⁷⁸ qtd. in Gaston, "Dance" 158.

⁷⁹ qtd. in Gaston, "Dance" 158.

⁸⁰ qtd. in Hanna, "Feminist" 201.

⁸¹ Hanna, "Feminist" 203.

negation of human lust."⁸² And although Devi and other revivalists tried to minimize the erotic component of Bharata Natyam, other dancers stressed its importance.⁸³ Hereditary dancer Balasaraswati disparaged the "cleansing efforts" by the revivalists as follows: "*Shringara*, which is considered to be the greatest obstacle to spiritual realization, is itself an instrument for uniting the dancer with Divinity. Therefore the question of 'purifying' *shringara* becomes a redundancy, if not impertinence."⁸⁴

Interestingly, even the spiritual component of Bharata Natyam has been criticized by some feminists as an impossible ideal which enslaves women as they futilely attempt to attain *rasa* or translation through the dance. For example, Meduri writes:

The twentieth-century performing artist, living in a secular reality, struggles to embrace, emotionally and intellectually, the theoretical ideal that has been set up. If she cannot personally achieve the ideal, she repeats the theory. So theoretician and artist trace the same circle, the figure eight, in which both are held mutually captive.⁸⁵

As stated above, the spiritual quandary seems unanswerable and unsolvable for the female dancer. But, who can measure and define such an intangible and highly personal phenomenon as spiritual translation, wholeness, and enlightenment? I believe one must simply have faith in the possibility, power, and resultant liberation of the transcendent experience. Also empowering for women are the testimonies offered by lifelong dancers who have experienced Bharata Natyam's mystical, divine unity. Balawaraswati likened Bharata Natyam to a sacred temple, with the dancer moving through great halls toward its inner sanctum where "the drum beats die down to the simple and solemn chanting of sacred verses in the closeness of

⁸² Projesh Banerji, *Erotica in Indian Dance* (Atlantic Highland, N.J.: Humanities P, 1983) 22.

⁸³ It is important to note, however, that blatant or direct reference to sex in Bharata Natyam is forbidden. In the classical style of the dance, the leg is not often raised and never above hip level; furthermore, a pleated fan of cloth between the knees is always a component of the costume so that the crotch is never seen.

⁸⁴ qtd. in Bharucha 48.

⁸⁵ Meduri 9.

God. [. . .] The devotee takes to his heart the god he has so far glorified outside."⁸⁶ Sarabhai writes that the dance "becomes so personal and intimate an expression that the one who sees often becomes one with the one who seeks. [. . .] Even a moment of forgetfulness is the beginning of awareness. Art, at its greatest, liberates the spirit."⁸⁷ And although Meduri posits that "this theatre is an expression of just one religious world view,"⁸⁸ other teachers, choreographers, and dancers would describe the spiritual component and power of Bharata Natyam as knowing no one specific religion, God, or world view. Guru Indira Rajan declares that "any god can be there." For a Christian student's recital, Rajan "composed a *varnam* for her on Jesus."⁸⁹ Echoing these universal and inclusive sentiments, Mulk Raj Anand states that Bharata Natyam incites "intense awareness in those who can read behind the symbols of any faith the meaning of their own individual spiritual struggles."⁹⁰ As evidenced by these affirmations of the spiritual power inherent in the dance, women should embrace the metaphysical possibilities that refute objectification. Without Hindu ascription, the dance phenomenon alone still suggests an obliteration of the ego which facilitates a synthesis of a higher order. Fraleigh entitles this phenomenon "I-thou:"

The I-thou relation describes simple wholeness, the dissolution of objectivity. It is difficult to conceive as relation, because there is no *thing* -- it has disappeared. I do not live myself toward the dance when I am unified in it because I am not aware of it as a thing, I am its unfolding, with no thought about it. [. . .] As one attains her purposes in dance, the vibrant life of her dance appears. In mystical thought and art, present centeredness is valued as participation in the essence of God.⁹¹

⁸⁶ qtd. in Bharucha 49.

⁸⁷ Sarabhai, *Creations* 6.

⁸⁸ Meduri 4.

⁸⁹ qtd. in Gaston, "Dance" 161.

⁹⁰ Sunil Kothari, ed., *Bharata Natyam: Indian Classical Dance Art* (Bombay: Marg, 1979) 6.

⁹¹ Fraleigh 41-42.

In the concept of the "I-thou," I find great inspiration, hope, and empowerment for female dancers. In Bharata Natyam, I find living evidence of the "I-thou" as testified by its practitioners. It is here I rest my argument, for if I am looking for female power and freedom through dance as my rebuttal to feminist criticism, I have found it in this paradigm, i.e., in the transcendent possibilities of Bharata Natyam.