MEN IN MOHINIYATTAM:

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON GENDER BINARIES

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN DANCE STUDIES
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO

April 2021

ABSTRACT

Mohiniyattam is an Indian Classical Dance form that originated in the state of Kerala and is popularly referred as the "dance of the enchantress." As a historically female-dominated genre, men have experienced barriers to learning and performing Mohiniyattam due to gender-based norms and stigmas (that call into question their sexuality and label them as effeminate). But, since the 1980s there has been rising interest among men to learn and embody Mohiniyattam, although social and institutional agencies have continued to negate their ability to access the genre. This dissertation maps male dancers' movements between spaces (gendered, artistic, and geographical) as they are taking up Mohiniyattam—upon moving out of the orthodox Indian society into the Indian diaspora of Toronto—and establishing cultural exchange and the transmission of their unique perspectives. This ontological study draws on ethnographic research methods utilized during fieldwork conducted in Kolkata, India, and Toronto, Canada. With three primary case studies and archival and Internet research, I explore the experiences and challenges of male Mohiniyattam dancers who are negotiating hetero-centric biases, gendered norms and stigmas within their socio-political contexts and the dominant cultural ideology, and I consider the broader impacts of these gender-specific limitations and the audience gaze on the embodiment of *Lāsya* or *Tandav* (movement qualities) in the practice of Mohiniyattam.

DEDICATION

Om Sri Gurubhoy Namaha

Salutations to my Parents and *Gurus,*

who taught me to believe in myself and be resilient!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Motivation for the Research

My initial experience of Indian Classical Dance forms developed in Kolkata, India, in my early childhood. This relationship kept evolving over the years, with mixed emotions of love-hatred, desire-disgust. Learning Indian folk dances and Kathak for six years, I arrived at a juncture in which I was feeling disinterested with dance. It was during this time that I happened to witness a Bharatanatyam performance by none other than the doyen of Bharatanatyam, dancer Yamini Krishnamurthy. The day I saw this performance was the day I decided to pursue the art form of Bharatanatyam, and thus my journey into the acclaimed practice of the South Indian dance forms started, under the tutelage of the revered *Guru* Thankamani Kutty at the premier institute of Kalamandalam Kolkata, in India. Eventually it was my *Guru* who initiated me into Mohiniyattam, and I found this soulful genre to be my niche. The idea to question and search for relevant scholarly resources on this subject was inculcated by my Kathakali teacher, the late *Guru* P. Govindan Kutty. It was from the inspiration of both my *Gurus* that I set out on the journey of pursuing dance scholarship. My dancer's mind urged me to give a voice to and highlight the agency of male Mohiniyattam dancers, as I encountered this trend—of men going against the grain.

Previously, the thought of male dancers learning Mohiniyattam did not cross my mind; during my training period I learned and understood that this form was popularly referred to as the "dance of the enchantress," and is a dance form only to be performed by women. As I mentioned, it is the legend and the myth of the male God *Vishnu*, taking the disguise of a beautiful maiden

Mohini, that is ingrained in the nomenclature of the form itself (Sen, 2007; Pati, 2010; Muthirakkal, 2018). This raised the question in my mind—why is the male body absent in Mohiniyattam?

After several years of associating with the dance community, I realized that young men who were passionate about dancing, encountered many challenges, especially when they were attracted to a dance form like Mohiniyattam. Still, in graduate school, I was attending training sessions in Kolkata with leading Mohiniyattam exponents from across the country when I realized that although male participants were allowed to audit workshop sessions, they were not encouraged to participate. On the contrary, they were advised to pursue "masculine" dance forms like Kathakali, to be able to "dance like a man" (Dhananjayan, 1992). These particular moments raised several questions in terms of gender, the body and stereotypes, regarding the accessibility of Mohiniyattam in particular. I wondered, is Mohiniyattam not suitable for all? Am I fortunate to be born with a female body, to have easy access to the genre without any stigma?

Male participation in Mohiniyattam became a research topic with my relocation to Toronto in 2012, where I had the impetus to study this question of men in Mohiniyattam in the Department of Dance at York University. In Toronto, I was introduced to a number male Mohiniyattam dancers from India. Performing and practicing Mohiniyattam with them, miles away from India, re-confirmed the versatility of the genre and made me realize how the male maneuvering of the form enriched my pedagogical appreciation. Sharing the stage with male Mohiniyattam dancers was challenging in terms of complementing each other in the process. I saw that these male dancers had a tendency to shy away from performances and their primary focus was to train students and choreograph Mohiniyattam dance numbers.

Thus, my motivation to conduct this research has been building from my experiences with Mohiniyattam as a practitioner for the last two decades, and as I realized the scarcity of scholarly research on male dancers in the genre. Indeed, male Bharatanatyam and Contemporary dancer and scholar Hari Krishnan claims that there is hardly any research on the role of men in dance; that it is "virtually non-existent" (2009, p. 379). He further comments on how men in various roles, as visionaries and teachers, have played a significant part in the transformation and revival of all the reconstructed dance forms in post-colonial India. Visionaries like Rabindranath Tagore and Vallathol Narayana Menon played major roles in the 20th century in the revival and establishment of a respectable status to the profession of dance (Banerjee, 2011, 2013; Bandyopadhyay, 2020).

A critical overview into the gendered challenge of male participation in Indian dance and their life stories showcases the struggle they went through and how they altered the audience gaze in post-colonial society. As scholars have shown, we learn much from the life and work of male dancers who are torch bearers in their respective genres—dancers such as Uday Shankar (Mukhopadhyay, 1991), Ram Gopal Varma (Jayakrishnan, 2011), *Guru* Kelucharan Mohapatra (Ghadei, 2015), *Guru* Bipin Singh (Kothari, 2017), *Guru* Birju Maharaj (Kothari, 1990) and *Guru* Vempati Chinna Satyam (Kothari, 2001) are exemplary(You may also see YouTube Links for interviews and video clippings of these stalwarts in Appendix A).

Furthermore, the experiences of such dancers demonstrate how they restored the respectability of dance as a cultural practice from the "illicit" interpretations, and they illustrate the struggle against the age-old "misconceptions of the public and the mis-direction of the teachers" in the field (Dhananjayan, 1991, p. 24). Importantly, their stories offer examples of how male dancers have overcome the "societal attitudes and perceptions regarding male physicality

[that] restrict the ways in which males are encouraged and allowed to move their bodies" (Polasek and Roper, 2011, p.175). The embodied experiences of these torch bearers (of different Indian dance genres) significantly highlight the sanitization effort in reclaiming dance in the post-colonial era by the elites and the middle-class Indians which created sexual binaries within several dance forms, modelled on western societal values associated with a male dancing body (Burt, 1995; Kothari, 2003; Morcom, 2013; Ganesh, 2016). This history was both interesting and inspiring to me; it provoked me to explore the evolving scenario of Mohiniyattam in relation to the larger histories, views and values around men dancing.

Theoretical Framework

There has been much scholarly research, in the fields of dance and gender studies, critiquing the exclusion and inclusion of bodies in terms of accessibility of dance forms; Judith Butler (1990, 1993), Phillip B. Zarrilli (1988), Judith Lynne Hanna (1988), Jenny Nilsson (2004), Ramsay Burt (2007) and Doug Risner (2008a, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b) are a few notable scholars. Of these, the theoretical framework of this dissertation aligns closely with Butler's theory of the "performativity of gender." From within this theory, I situate the embodiment of Mohiniyattam by men and analyze how, in the process of embodiment, they are "becoming" a Mohiniyattam dancer.

The study of the ephemeral execution of movements and tangible observations of the dancing bodies (who are physiologically male), are observed in lieu of scholarly research conducted on male dancers and areas where we see bodies—male and female—negotiating their identity to appropriate the "other" gender. This study examines the ephemeral movements of dancing male bodies because there is not enough research on male dancers and gender-bending,

and in doing so I am thereby filling a gap in academia. Butler's framework guides me critically and kinaesthetically to review the process of participation, by men, who are appropriating or overcoming the limitations and stigmas associated with the Mohiniyattam (1990). Using Butler's discussion of gender identity, I question the gendered representation of Mohiniyattam (assigned by the society); and specifically, I explore the eligibility to pursue the dance form based on sex (in the biological sense) and the correlated gender representations and their effects on the dance's performance by a man or woman.

Performativity

Butler argues that a "masculine" man and "feminine" woman are social constructs that are assigned on a contextual basis by language within a social environment and are prescribed through repeated acts that have been historically embedded in society. The idea of performativity, introduced in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990), harnesses the concept that "[g]ender is itself a kind of becoming or activity... hence... one is not born a woman, one becomes one... in other words, "sex" imposes an artificial unity on an otherwise discontinuous set of attributes... as both discursive and perceptual" (1990, p.152-155).

Historically, Mohiniyattam in the society of Kerala reflects the presumably "innate" differences between men and women, which differ along cultural and temporal lines—as I discussed in chapter three, keeping in mind the unique social structure of the state of its origin. Every aspect of human life, from the clothing we wear and the jobs we engage in, to the words we say, is impacted in some way by our collective perception of how our gender is supposed to act within a specific cultural context from our historical and social environment. The stark male-

female dichotomy has traditionally been justified through biology; however, Butler's study challenges this viewpoint. In other words, the idea that gender and sex are not prescribed biologically, but rather constructed through society to create a pre-assigned code of behaviour associated to specific biological body types, was set forth by Butler. Thus, Butler introduced the theory of "gender performativity," stating: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (1990, p.25).

Theorist Sara Salih, in *On Judith Butler and Performativity* (2007), summarizes Butler's argument. According to Salih, all bodies are gendered from the moment they are born, assigning the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no natural body that pre-exists its cultural inscription (2007). She condenses this into the idea that "gender is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (2007, p.55). Further, as Salih elaborates, individual identity based on gender is derived from social norms, set "within a highly rigid regulatory frame," and the reaction of a self, the repetitions of the act acquired, then "become" the gender "identity" (1990). This perspective is important for my understanding and exploration of male participation in Mohiniyattam; from the theoretical framework of "gender performativity" I can analyze the role of gender norms in the context of my research—how male dancers are doing and undoing gender norms in their embodiment of Mohiniyattam (Butler, 1990, p.25). I extend from Butler to argue that gender is equivalent to performance which is not something one *is*, it is something one *does*; gender is an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a "doing" rather than a "being" (Butler 1990, pg.25; Salih, 2007, p.55).

This “doing” gender rather than “being” gender is the crux of the “gender performativity” occurring in Mohiniyattam (Butler, 1990, p.25).

Since Butler’s conceptualization of “gender performativity” there have been arguments and counter arguments (Butler, 1990, p.25); disagreements in recent paradigms and discourse analyses, cultural studies and poststructuralism. One branch of critique stems from the conflation of the terms: performativity and performance. Critics argue that no one actively thinks about performing gender at all moments; therefore, they say, gender performativity must not be real. However, gender performativity does not claim that every human being wakes up and actively decides to perform their gender. Quite the contrary, the theory posits that the construct of gender has such an all-encompassing role in society that every human being, at times consciously or subconsciously, reinforces and reiterates their gender, performatively. This reiteration is so pervasive it creates the illusion of naturality.

Critics like Susan Bordo argue that Butler reduces gender to language, and she contends that the physical body is a major part of being the gender and thus opposed the concept of performativity (2004). Bordo emphasizes the “real” flesh and blood body, from a material perspective, while Butler approaches the body from a theoretical conviction. According to Bordo, a body is a metaphorical product of a culture (2004). Nancy Fraser, a critical theorist, suggests Butler’s focus on performativity distances an individual from the daily activities of engaging with one another in society, and in turn this distances ourselves from the self. Critics of gender performativity often mistook gender performance for staged performance and used that confusion to discredit the theory.

Butler's foundational writings on the topic, from *Gender Trouble* to *Bodies That Matter*, generally shies away from explicit mention of performance modes like dance and theater, as "performance" is not restricted to the society but extends to the stage as well—when we talk about gender performance broadly (1990; 1993). While Butler eschews explicit performance in favor of everyday "performances," performative practices such as dance offer a unique lens through which to study performativity due to their positioning as idealized representations of society and culture. In stark contrast to the more subtle, reiterated acts that constitute our daily lives, every aspect of a dance performance is highly intentional and, in the case of Indian Classical Dance forms especially, they are representative of a culture, a lifestyle and above all an aesthetic representation of life. Thus, an analysis of gendered performance in Mohiniyattam has the potential to show the differences in an idealized gender expression, both cross-culturally and historically.

After applying Butler's performativity framework to the analysis of male maneuvering of Mohiniyattam, I equate gender performativity with the concept of *Ekahari Abhinaya* as theorized in the text of *Nāṭyaśāstra* where a single dancer enacts multiple characters as a mode of presentation. Mohiniyattam dances have different degrees of sensuality with an incredibly sensual and gendered representation, through female embodiment. Thus, I draw from various aspects of dance, including attention to the body, movement and costume, to analyze the gender ideals performed in this genre with an analysis of male performance. Using this as a base, I am able to elaborate on the societal implications and effects of gender performativity and the ideals and constructs that it upholds. This analysis will show the importance and impact of gender performativity; how the performativity of idealized gender roles upholds and reinforces the heteropatriarchy, and how the role of ethno-identity dance figures in this discursive work.

Dance has always been an integral part of cultural identity. Traditional dance forms like Mohiniyattam and all Indian Classical Dances are not simply dances; they are representations of the culture they come from. Performances of these dances display idealized versions of that culture, notable in numerous elements—from costume to physical appearance to precision of the dances. Through these methods, traditional dance performances present idealized forms of gender. As sociologist Helen Thomas writes, in her study of dance, gender and culture, "The men's dance style is a crystallization of what it means to be a male member of their culture. The women's dance style is a crystallization of what it means to be a female member of that culture" (1995, p.12). In these two vignettes, gender is portrayed in vastly different ways in Mohiniyattam, from gendered movement to dynamics that exhibit dominance.

According to Butler, because gender constitutes imposed external factors they are constructed by discursive gender performances (2004). She considers these embodiments of acts that are approximated to reproduce ideal behaviour (2004, p. 48). There is a sense of an essentialist approach, of fitting gender into a clear-cut definition, excluding the complexities and the plurality within a particular group. Butler questions whether there is a "right" way to be gay or to be straight, asserting the discrimination against homosexuals that do not fit into the framework, and instead suggests that gender is fluid, unclear and even implies that it is not appropriate to construct the gender identity within a fixed set of rules and societal probes (2004). Fitting identities into rigid boundaries can be limiting not only in terms of sexuality or gender identity but also in other spheres of life. For instance, gender boundaries in the popular culture of Kerala restrict and set up orthodox boundaries for the accessibility of dance forms.

Masculinity

Another theoretical background that I draw from is on the subject of masculinity to understand and assess the definition of masculinity, in consideration of male dancers in Mohiniyattam. The concept of masculinity helps with understanding how men are negotiating gender protocols of a dance form that is currently female dominated; how they are embodying multiple masculinities and reconstructing their identities within the hegemonic constructs of Indian masculinity.

A project on social inequalities in school inspired R. W. Connell to theorize masculinities and problematize the sex-role theory (2002; 2009). Connell asserts that socializing agencies like the family and schools initiate boys and girls and teach them to conform with an act by internalizing the different complementary rules based on career orientation (2009). The focus is internalized expectations, attitudes and traits which obscures power and structural inequality and misrepresents the gendering process defining masculinity (2002). The research team finds that schools actually foster hierarchical masculinities and femininities, valorizing some while marginalizing others (2002). The project not only contains her first theorization of "hegemonic masculinity" but also motivates her to develop a more sophisticated social theory of gender and masculinities (Connell, 2002, 2005, 2009; also see Wedgewood, 2009).

In India, men and masculinity are considered synonymous with bravery and heroic deeds—which coincides with Connell's theory (2002, 2005, 2009). Being a macho personality endowed with social and economic powers, within the family a man stands as a person empowered with absolute agency over the rest of the family members and is a person who cannot indulge in trivial activities and acts which are commonly done by the women in society. Emerging from this critical

environment, today we see a growing corpus of literature that only focuses on masculinity in all its diverse interpretations. More recently anthropological and historical studies have traced the construction of masculinity in its various forms and that scene contributes and intervenes in the masculinity studies generated in South Asia.

Building from Connell's ground-breaking conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity, which is believed to be a social construct and understood as synonymous with patriarchy, I propose that masculinity is ingrained in the concept of gender performativity, in the of doing gender, in relation to and in tandem with other individuals in specific spaces and social settings. This is mirrored in the social structures and hierarchies and reflected through Indian arts. It is interesting to note, within a dominant patriarchal set up, how a minority group of men are challenging the stereotypical concepts of masculinity understood and propounded by the South Asian community in relation to their desire to pursue specific professional careers. Dance of course stands out among these professional choices that men indulge in, and as a result they become victims of social stigmatization, peer pressure and bullying, as well as experience a lack of family and economical support (which I will discuss further in Chapter Three).

This is a particular type of masculinity that I assign the status of stigmatized masculinity, due to their affinity with dance which coexists within the larger framework of gender, in terms of the experiences and practices that a man encounters. The intersectional and relational nature of masculinity is just as important to feminist literary and cultural studies and falls within the Butlerian model of gender and sex, which are discursively produced. This is a primary reason why I use the framework of masculinity to analyze male articulations of Mohiniyattam in conjunction with Butler’s concept of gender performativity.

In South Asia discourses of caste, class, sexuality, region and gender contour ways of being and becoming, both authorizing and restricting the range of gender practices even today. Thus, questions of representation became key in terms of Mohiniyattam (Lemos, 2016; Kavya Krishna, 2014). I analyze the different shades of masculinity through my fieldwork in Indian, where men are nurturing their passion, dancing a graceful, "feminine" form, within an Indian cultural and social environment. I also analyze men who, despite migrating in search of work, are able to continue their dancing career outside India (in Toronto, Canada).

Nikki Wedgewood critiques the use of Connell's theory, suggesting, "[h]egemonic masculinity is sometimes used as a free-floating concept, in contrast to Connell's original concept, which is firmly anchored in the hierarchy of historically specific masculinities, including subordinate, complicit and marginalised masculinities" (2009, p.335). This tension provokes and directly targets the presence of the male body in Mohiniyattam which is at the heart of my research. It seems that these male Mohiniyattam dancers, while challenging hegemonic notions of what male dancers should be like, are simultaneously recreating these ideas through the embodiment of Mohiniyattam movements and dance. A discussion of multiple masculinities calls for a much more nuanced understanding of how multiple masculinities are negotiated (Pascoe, 2011). By conducting a narrative analysis of the ways men construct identities in the dance world, I explore how these men articulate and negotiate their identities through hegemonic constructions of masculinity (Wedgwood, 2009, p.331).

In my research I ask the following broad questions: how and why are certain forms of masculinity prioritized while others are marginalized in the Indian cultural context in the contemporary moment? How does the dance fraternity establish, challenge or negotiate different

masculinities? To what extent are these men challenging the theoretical concept of hegemonic masculinity? To probe at ideas of manliness articulated in particular geographical contexts, how might the juxtaposition of diverse masculinities engaging with Mohiniyattam put pressure on and challenge the stereotypical notion of hegemonic masculinity?

In *Men and Masculinity* (2015), Nigel Edley suggests that masculinity is a matter of identification with the social constructs and physical dimensions that society has imposed on the male body. The condition of the state of mind can be related to "Object Relation Theory" whereby an individual can strongly associate one's identity with the inner self. This is significant in the context of male Mohiniyattam dancers; Edley's discussion provides further guidelines for my assessments of these men's strong desires to participate in the dance form in spite of the social stigmas. This will initiate a narrative of how these men are negotiating and constructing identities within the hegemonic domain of Indian masculinity, as they are torch bearers—pushing boundaries and challenging the stereotypical concept of "dancing like a man."

There is the coexistence of opposites to experience the ultimate and to transcend the material and the mundane; the outer realm to inner consciousness; from the seen to the unseen. The male dancers and students are constantly in a rupture, to make a cohesive organic self and to bring an interconnectedness of the body with movements in dance. Kavya Krishna rightfully claims that the commercialization of Mohiniyattam through representations of women's bodies in tourism and films "produces, defines and sustains a gender ideal for a regional feminine identity through bodily practices" (2014, p. 123). Dance is a space that gives the freedom to express oneself and yet remains a medium of culture and history, particularly scripted and categorized through male and female bodies.

There are two specific approaches to problematizing masculinity in the sphere of dance training that are relevant to my study. One primarily targets the creation of a macho male dancer, that we all (socially) uphold as the appropriate representation of men's behavior with strong encouragement from dance teachers who tell students "to dance like a man" (Dhananjayan, 1991). The other is focused on nurturing the inner desires and preferences of the student, regardless of their consistency or lack thereof with the hegemonic ideals of being a (biological) "man." To explore these two perspectives in the fraternity of dance, in post-colonial India, it is significant to understand the definition of subaltern identity and define the excluded "other," with reference to male exclusion in Mohiniyattam even after seven decades of freedom from colonial rule.

Subaltern Identity

In her essay "Can the subaltern speak?" Gayatri Spivak Chakraborty claims subaltern subjects need to acquire the voice and agency to speak (2010). I focus on the nuances of the term "subaltern" and position male Mohiniyattam dancers under this category of subjects, focusing on the disenfranchised group within the highly feminized dance form. When it comes to gender, theoreticians of post-colonialism primarily consider the status of women in reference to the past and post-colonial history. We see how Spivak's discussions are based on the perils of the women in the "Third World" with reference to their cultural position and representation.

As post-structuralism would have it, Spivak's argument is based on Foucault and mentions that he "is correct in suggesting 'to make visible the unseen" (2010, p. 27). This can also mean "a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history, and which had not been recognized as having any moral or historical value" (Spivak, 2010,

p.27-28). This can be interpreted as human consciousness and choices constructed discursively in social situations within the colonial and post-colonial era. It is a probe into political subjectivity; an ability to access the uninhabited periphery of the unseen (male dancing bodies) within the framework of the definition of the term "subaltern" that has brought about transformative analysis of colonialism using deconstructionist methods. Theories in post-colonial studies by Edward Said (1989), Homi Bhaba (2004) and Spivak have been acknowledged universally, but we do not see the inclusion of men and masculinity within their theoretical periphery—with the exception of the book by Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The "manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali" in the late nineteenth century* (1995).

It is difficult to agree on the Indigenous cultural and religious inheritances playing the sole criteria with power and agency in defining the male identity in independent India. National identity created out of myths in history from racialization and shared experiences of social, economic, military and political elements plays a crucial role in building up the identity of Indian men in post-colonial India. One cannot deny how the colonial past contributed, alongside the alternative traditions and initiatives, to building identities—with British colonial ideologies ingrained in the Indian psyche and socio-cultural environment. The ideology behind making dance inappropriate, a vocation with proximity to prostitution, was inculcated with Victorian ideals of morality, sex and womanhood. This view (affecting the accessibility of dance) was dominantly believed in colonial days to be a suitable profession for women, and the woman's body. Thus, it was ingrained in Indian psyche that it is inappropriate and shameful for men to dance.

Men in the post-colonial era have played an integral role in the perpetuation of arts and dance forms in various regions of India—in the role of creator, conductor and performer. In Andhra

Pradesh, Brahmin men adopted the female form in terms of attire and attitude to participate in *Bhagavata Mela,* a dance-drama performance, which eventually was reconstructed as Kuchipudi. With the reconstruction, men acquired the role of *Gurus* and eventually the art form was taken up by women practitioners. Similarly in Kerala, the tradition of performing female characters by taking on their costuming and attitude by a male dancer is still a persistent practice in the theatrical dance form of Kathakali. But as soon as a man intends to indulge in a graceful dance form like Mohiniyattam, students and practitioners are faced with multiple challenges and stigmatization. They become the silenced "other," and take on a subaltern identity.

This is reminiscent of the theme of beauty, particularly feminine beauty, which is based on ideas of purity, submission and docile behavior—also informed by British etiquettes—which in turn provoked the Indian male to create their national identity in contrast to the position of women. Mrinalini Sinha discusses colonial masculinity and bridges the gap between gender studies and post-colonial theories by analyzing the stereotypes of the "effeminate Bengali" and "manly Englishman" (1995). Being a historian, her book focuses on British policies and how these impacted the shifting discourses between British and Bengali masculinities, a struggle in power structures which was eventually rebuffed and reconfigured (1995). Sinha's work aligns with the oral narrative of one of my participants, Hari Vattappilli, who recollects his personal story of struggle growing up in the socio-cultural environment of Kerala, where he was constantly stigmatized for his association with dance and his intentions to learn and embody Mohiniyattam. Vattappilli spoke about the social attitude as the "residue of colonial rule left behind for the Indians to overcome only with passing years" (Interview, 16th February 2020).

Post-colonialism is an interdisciplinary movement that attempts to reshape the past, present and future of a colonized society. With generations of lost identity, unvoiced oppression and exclusion, this multilateral, interdisciplinary area is moved beyond the point of departure. Moreover, I aim to forefront under-studied male subjects to explore performativity and the articulation of a feminized dance, to highlight concerning issues and study them with new approaches and views. The strategy for implementing the theory of subaltern identity is an attempt to reveal the reality, question the unquestionable and posit the "other" beside the "self." Besides this, concerning the issue of objectivity, stagnation and homogeneity, it also paves way for criticism and further studies in multi-disciplinary subjects including performing arts.

Research Context and Questions

Male participation in dance has been previously documented with reference to multiple dance and theatre practices, ranging from Western Ballet to Indian Classical Dances like Kathakali and Bharatanatyam (Zarrilli, 1988; Burt, 2007; Risner, 2008a; Hari Krishnan, 2009). In his book *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle and Sexualities* (2007), Ramsay Burt assigns the creation of stereotypical discrimination against men in dance to the historical misperceptions that dance is an inappropriate activity for men. As a result of this misconception, male students are often victims of bullying, isolation and stigmatization. In the family, they encounter social discriminations; in educational institutions and within the peer groups young men feel isolated and their association with dance raises questions about their sexual identity. Male dancers constantly face challenges to claim their identity as students, dancers and practitioners, from the moment they proclaim their intention to dance; in the school environment they fear associations with effeminacy, and in studio

settings they are forced to compete for attention as a minority population and to claim their foothold against the female dominated peers. Raktim Chanda, a Mohiniyattam student from Kolkata and one of my participants, demonstrates this, stating:

> Being a male when I had formally started my training in the beginning much of an importance was given to females since they used to perform in the front row due to the concept beauty & we boys had to stand in the extreme back row which could only be viewed with a binocular or telescope or rather not at all seen in the crowd, so a bit looked down upon in the initial phase (Email communication, 25th March 2020).

In this dissertation, I discuss the doing and undoing of Mohiniyattam by male participants in Kolkata, India, and Toronto, Canada. Male dancing bodies are negotiating boundaries, socio-cultural repercussions and challenges, in the process of embodying the soft and languid quality of movements based on the concept of *Lāsya* which associates these movements with femininity. As a result, men are considered effeminate by their family, peers and the society at large. Yet, in spite of stigmatization and a minimal support system, we see more and more men becoming interested in embodying the dance form. And this is the area of ethnographic research I embark upon. Specifically, I ask: What are the gender norms and expectations that are significant in embodying Mohiniyattam? How does dance become a space where the gender norms and expectations of a society are reflected, reinforced and reproduced? And, how are these male dancers generating an alternate space in dance to challenge the gendered boundaries and norms that can in turn benefit future dancers who might want to try different dance forms?

Although it is fair to say that dance is an artistic expression of ephemeral movements of the body, there are styles of dance that associate different movements to certain social roles and

practices, as in the case of Mohiniyattam—which is a cultural practice often used as an outward expression of a regional matrilineal tradition (discussed in the next section). Cultural dances, like this one, are often expressions of the traditions from which they originate and are celebrations of the history and values of local cultures. They are performed to communicate social ideologies, cultural ethos and philosophical manifestations. The goal of this dissertation is not to resolve the question of whether male dancers who are taking up Mohiniyattam go against the traditional practice or not, but to present male dancers' individual stories in an accessible manner through academic research; to bring together the different perspectives of various participants and to promote productive and critical dialogue through the analysis of those components (with a focus on three case studies).

Men who are pursuing the art form are faced with pedagogical drawbacks in terms of its predominantly female context as dance items and costumes too follow gender expectations and norms. Other challenges include the stigmatization from family, peers and society for their intention and desire to embody Mohiniyattam. In Indian society, the general view stereotype men who perform Mohiniyattam as effeminate. Though, there are rare exceptions in which some have supportive parents and family who stand by them. My study brings together the perspectives of both the fortunate and not so fortunate male dancers, their challenges and what they refer to as the "adjustments" made to negotiate their circumstances. This dissertation also delves into the relationship between power, agency and the desire to embody Mohiniyattam against the stereotypical attributes of the societal description of "masculinity"—which is represented and embodied in Kerala's male-dominated dance form, Kathakali (Zarrilli, 1984, p.2).

In the eastern part of the world, along with these stereotypical challenges that a man needs to negotiate, we also get to see the other side of the picture. We have in-depth analytical documentation of male dominance in the practice of the dance-theatre form, Kathakali, by such scholars as Zarrilli (2000, 1988, 1984) and Nilsson (2004). Through their research we learn that due to "weaker female constitution" women are not allowed to "penetrate the world of Kathakali, and men continue to take on female as well as male roles in what is described as the 'vigorous,' 'masculine,' dynamic dance-drama" (Nilsson, 2004, p.11). Nilsson has identified Kathakali as a "site for processing the transformation where the dance form offers spaces where gender boundaries can be and are crossed" (2004, p.21). From the perspective of embodiment politics in the state of Kerala we notice a sharp demarcation between the two genres of Kathakali and Mohiniyattam, and rarely see dancers crossing these (gendered) boundaries (Shivaji, 1986; Rele, 1992; Nilsson, 2004; Lemos, 2011).

Dissertation Structure and Chapter Summaries

The structure of this dissertation is based on three broad concentric circles, delimiting my three field sites (Kerala, Kolkata and Toronto) and the three primary case studies I focus on. Therefore, the chapters are organized according to the data gathered during my fieldwork. First, I contextualize the practice of Mohiniyattam within the socio-political history of Kerala; second, I explore the effects of this history on the practice of the dance form as it is being taken up by male practitioners, framing the research within ethno-sociological research, gender studies and dance studies; and third, I unfold my three case studies, engaging with male dancers in Kolkata, India,

and who have immigrated to Toronto, Canada, who are highly influenced by the graceful movement quality of the genre of Mohiniyattam.

Chapter one, the introduction, situates my research topic. I also unfold the purpose of my research, the theoretical frames guiding my study in the Indian diaspora of Toronto, Canada and the Bengali community of Kolkata, India. To frame this study, I introduce the scholarly research that has critiqued male participation in the dance on a global platform and note how the researcher establishes trajectories to the Indian counterpart within the dance fraternity. The research questions are raised within the theoretical frameworks and gender theories by Judith Butler, as well as with considerations from masculinity studies following R.W. Connell and Gayatri Spivak Chakraborty's sociological and post-colonial interpretations. A critical analysis of the theoretical framework within which the research questions are positioned Butler's concept of "gender performativity" is the approach that I utilize to study and observe male participation in Mohiniyattam (see Appendices E, F and G). To analyze the participants in this research, masculinity, as framed by gender theorist Connell, aids the research with a structural framework to locate the multiple attributes ingrained within the study. How and why men are invisible in the world of Mohiniyattam is studied from the perspective of the "other" who stands as the excluded "other" within the tradition and practice of the dance form. To define the identity of the excluded "other," I draw from subaltern studies with a post-colonial influence on the generation of the "*bhadralok,*" the Indian gentlemen who are expected to refrain from participating in any feminine activity, especially dancing.

The second chapter outlines the historical, geographical, socio-cultural and political context of Mohiniyattam through literature review. Drawing on the influences of the social

structure and the matrilineal family relations I study the causes of Mohiniyattam being a secular practice in contrast to the connotation of dance being only a temple artform. Also the stereotypical interpretations of *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* has been analysed to understand how the movement qualities got gendered association with time.

This is followed by third chapter with discussion of my research methods, and how this work becomes effective through pragmatic implementation of ethnographic tools. The research methods undergo a lot of improvisation due to multiple hurdles that I encountered during the viral pandemic of 2020. Personal life and research also experience a lot of reshuffling to allow for space and opportunity to continue, both in spite of major financial constraints and travel restrictions and social distancing. Under such circumstances intelligent utilization of technological advancement comes to the rescue. How the Internet and social media takes the central position in conducting and completing the field work is detailed. With the traditional ethnographic tools that are administered through the virtual medium of communication and within a time span of two years I was able to collect enough data to complete this dissertation. This, along with auto-ethnographic inputs of being a dancer-teacher-researcher and collaboration with my male Mohiniyattam dance partners with whom I had the chance to share space adds to the perspective as an insider. Thus, my positionality here takes on the dual role of the observer and the observed.

In chapter four, I address and reflect on the re-presentation of dance since time immemorial, as it underwent a shift in status and respectability, and this significant query is explored with attention to the history, tradition and social customs of the *Devadasi* system. A scarcity of scholarly resources on the male teachers who nurtured the genre of Mohiniyattam in history leads us to personal accounts that have been gathered through semi-structured interviews with the teachers

and practitioners of the genre. Reviewing scholarly literature on the origin, revival and reconstruction of Mohiniyattam is an attempt to generate a cohesive understanding of the dominant influences on the genre throughout its long history. It also sheds light on major male contributors in the role of patron, rescuer and aesthetic visionary to re-establish the dance form as a respectable profession in the stigmatized social environment during post-colonial India. I discuss the evolution of Mohiniyattam in detail. I acknowledge how the dance form was initiated by the philanthropist Vallathol Narayana Menon during 1930s, within the vociferous reform and cultural renaissance, with the goal to sanitize the dance form and regain the cultural practice from the closed quarters of the dancers who were actively involved in the sex trade. The dance practitioners all over India, who were originally female dancers, or *devadasis*, during the day and prostitutes by night, went through multiple layers of transplantation and transformation with repeated foreign infiltrations finally culminating in colonial rule (Venu and Paniker, 1983, p.1-6). The ultimate blow came with the launch of the Anti-Nautch Movement that started in the late 19th century, as Mohiniyattam was also not spared from that crackdown. Displacement and revival of Mohiniyattam, from hibernation to the time when performances shifted to the proscenium theatre, started only around the early 20th century, after 1932. Slowly but steadily the dance form acquired the status of representing the sub-culture for the women of Kerala (Kavya Krishna, 2014, p.36-49).

Chapter five considers the social, contemporary, political and economic contexts which influence Mohiniyattam in three distinct geographical locations of Kerala, Kolkata, and Toronto. I recount how the dance form has been in practice, since the time of reconstruction, and how it eventually travelled to other sites. Through the course of my fieldwork, I observed the transition of the genre from one site to the other in a gradual effort to share the skills and allow the transition

of the dance vocabulary onto multiple body types. The societal influences based on gender regimes and sexual politics seems to vary between three sites of fieldwork: the similarities and differences based on gender politics that exist in Kolkata and Toronto are different, compared to that of Kerala. In particular, the type of relationship in *Guru-Shishya parampara*, between the student and teacher involved in the pedagogy of Mohiniyattam; the accessibility of the genre to any body type irrespective of the gender; and organizational policies of inclusion-exclusion based on caste and gender brings forward a wide spectrum of responses from the participants.

Most of this research is dependent on oral narratives recorded in the course of the fieldwork. The discussion is also supported by the print media and current events related to men in Mohiniyattam. This elucidates the dance form of Mohiniyattam in the three different geographical locations of Kerala and Kolkata in India and Toronto in Canada. The purpose is to analyze the journey of Mohiniyattam from the land of Kerala to Kolkata and Toronto. I will discuss how dancers and teachers moved and migrated for better job opportunities and eventually traveled with their regional artistic and cultural practices. As a result, we see a reiteration of the process of migration over the years to western lands and a repetition of the same process of transfer (of skills acquired and embodied) in the 21st century.

Chapter six focuses on three case studies, that feature my participants Kalamandalam Siddharth, Rohit Tyagi and Hari Vattappilli, presents the narratives of male dancers and students in Kolkata and Toronto. Through their narratives, we learn about the process of shifting away from Mohiniyattam and the primary reason for the shift, which is due to social stigma and peer pressure to maintain their masculinity and status as a man, and to nullify any related conversation which brings their sexual orientation under scrutiny. The transgression or adaptation of movement

qualities into another genre is their way to channel their emotional outbursts. These three case studies project three different perspectives of being a male and at different junctions of being a dancer—as a student, an educator-performer and an IT professional. Their persistence and perseverance in sticking with dance demonstrates how male dancers are transcending stereotypical ideologies and creating role models for the many other aspiring male artists in the society. Deconstructing gender as a social construct is evident in the case studies.

Chapter seven assesses how the historic travel of Mohiniyattam to Kolkata, which was initiated by the Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, culminates into a new dance style, and studies how the movement vocabulary is inspiring dancers and choreographers. Men are gracefully transcending the hegemony of historical gender norms and traversing the path of rupture by aesthetically indoctrinating Mohiniyattam vocabulary into their creative works. Bengal is the vibrant space of creativity where the male dancers have been dominating the contemporary dance scene through the brilliant utilization of the Indian Classical Dance vocabularies, since the time of Tagore. This chapter takes us on the continuing journey of Mohiniyattam, and discusses how eventually it has travelled to Bengal where it is influencing the contemporary, creative dance styles in that state. Today, with formal training in multiple dance forms, male choreographers are deconstructing the movements to suit their artistic expressions in a versatile manner without sacrificing tradition and authenticity.

Chapter eight, the concluding chapter unfolds how the inter-changing roles of male dancers, teachers, choreographers' construct and deconstruct one's journey as a human being, and how this becomes essential in the growth of the art form and an individual artist—in their true

commitment to arts and their ability to live their passion for dance. It is an evaluation of thesis with future endeavors which might springboard new avenues in dance research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

To assess the current positionality of men in the environment of the origin, survival and reconstruction of the dance form Mohiniyattam, we need an analytical and chronological understanding of the transformation and interpretation of the practice. In terms of the genre, which is predominantly practiced by women, I critically analyze this dance form from historical, sociological and ethnographic perspectives, building from dance studies scholars such as Kanak Rele (1992), Bharati Shivaji (1986) and J.A. Lemos (2011). Following this contextualization, frameworks from gender and masculinity studies scholars, such as those of Judith Butler (1990, 1993) and R.W. Connell (2002; 2009), are important for deeper analysis. Other resources range from scholarly articles, online dissertations, books, newspaper reviews and documentaries available in print as well as digital media and archives of premier institutions and libraries which I draw on for further support. The emergence of the male dancing bodies in the genre around the late 20th century has not yet been recorded in scholarly research but there are ample instances of dance performance reviews by critics which are available on the Internet along with videos on YouTube.

In *The Art of Mohiniyattam* (1986) Shivaji argues that Mohiniyattam is quite paradoxical with respect to gender, being a genre where the opposite sex rules. This argument highlights how current trends within the practice, in which men are taking up Mohiniyattam, raise important questions: How did the vocabulary of dance and particular movement qualities become attached to the male and the female body of the performer as markers of gender? How is the social behavior

or code of conduct historically assigned to the body of a man or a woman in a society, and how does this become reflected in dance (as well as music and the arts in general)? Similar trends within other genres of Indian Classical Dance have also questioned the gendered bias which can be noted in the history of reconstruction and cultural renaissance in the post-colonial era; particularly because the avant-garde approaches in the Indian dance scenario were constituted by male dancers like Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal, Kelucharan Mohapatra and Birju Maharaj. Moreover, these dancers reconstructed the Indian dance scenario in the post-colonial era with their performances and training of a new generation, locally and globally.

Dance scholar Hari Krishnan (2009) shares his "ungendered" experiences with the hereditary dancers from the past. He goes further to explore the concept of eroticism and the sensual aspects assigned to the *Lāsya Bhava*. His critical analysis between the difference of vulgarity and sensuousness executed through dancing bodies, speaks of negotiating ideas and representations of gender. He explains how the displacement of identity, which feeds into the day-to-day discourses, drastically affects the shaping of individual, gendered identity. Based on these theoretical approaches, a comparative study on female characterization in male-dominated theatre form Kathakali, helps to position my research subjects (Zarrilli, 1988; Nilsson, 2004).

Rele's book *Mohiniyattam: The Lyrical Dance* (1992) is a primary resource to compare and contrast the affinity with dance, based on the movement quality, because it exquisitely brings forth the lyrical qualities from the physical as well as psychological level. As a trained Kathakali artist and a Mohiniyattam trainer, performer and researcher, Rele's understanding of Mohiniyattam, and articulation of facts stems from a deep, technical and spiritual perspective.

Identity and the transformative quality in Mohiniyattam are strongly believed by scholars and dancers, like Rele (1992) and Shivaji (1986), to be spiritual and philosophical.

The philosophical significance of dance has been studied by Francis Sparshott who inquired about the philosophy of dance from the perspective of "practice" and the view of "dance as a transformation of the person dancing" (1995, p.113-130). His thesis involves the deep meanings of dance in relation to the self-transformation experienced by the dancer which is repeatedly mentioned in Indian dance documentaries like *Mohiniyattam through the Ages* (1990) and *The Thinking Body* (2016)—which present the experience and transformative quality of dance for the dancer. Sparshott's argument is that dance provides significant and meaningful alteration to one's being. This is also mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as harnessing the concept of becoming through the practice of embodied ritual of dance. Later, in his book *A Measured Pace* (1995), Sparshott discusses the unifying principles of dancer and spectator, and how learning dance and the identity of dance are significant in the practice and self-transformation. His book offers a critical commentary on the aesthetic categories of representation and expression; and ventures into the complex problem of the identity of a dance and the relationship of the dancer with the question: How does a dance performance become representative of the identity of a dancer?

Kapila Vatsyayan (2015; 2007), a bureaucrat-scholar active in the process of reconstruction of Indian Classical Dance forms during the post-colonial era, confirms that within the patriarchal social environment, antiquity and markers of heritage became key issues in the promotion of the art forms on the global stage. The effort in Kerala was, however, met with social upheavals against the female dance form which had fallen into disrepute due to the alterations that occurred socially, under the institution of marriage. Lemos (2011) further adds how the artistic degeneration in the

19th century occurred in direct relationship to the reframing of the Nair marriage practices and the changes in Kerala's caste, class and religious structure. She reflects on the practice, as a statement of the matriarchal social setup and a reflection of the customs and practices through the reconstruction of the repertoire. In consideration of these histories and scholarly discourses, the exclusion of men in Mohiniyattam can be understood by examining the socio-cultural environment and in juxtaposition to its colonial history and political context—which will be critically discussed in the following section.

Mohiniyattam and Myth

> *The state of Kerala lies like a green staircase on the South-West coast of India. It descends to the sea from the granite heights of the cool Western Ghats, beribboned with the rivers winding through forests of teaks and gardens of spices, through flooded fields of brilliant green rice paddy, through the red laterite earth and white sands, through the eddying backwaters and palm fringed lakes and canals, to the sparkling Indian Ocean.*
>
> – Clifford and Jones (1970)

Mohiniyattam, the "dance of the enchantress," is a traditional practice of women in the state of Kerala. The dance technique of Mohiniyattam has a unique movement quality and stands apart from all seven Classical Dance styles of India. Nature inspires the circular pattern of movements—with the sway and gentle hand gestures, undulations of the torso and the knees, and the divine look of the dancer, clad in a white *saree* with *Kasavu* (golden coloured) border—and has a mesmerizing, enchanting appeal in the eyes of the *Rasikas*. Light-footedness with grace are its key dynamics. Moreover, the movements in the shape of infinity '∞' are appealing to the eyes. Dancers move across the stage in a slow and steady pace with angled movements, and the dips and elevations of

the body are unique to Mohiniyattam. Likewise, the movement of the torso, in a swaying tempo, is also visually appealing.

In Mohiniyattam, with its ties to India's performance history, dancers are influenced by the movement of the natural world around them, along with personification of mythological stories and divinity. One experiences the freshness and touch of Mother Nature everywhere. No wonder the local people call their State "God's Own Country" (Clifford and Jones, 1970). Dance, in Kerala, is a medium of expression for the dancers, and is a highly spiritual and emotionally dedicated activity. Bharatanatyam dancer Mrinalini Sarabhai, in her book *Understanding Bharatanatyam*, claims "tracing through the centuries of the rich cultural heritage of India's art, one goes far back into the world where the real and the mythological are impossible to separate" (1975, p.1).

Of all the Classical Dance styles from India, Mohiniyattam can be singled out with admirable distinction, for its divine appeal; characteristic gestural language marked by the graceful sway of the torso; the controlled rise and fall of the body in continuous circular patterns, with the ebb and flow motion empowered by the knees and toes. The movements are never abrupt, but dignified, easy, natural and restrained, yet subtle and spontaneous. The glances, postures and gait employed are so graceful and ethereal that they convey the infinite suggestiveness of radiant love and represent the cycle of continuity, always in motion, with no breaks and pauses. The geometry of the motions and the basic technique reflect unforgettable images in nature: coco palm leaves waving in the wind, boats rocking on water. This is identified as the endless source of energy, unrolling, spiraling and gradually awakening *Kundalini Shakti* (Sanskrit for a sleeping energy crawling up the spinal column) (Shivaji, 1989; Rele, 1992).

All the images seem to unite in smooth circular body movements, forming the central element of the dance. Flexibility of the waist, shoulders, elbows and wrists is developed within the frames of *Andolika* (Sanskrit for the continuous flow of energy emanating from the center of the body of the dancer behind the apparent softness) and cannot go beyond the limits of the stated norms of movement construction as practiced in the genre. The motion starts from the center of the body, shifts to limbs or, on the contrary, starts in limbs and shifts to the center. Simultaneously, with the swaying movements of the upper part of the body, the lower part is in the semi-plié position with knees moved aside, forming a square shape, rather than a triangle. And the white attire and gold accessories used by the dancer separates the genre from the rest of the group (see figure 1 in Appendix A on page 206).

In Mohiniyattam it is the body movements, *andolika*, that echo the curls of musical patterns. Since "culture is embodied" (Novack, 1990), identity, gender, power, history and aesthetics intertwine with performance; bodies are a crucial juncture for the study of semiosis. Choreographed movement is an ideal entry into the study of culture, although the dance form of Mohiniyattam remains an under-studied arena of anthropological inquiry, which Fulbright scholar Priyadarshini Ghosh confirms (Interview, 17th March 2020). It is crucial to look at the complex dynamic of the male physique and their relation to a feministic dance form, such as Mohiniyattam; particularly in the current study, where I observe that male members are approaching the genre with a realistic mode of acquiring and mastering the skills to be trained in the controlled execution of Mohiniyattam *adavus* and *abhinaya*. With a dominance of female participation, it is commonly believed, conceived and contextualized that Mohiniyattam is taught, practiced and performed only

by women which is challenged and questioned by these participants (Jones, 1973; Lemos, 2012; Kavya Krishna, 2014).

The movements are never abrupt; rather, they show a commendable control in the dancer's body, as the body generates the flow of patterns, from one to the other, with ease and beauty. The bodily movements follow two strategic maneuvers: "volution," referring to geometrical patterns, and "revolution," referring to a spiral which divides the dancer's body into two halves at the waist. Moreover, the section above the waist moves in circular or semicircular movements, and the section below the waist generates rhythmic movements related to the intricate footwork. These movements are well-rounded and the harmonious "volution" and "revolution" generate movements that can be described as lyrical. The very basic movement that sustains Mohiniyattam is *Andolika*, which describes this oscillating movement (Rele, 1992; Venu and Paniker, 1983).

Over the years there has been an absence of men in the whole gamut of Mohiniyattam (in the role of a *Guru*, dancer or student), and thus the genre is perceived as a statement of femininity (Lemos, 2011; Kavya Krishna, 2015). However, recently within this female-dominated dance form, "there is a definitive pedagogical, social, cultural and gender shift visible within the environment of Mohiniyattam," as Thankamani Kutty highlights—an alumnus of Kerala Kalamandalam (an academy of dance and art) and my Mohiniyattam *Guru* and who is also a participant in this project (Interview, 13th March 2020). In light of this shift, we witness an increase in interest to embody the genre. Thus, this dissertation explores the emerging trend of male Mohiniyattam articulations, within an overwhelmingly female environment. In spite of the gender question that pops up all the time (as I will discuss), men are taking up Mohiniyattam and pursuing the dance form with zeal and dedication. Male teachers are inspiring other students to

learn and practice the genre, and male performers are transgressing gendered boundaries on stage at local, regional, national and international platforms. This shift is a confirmation of the immense possibilities within the genre of Mohiniyattam for further enrichment of the repertoire, which otherwise has been confined to the female body.

The dance form gets its name from *Mohini*, which is the beautiful female form of *Maha Vishnu*, *Sri Padmanabham Swamy* (a principal deity in Hinduism, particularly within the denomination Vaishnavism, in the temple of *Padmanabham Swamy,* located in Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital of Kerala, India)—worshiped by the royal family of Travancore located in. It is the mythological interpretations instilled within the genre that makes Mohiniyattam a statement on the gendered representation of the art form. With an enchanting movement quality, this dance form is historically embodied only by Malayali women (the local inhabitants of Kerala are addressed as Malayali). A dance devised for enticing *Mohanam*, a scale of classical South Indian music, is ingrained in the nomenclature and refers to innumerable mythological stories which commemorate the feminine power through a quintessential mood known locally as *Sringara Bhava*.

The myths associated with the nomenclature of Mohiniyattam are strongly embedded in the puranic stories of *Maha Vishnu*, transforming his identity into a beautiful woman to perform the enchanting dance that deludes the demons *asuras* during the churning of the ocean for *manna*. In *Maha Vishnu's* female form, *Mohini*, an element of enchantment and sensuality, is displayed with this transformation, which is considered the *Maya*, or an illusion, in Hinduism. *Mohini* only enchants and does not lure for the purpose of establishing good over evil, as the male form of *Maha Vishnu* does; but rather, *Mohini* maintains balance in the natural world. *Mohini* is an ultimate

form of beauty who is known to have beguiled and tricked the demons to save humanity and divinity alike. *Maha Vishnu's* transformative form *Mohini* is mentioned in *Agni Purana, Shiva Purana, Brahmanda Purana, Ganesh Purana and Tripura Rahasya*, a South Indian Shakta text (Pintchman, 1998).

The power of femininity is portrayed in the role of *Mohini*, found in these ancient Hindu texts, and as an enchantress *Mohini* reflects the gender dynamics in cosmogonic processes which are interpreted and become informative of gender roles in the social realm. Specifically, empowerment of the female form of *Mohini*, is evident in the gender dynamics in the socio-cultural environment of Kerala, with its historically matrilineal society. Because of these associations, *Mohiniyattam* has been considered a secular dance that is often described as "vivacious and voluptuous dance," quite in contrast to the religious, ritualistic dance practices prevalent in neighbouring states. For example, the art connoisseur and a South Indian dance critic Y.G. Doraiswamy suggests, "The charm of Mohiniyattam lies in the fact that it is a style which is not too heavily loaded with the religious elements but is largely a secular and social art" (Doraiswamy, 1973, p.4).

The nomenclature itself is a statement on the status of women who enjoy the sole agency in this dance form, and thus limits the role of men to a mere spectator or a *nattuvanars*/conductor in Mohiniyattam performance (Kavya Krishna, 2014). Perhaps, the socio-cultural influence of Kerala's matrilineal society is one of the causes for the popular denomination of the term Mohiniyattam, as "the dance (*attam*) of the mythical enchantress (*Mohini*)." As Justine Lemos elucidates, "Unlike other classical Indian dance styles (namely Kuchipudi, Kathak, Bharatanatyam

and Odissi) women are the main teachers, choreographers, and performers of the form; men perform the dance rarely, if ever" (Lemos, 2011, p-4).

In the last two decades, I have observed a consistent increase in the number of men (at the ratio of at least two male students in a class of ten female peers) who are undertaking Mohiniyattam training and pursuing the dance form Mohiniyattam as a career in Kerala, as well as in my fieldwork sites: Kolkata and Toronto. This dissertation is based on the ethnographic study and observation of these practicing male Mohiniyattam dancers and students, with a focus on three case studies informed by my primary participants: Kalamandalam Siddharth[1], Rohit Tyagi and Hari Vattappilli. My analyses are further supported by conversations and information from additional participants such as my *Guru* Thankamani Kutty, and archival and Internet research (as will be discussed in more detail later). Specifically, I consider their desire to learn Mohiniyattam, and how they choreograph with Mohiniyattam dance vocabulary by virtue of relocation and migration to Kolkata and Toronto. Furthermore, within this context, I study and observe how male teachers and students, within a patriarchal society prevalent in Kolkata and Toronto, constantly negotiate and challenge the socio-cultural stereotypes and stereotypical understandings of masculinity to explore the nuances of the dance form.

Social Structure and the Matrilineal Psyche

The social life of Kerala is an amalgamation, constituted by a variety of lifestyles. Since time immemorial the social structure of Kerala has been unique in its fervor. As "God's own

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[1] This participant has been anonymized; pseudonyms will be used to protect his identity.

country," as it is commonly known, Kerala has bountiful nature. The state spans a narrow coastal land at the southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula, separated from the rest of the country. To the east, Kerala is bordered by the mountain range called the Western Ghats, while the west coast is framed by the Arabian Sea and thus open to the foreign influences. The unique geographical location has been enriched by the Indigenous culture of the land for centuries. This has deeply influenced the social, cultural and political developments which have been distinct in many ways from other regions.

To understand the gendered interpretations of the multiple dance and theatre forms in Kerala it is essential to position Mohiniyattam within the social structure unique to the state. Further, it is important to discuss the social system of Kerala in relation to its geographical location to situate the female dominated dance form that has thrived in this region, after facing repeated periods of degeneration over centuries. This context will demonstrate the history of the gendered embodiment and accessibility criteria in which women's bodies have always been prioritized.

Mythically, the story ingrained in the psyche of the locals depicts that the land was created by *Bhargava*, or *Parashurama* for the Brahmins who have sovereignty over the land (Raees, 2015 p.14). Kerala prospered and developed under the leadership of Brahmins who were known as Nambudris and enjoyed a "privileged position" alongside the Nayars, another community, who are known to "have wielded considerable influence in Kerala" (Rele, 1973, p-7). In a scenario describing the professions and duties of the Nayars, they were said to fight wars, hunt, guard and escort the Brahmins (Ibid.). Serving the noble class, Nayars claimed an important status in the society; they contributed to the administration, military and economic affairs (Ibid.).

The society nurtured *Tharavadu*, which was a joint family system that existed in Kerala until the 1940s; this was a social system, with an undivided Nayar family entitled to their own property, confirms a local resident and a research participant in this study Harikishan S. Nair (Interview, 9th December 2019). Thus, *Tharavadu* is a Malayalam term for ancestral home used by Nambudri, Nayar, and Ambalavasi castes, and is related to the matrilineal system of *Marumakkathayam*. This was a matrilineal system of inheritance whereby the descent and inheritance of property was traced through female members of the family. Being a matrilineal group, the Nayars practiced the martial arts of *Kalaripayattu*, and their skills in army affairs made the Nayars a community of privilege. They were the epitome of bravery; they fought and sacrificed themselves for the king while their female counterparts supported the family and children. The focus on matrilineal traits gradually molded the Malayali culture over centuries (Mateer, 1883).

There was doubtlessly an intimate functional connection between the military activities, kinship and marriage system of the Nayar community—as noted by Samuel Mateer. In *Native Life in Travancore* (1883), Mateer deals with the social life of Kerala and considers Nayars as a sect rather than a caste. Mateer also identifies coexisting characteristic features of patriarchy through the role of a *Karanavan*, the oldest male member who was considered the head of the family (1883). In the presence of a *Karanavan*, women were subordinate, although they managed the domestic affairs; and it was only if a *Karanavan* was younger than the senior women in the family, that the older woman was the head and in charge (1883). According to Mateer, they practiced this system of marriage to protect their property and not let it get divided in the course of marital ties (1883). The cultures of the Nayars would not recognize the real marriage of today, from the

perspective of this system. Even they do not have anything that can be called a *Vivaha*, a marriage, in the sense of the definition of the term (Mateer, 1883).

But in the system of Namboodiris marrying from the same caste is not the type of marriage we recognize today. In this system, the eldest brother and the *Aphans*, the younger brothers, marry the Nayar women; and this practice formed the basis of *Marumakkattayam* (Nair, Interview, 9th December 2019). Within the patriarchal system, the Nayar women much enjoyed freedom and independence to practice polyandry, as they were the ones to manage the family properties that descended through the female line (Ibid.). The *Tharavadu* household unit was the power centre in medieval Kerala (Ibid.). It was these Nayar women who celebrated femininity at various stages of womanhood and participated in Kummi and Kaikottikali (locally practiced dance forms in social and community gatherings during festivals or special family occasions) (Panikkar,1991, p.72). Betty True Jones states, "the dancers were usually Nayars from families attached to the landlord's household" who learnt and performed Kaikottikkali during holidays for the entertainment of wealthy landlords, their families and guests (Jones, 1988, p.106).

In this context the forgotten chapters of the *Ammachi* and *Ammaveedu* in Travancore history are of great significance in relation to the practice, propagation and structuring of the Keralian dance practices—for the women and by the women—which sowed the seeds for the current form of Mohiniyattam. This is the untold past of Keralian society which has never been talked about, mentioned or discussed in scholarly articles, but that I came across in my field work. One of my participants, Nair, assigned this to the "scandalous practice of which the educated, elite Keralite scholars never would like to talk or write about it in print or media as they dominantly belonged to the communities of Nayars, Nambudiris or the related castes genetically associated"

(Interview, 9th December 2019). In our discussions of the social and marital relationships, I understood from the conversations with Harikishan that terms like *Ammachi* and *Ammaveedu* formed an integral part of the Royal Travancore family's marriage customs.

Travancore adopted the matrilineal custom with power passed through the female heirs. For the same reason, male members of the royal family were allowed to practice *Sambhandhanams*, or marriages, from within the Nayar families and their sub-castes. In the case that they marry from within the same caste, children born from these marriages become the next rulers (Ibid.). As they accepted the matrilineal custom, male members married from Nayar, and these matrilineal families, headed by the *Ammachi* or *Amma Veedu*, lived a luxurious life and enjoyed high social status—but with no right to claim royalty. Rather, they practiced art and culture to entertain the men (Ibid.).

Research on this subject was gathered from the oral narratives of Nair, a resident of Palakad, Kerala, and investigated the existence of the *Amma Veedukal*—specifically, how royalty practiced morganatic marriages outside their caste and how they often had more than one consort (Ibid.). Due to their relations with other women, this resulted in the construction of *Amma Veedukal*, meaning mother's home, and these were the ancestral homes (not palaces) where these women, known as *Ammachis*, lived with their children born out of royal blood (Ibid.). The ladies who were called *Ammachi*, however, did not have any royal titles, political powers or status to mingle with the royalty (Ibid.). The law stipulated that the King's power was inherited by his nephew, his sister's son, and it was the sister who was the Queen of the land and not the King's consort (Ibid.).

The tradition of *Ammachis* flourished, primarily during the time of Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma or Dharmaraja. It was when he shifted the capital of Padmanabhapuram to Thiruvananthapuram that he brought along his four consorts and constructed four *Amma Veedus* for them (Ibid.). Later, the *Maharaja* also passed a rule that all royal members should take consorts from these four *Ammaveedus*, and for the same reason *Ammachi* became more powerful. Later, it became a tradition for royal family members to only marry members from the *Ammaveedu*. In addition to these socio-cultural developments, these sites generated sensual poetry, music and dance as entertainment to enchant the royal men. Lemos comments that "the overt purpose of the *Sambhandhanam* was sexual, romantic and financial" (2016, p.33).

Over generations Mohiniyattam came to be practiced as a social and secular art form, used for the entertainment of the royal or higher-class men. Lack of evidence, and a scarcity of written and codified records in the temples and royal courts, makes it difficult to claim Mohiniyattam as a divine and chastised dance offering and part of the temple ritual (Lemos, 2011, 2016). Thus, scholars and practitioners of Mohiniyattam cannot provide an absolute account of it being a temple art form or track the route of its development into the current practicing format. Instead, it can be understood as a product of multiple factors, such as the Nambudri hegemony, *Sambhandhanam*, and sexual excess which led to its inception. Undoubtedly, there are factual accounts, albeit scarce, that have been researched and documented by scholars like Jones and Lemos.

Indeed, scholars conclude that the dance form, constituted of female dancers, incorporated immoral acts in an attempt to survive—after the demise of Swathi Thirunal *Maharaja* and due to the lack of royal patronage (Rele,1973,1992; Shivaji,1989; Lemos,2011). This was a primary reason why resurrection of the form was initiated by Vallathol Narayana Menon in the 1930s, with

the aim to "Sankristize" the *Lāsya* form of regional Keralite women's dance (elaborated on below) and align it with the other Indian dance forms (Rele,1973,1992; Shivaji,1989; Lemos, 2011, 2016). This effort is discussed in detail in chapter two, along with the evolution of the *Devadasi* system which existed in the neighbouring states, and the journey of Mohiniyattam in Kerala, through the dominant three eras of practice, propagation and degeneration, finally culminating into the reconstruction of the current practice.

Interpretations of *Tāṇḍava and Lāsya*

As noted earlier, Mohiniyattam is conceptually associated with graceful movement quality and is understood to be a technique ingrained with the lucid movement attributes known as *Lāsya* (the name for these movement qualities). Because in Mohiniyattam we see a dominance of controlled, restrained, circular patterns generated through the major and the minor limbs of a female dancer, the genre very easily parallels the concept of *Lāsya* and stands apart from other Indian Classical Dance forms. We rarely get to see vigorous movements implemented in the execution of the various dance pieces composed or reconstructed over a period of time, that are performed as a part of the repertoire today. The slow and subtle nature of the technique is focused on the culmination of dancing to love poetry and establishing enchanting, sensuous mysticism. And this is best captured through the lucid movement quality, in contrast to the powerful, vigorous attitudes—which need to be assessed with reference to the ancient dramaturgical text *Nāṭyaśāstra*—"which is believed to have been written not later than the 2nd Century A.D.," states Bose (1991, p.13) that conceded to the ideologies embedded in all Indian Classical Dance forms.

Dance scholar Kapila Vatsyayan states: “The *Nāṭyaśāstra* serves as an indispensable link between the realms of philosophy and aesthetics of mysticism,” and interpreters of *Nāṭyaśāstra* over the centuries have made it clear that “*Nāṭyaśāstra* commences a long tradition of discourse on the nature of the aesthetic experience, the artistic content, for, process and response” in the creator as well as in the audience (2016, p.157). Not *Lāsya* but *Sukumara-prayoga* is grounded in the definitions of expressional components employed in the dance style of *Kaisiki Vritti,* and this is mentioned in *Nāṭyaśāstra*. It is believed and understood claims the scholar Ashoknath Shastri in his book *Abhinaya Darpan* that *Sukumara-prayoga* constitute the graceful movements used in dance, but they are not confined to feminine body; rather, it is believed to be performed by *Devi Parvathi* in response to *Shiva’s Tāṇḍava* (1991).

The commentators of the middle period (around the 10th century and thereafter) interpreted some of the fundamental terms of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in a manner that was considerably different from what the sage Bharata meant. They also brought in many concepts that were not envisaged by Bharata. The concepts of *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* in ancient dramaturgical text of *Nāṭyaśāstra* are described and discussed in chapters 4 and 19 (of *Nāṭyaśāstra*) respectively. The *Tāṇḍava* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* did not convey the sense of *Uddhata* (vigorousness); *Tāṇḍava* or *Nritta* (a technical dance with no meaning associated with the execution) of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was in no way related to what later came to be known as *Tāṇḍava-nritta.* And *Sukumara-prayoga* which was coined as *Lāsya* did not mean a feminine style of dancing, as it was interpreted later (Ibid.). Actually, such distinctions between masculine and feminine dances were not made in the *Nāṭyaśāstra.* During the time of Bharata, there was no clear theoretical division of dance into *Tāṇḍava* and what later came to be known as *Lāsya* (Ibid.). They merely referred to the nature of the physical movements. For

this reason, the term *Lāsya* similarly does not appear in *Nāṭyaśāstra,* per se; though the concept of the element of grace and beauty did exist and was named *Sukumara* or *Madhura.* Moreover, Bharatamuni did not make the distinction between *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* based on sex or gender (Ibid.).

Shastri defines *Tāṇḍava* as the dance performed and taught by *Nataraja*, the male dancing God (1991, p.8). It is believed that he transferred the knowledge to *Tandu* (Lord *Nataraja's* attendant who instructed Bharatamuni author of *Nāṭyaśāstra about Aṅgahāra and Karanas*) and hence the dance taught to *Tandu* became *Tāṇḍava.* As a response to the dance taught and performed by *Nataraja*, his consort, *Parvathi*, was asked to create a dance, complementary in quality (Ibid.). The *Nritta* employed *Sukumara Prayoga*, which was taught to *Usha*, daughter of *Banasura*, and which is considered the *Lāsya* (Ibid.). Vatsyayan reflects how the pure dance technique, *Nritta*, came to be categorized into two types: *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya*—in the following centuries of ancient texts that originated and developed as regional interpretations of *Nāṭyaśāstra* (2016). *Tāṇḍava* employs vigorous *Aṅgahāra*, and *Lāsya* employs non-aggressive *Aṅgahāras*, along with songs for the practice of the *Kaisiki Vritti* (Coomaraswamy,1999; Bose, 1989; Shastri,1991; Vatsyayan, 2016).

From the text of *Bhāvarakāśana* it can be determined that Sāradātanaya was well-versed in the sciences related to theatre and included music, *Lāsya*, *Tāṇḍava*, *Rasa* and the different kinds of *Nāṭya* (1968). The date of this text is (tentatively) estimated to have been produced during the last quarter of the 12th century, according to Sandesara, who edited and published the manuscript (Ibid.). Furthermore, the terms *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* are considered categories of different dance attitudes in terms of the movement quality—*Tāṇḍava* being powerful and vigorous, while *Lāsya*

is soft and languid (Bose, 1991). The ancient text (of *Bhāvarakāśana*) uses the word *Lāsya* in the context of *lasyanga-s* which are fully interpretative, and where the heroine who is in love expresses her state of mind and emotions (Sāradātanaya, 1968).

But in the later treatises, *lasyanga* was linked to the body of a female dancer; it became more related to the *angika* (body movements) and *Nritta* performed by a female dancer (Ibid.). In *Bhāvarakāśana,* Sāradātanaya states that *Nritta* is defined as a technique that is executed by *Karana-s* and *Aṅgahāras* (Ibid.). But he doesn't explicitly state that *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* are a part of *Nritta* (Ibid.). Instead, Sāradātanaya suggests the *gita* (song) which contains *uddhata karana*, *Aṅgahāras* (aggressive body movements) with the *arabhati vritti* (warfare and martial arts) is *Tāṇḍava* (Ibid.)—no other treatise tries to include the *vritti*-s while explaining the elements of *Nritta*. He also divides *Tāṇḍava* into categories based on the movement and intention of *chanda, ucchanda* and *prachanda,* and defines *Lāsya* as the *gita* which contains *lalit angahara* in *lalitlaya*, infused with the *Kaishiki vritti* (Ibid.). Śārṅgadeva(1175-1247), who authored *Sangita Ratnakara* is very clear as to what *Nritta* is and what could be its divisions and its types. He says *Nritta* is the movement of various parts of the body, which is not suggestive of any particular meaning, and he divides this into two elements: *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya*.

It is amazing how *Lāsya*, is depicted all over the country, through the medium of literature, epigraphy, sculpture and painting created over the last 2000 years. The *nati,* or the solitary *nayika*, had a huge presence, physical and visual, and this presence flourished in the two main venues where dance was practiced, presented and patronized—the palace and the temple. In between these two, there invariably must have been social and festive platforms that also supported it, to be enjoyed by ordinary people in domestic and public domains, which is evident in the context of the

state of Kerala. The *Kama Sutra* and the works of *Kalidasa*, *Rajatarangini* and *Kathasaritsagara* (ancient texts) all paint a vivid image of the richness, beauty, appeal and popularity of this art.

From the 3rd century A.D., one finds many references to the elements of *Lāsya* and *Lasyanga* in several plays and dramas. They appear as short cameos or as an integral part of the narrative that strengthens its theme. Some of the strong examples are Malavika's dance in Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitra* and Harshapadika's performance in *Shakuntalam* (Act V). It is believed that components of dance in a theatrical performance were appreciated and enjoyed by the public as a separate art form. Bharatamuni took cognizance of this when he wrote down the tenets of dramaturgy in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Bose, 1989). Bharatamuni's extensive exposition on this topic, wherein he describes *Lāsya* in great detail, contextualizes it in three ways—firstly, *Lasyanga*, its *Nritta* part, involving only pure dance, without any *Abhinaya*, is described in connection with the stage preliminaries called *Purvaranga* as explained in chapter five of *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Bose, 1989). In this chapter, devoted to the ten varieties of drama, he says that it is to be danced by a single danseuse, *Ekaharya* or *Ekaprayojya,* and that the performance comprises a series of emotional pieces which may be interlinked into a continuous theme *ekartha* or each standing separately, *Prthagartha*, as in a classical dance recital today (Orelskaya,2001).

Scholar Venkataraman Raghavan traces the development of *Lāsya* in its oldest form as described by Bharata and its later history (2004). He also traces the way it spread, and its development in different regions of the country, taking on certain features that shaped its evolution with regard to recital in medieval and modern times (2004). Further, Raghavan examines these *Lasyanga-s* and their relationship to the themes or ideas of the items selected by modern-day performers in a solo recital with reference to Bharatanatyam (Ibid.). The *Lāsya* and *Lasyanga*

allow for full and imaginative exploration of the *rasas*, and they are often performed by a single *Nati* (dancer) assuming various roles as fits the narrative danced/enacted (Ibid.). The articulation of attitudes is done through one single body irrespective of space, time and physicality, which is known as *ekahari abhinaya* in Indian classical dancing (Ibid.). They harness the concept of "becoming" and "doing" theatrical representation of various characters, as prescribed in the translated version of the *Nāṭyaśāstra,* by overcoming physical and external attributes (Ghosh, 1951; Bose, 1991; Raghavan, 2004).

Gender, a social construct, became attached to the bodily movements in terms of the quality denoted as *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* since the medieval times as noted in *Abhinayadarpaṇa* (Bose, 1991, p.28). It is not until the medieval period that we find the terminologies of *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* as markers of masculine and feminine dancing in such texts as *Abhinayadarpaṇa* (the text dates them between the 5th and 13th centuries, though this period is debatable), which is an important treatise on dance written by Nandikeśvara (Bose, 1989, p. 18-22). Since then, these terms started to become synonymous with a gendered denomination.

I situate my research questions within the context of these concepts and building from this basis I consider the data in relation to Judith Butler's theoretical framework, the "performativity of gender," while recognizing masculinity as a social construct. Thus, the formulation of my hypothesis is intended to understand the phenomenon of men in Mohiniyattam, drawing from these concepts and theories.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

With my study being focused on participation of men in a female dominated dance form, originating in Kerala, India—Mohiniyattam—dance ethnography and its related research methods inform my dissertation. These include a combination of participant observation, media analysis, semi-structured interviews and personal life histories. I also integrate the discussion of arts-based research methods to create a synergy of practice with research to generate an interplay of form and content, while generating, interpreting and disseminating knowledge manifested in the moving bodies and the dance form (Leavy, 2015).

This ethnographic study was conducted with participant interviews and the assistance of archival and the Internet research. As a dance educator, the topic of major concern in my research exists in the domains of pedagogy and performance, and to explore these concerns I examine how male youths are walking through unchartered territories with the pedagogy of Mohiniyattam. Along with the broadening learning environment for men, I also look at levels of acceptance and the amount of work generated for them in future. I deal with gender identification at the very basis of my research questions, because of the attitudes and sentiments attached to bodies in Mohiniyattam.

As D. Soyini Madison says, "[p]ositionality is vital" (Madison, 2012, p. 8) in the ethnographic study; therefore, I intended to utilize a dual role in my study, from an etic as well as emic viewpoint. As such, in this research I position myself as an insider, being a practitioner of Mohiniyattam, and as an outsider or "other," being a Bengali researcher in Kerala society. I explore the analytical journey of crossing pathways, or boundaries, in the site of Mohiniyattam

embodiment—specifically, regarding the physical body of male dancers. The juxtaposition of these two contradictory standpoints where we see male dominance in Kathakali on one hand and male exclusion in Mohiniyattam on the other, lays the groundwork to analyze the performativity and resistance within the conventional, orthodox practice of Mohiniyattam, from a socio-cultural viewpoint.

These research trajectories provide me with the outlines for the exclusion of male dancing bodies; as well as the context for analyzing the hierarchies within masculinity, as the male dancers transgress Mohiniyattam conventions—drawing from masculinity studies (Connell, 2009). These transgressions, I elucidate, are understood as a practice that involves the definition of the *Kaisiki Vritti*, defined in *Nāṭyaśāstra,* as a style of dancing that cannot be "practiced properly by men except with the help of women and thus Brahma created the *apsaras* to help them embellish the drama skillfully" (Ghosh, 1951, p.8).

Academically, my dissertation will contribute to these under-researched areas, with special attention to the concepts of "staging ethnography" (Madison, 2012, p.190) through a "dialogic performance" (p.145). Staged, cultural performances, as described by Madison, refers to "the performers, who embody and enact the data" collected in the fieldwork (p.145). Thus, the "performance of possibilities" of the male dancers allows for "active, creative work that weaves the life of the mind with being mindful of life," representing the cultural, social and political environment mirrored through "movement culminating in creation and change" (p.191). The strategy of "staging ethnography" will spark new discourses that will allow participant-performers to probe questions regarding "identity, representation and fairness to enrich their own subjectivity, cultural politics and art" (p.191).

To develop a dialogue between the two perspectives in my research—which focuses on male exclusion and patriarchal dominance—I employ anthropologist Dwight Conquergood's ethnographic tool known as "dialogical performance" (1982, p.10). Conquergood states: "The aim of dialogical performance is to bring self and the other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another. It is a kind of performance that resists conclusion" (1982, p.10). To my knowledge, this dissertation is one of its kind, focusing on gender identity in Mohiniyattam in the locations of Toronto and Kolkata. Thus, it will fill a void with regard to male participation in Mohiniyattam, a perspective that has not yet been critically analyzed.

The Journey of Dance: From its Non-Existent Status to an Established Research Method

Dance, as field and method, did not enjoy a significant status in the early 1900s, as it was positioned within the field of anthropology: as an element of culture and a socially engaging human activity. It was not until anthropologist Franziska Boas laid the foundational stone (for future developments and ideas around construction of the ephemeral human activity) that the subject of dance ethnography was born. The credibility of dance as an independent academic subject and the potential within to observe and analyze human behaviour was recognized for the first time ever in Boas' *Function of Dance in Human Society* (1940). Here, Boas claims dance is an expression of a communal activity, and she argues that its constructive social influence on local individuals must be realized and promoted (1940, p.2). Boas' pioneering work focused on the "Western" world's engagement with dance, or lack of it; though, she does so without an orientalising perspective.

Twenty years later, Gertrude Kurath's article "Panorama of Dance Ethnology" (1960) took a turning point with her attempt to validate a discipline for dance research. Her focus was structural

and stylistic analysis; she shifted focus to the organic component of dance and its representational nature embedded within the human body, making the foundation into the science of movement patterns (1960). Kurath states: “Evaluation of dance depends on both cultural and choreographic criteria, which vary from place to place. It hinges primarily on stylistic definition, but also on appraisal of factors such as creativity, precision, acrobatic skill, and dramatic ability” (1960, p.246). Taking a bigger step in establishing dance ethnology as a sub-discipline she confirmed “choreology as a science, and choreologists must accept the scholarly responsibilities of being ethnologists” (1960, p.250).

Further, Kurath developed and introduced scientific evaluative techniques to understand and classify research through specific methods and procedures which can be implemented cross-culturally in field work (1960). She used the term “panorama” as she developed a system for dance research, including the most prominent methods being dance notation, ground plans and multi-disciplinary research terms (such as theatre science, art history, musicology, etc.) that have been used by research scholars of the East European World (1960). Thus, multidisciplinary strategies and ways to record and codify dance were of great value.

With Kaeppler’s publication in 1978, dance came to be understood with reference to a particular culture and society of which it is a product; a statement; a dialogue between the man and the society (p.34). For the first time, importance and emphasis was given to “participant observation” with extended exposure to the practice of dance form within a specific geographical location and cultural society (1978). This is seen in the development and analysis of Kaeppler’s work with Tongan culture. Thus, a basic transformation went through in the perspective of the researcher; their focus shifted from looking at a specific culture, towards the “feeling” of it, with

more emphasis on the phenomenological aspect. This highlights a significant transition in perspective and attitude, body and performativity. During this period, theoretical influences from different fields of study, such as anthropology and linguistics made dance ethnographers construct individual approaches to research (Kaeppler,1972; Royce, 1977; Hanna, 1979). Their personal approaches capitalized on movement analysis, and examined the function and the form, as well as the symbolic elements and Indigenous movements (Reed, 1998, p.505).

As scholars of dance and movement explore new ways of thinking through and with the body, there is no doubt that they will continue to challenge conventions; undermine entrenched dualisms (e.g. mind/body, thinking/feeling); critique evolutionary, colonial and nationalist typologies (e.g. classical, folk, ethnic); expose the limits of various conceptual categories (e.g. dance, art); and reveal the dimensions of the dance experience (e.g. sensual, spiritual) that have often been neglected in scholarly inquiry.

With the explosion of interest and attention to dance studies since the 1980s, scholars from multidisciplinary genres started the process of comparative and critical analysis by situating their research within the framework of body and movement and placing that within broader frameworks of embodiment and the politics of culture. These projects highlight ethnographic and historical studies and foreground dance, and other structured movement systems, in the making of colonial cultures; particularly, the constitution of gender, ethnic and national identities. Theoreticians had a tremendous impact in this whole process of writing and embodiment with which Reed identified and has also harnessed in her article: “The Politics and Poetics of Dance” (1988). Colonialism, nationalism, ethnicity, women, gender, sexuality and feminist theories are a few to be noted. And, key philosophers who had a, influential role in the development of the field were Michael Foucault

(1978), Jacques Derrida (1992), James Clifford (1986, 1988), Edward Said (1978), Homi Bhabha (2004), Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty (2010) and Judith Butler (1990, 1993).

In the latter half of the 20th century, with the flourishing of political theories and continental philosophy, researchers within the paradigm of dance ethnography focused more on the physicality of dance; the body, (as a social object, political body, sexual body, body as a social text). The experience of moving used a phenomenological/existentialist style of discourse as one kind of linguistic practice that has attendant purposes. In *Movement, and Culture: Kinesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community* (1992), Sally Ann Ness provides a close analysis of movement that is all too often missing from anthropological studies of dance. Most significantly, she works to relate the movements used in dance of a specific geographical area—the Philippines—to everyday movement to interpret the attitudes and values that are embodied in both choreographed and quotidian gestural languages. A shift in focus, from the external ephemeral dance (as it started in 1940s) to embodied movements, is visible in Ness' *Movement, and Culture Kinesthetic and Visual Symbolism in a Philippine Community* (1992), Cynthia Novack's *Sharing the Dance* (1990), and Jane Cowan's *Dance and the Body Politic in northern Greece* (1990). These works examine dance, the body and movement to represent the significance of external forces and textual understanding of culture positioned within specific theoretical frameworks.

The possibility of rediscovering "otherness" and the difference of representation by insiders and outsiders of a culture constitute visible developments in the field. Positionality, reflection on one's position, is done through a reconstruction of the self, which has been reincarnated from the anthropological self. Auto-ethnography and the reflective self has become a conventional component. Theresa J. Buckland's edited anthology of scholarly articles (1999;

2006) speak to the shift from a Euro-centric view of dance and debates the representation of culture and people, synchronic and diachronic approaches which have made dance ethnography an interdisciplinary method where fieldwork and history come together as research methodologies. The essays in her edited anthologies (1999; 2006) showcase the fact that research involves not only fieldwork but historical research which questions the post-colonial interrogation of culture, authenticity and the reconstruction of the past for the present.

In exploring my research questions with consideration of historical and current contextualization of the cultural practice, a dual perspective is inevitable. According to my case studies, it becomes evident that Indian administrative policies in the 20th century promoted and funded arts which were representational in character—arts which spoke for the national heritage and had elements of antiquity ingrained in their execution. The study of dance as a representative practice thus requires the skills and perspectives of history and ethnography, not only to explore legacies of colonialism and nationalism, but also to interrogate the continuing impact of globalization and the politics of identity.

Through reflexive and dialogic strategies, synthesizing synchronic and diachronic perspectives, we can exercise our cultural and political choices purposefully, toward a more informed, imaginative future for dance scholarship (Buckland, 1999, p.17). According to Buckland, an ethnographer has a complex and difficult task in engaging with a body that is both a "recipient and manifestation of local history" and a site of complex and performed negotiation; moreover, situating dance as a "representative practice" provides "a clear indication of [the] growing interest in ethnographic perspectives on dance [and] is the specialized designation of 'dance ethnography'" (1999, p.8). She prepared the ground for the future pathways that

ethnographers have travelled and indulged in. Even without referencing more contemporary terms—performs, negotiates, constructs, articulates and embodies—Buckland's example (1999) seems prudent and merited; the act of engaging with ideas and subjects under more rigorously structured theoretical and methodological conditions, using both historical and ethnographic approaches, will only redefine views of particular landscapes; not erase them, but rather establish the fluidity of the genre which is an important quality for the propagation of any arts and its sustainability over time.

At the beginning of the 21st century there was emphasis on psycho-analytical processing of information in different media, as initiated by research scholars Sarah Pink (2007), Patricia Leavy (2015), and Christine Hines (2015). Visual and sensorial ethnography, along with the use of digital resources through the Internet, have been incorporated in the construction of research methods with subjective inclusion of the researcher in qualitative ethnographic work. The field is experiencing both the processes of combining digital hypermedia into projects and research, and also studying the effects of these actions. Validation of a work happens with the concept of data construction and representation through multiple media, along with the writing of dance ethnography in the era of virtual reality. These ethnographers have dealt with tradition and specific implementation of visual and embodied methods, in the existing qualitative repertoire of research and writing.

Although invitational, Leavy (2015) encourages ethnographers to employ an arts-based approach not to dabble with the art form but to develop a rich understanding of the genre being employed. She sets the stage for hybrid arts-based research projects with deep respect towards art and explores epistemological and methodological insights into the practice of research with

positivistic, interpretive and artistic research fields. In her book *Method Meets Art* (2015), Leavy introduces the written aspect to visual and qualitative research. With myriad authors from distinct cultural practices, Leavy (2015) provides a rich cultural exchange and a fruitful comparative analysis of nine individualized ethnographic case studies. The wide range of articles precisely "cover(s) extensive ground that questions the concepts of tradition and modernity, gender, tourism, and textual representation in dance" (2015, p.7). These are specific theoretical frameworks, generated through study of embodied socio-cultural practices conducted through fieldwork.

Performance studies is primarily about the body and the embodied experience of the observer and the observed, the researcher and the researched. They owe their methodology to genres like anthropology and sociology, where the "self is the key resource" (Leavy, 2015, p.7). She has highlighted the skills through auto-ethnography where positionality of the people involved in the research is vital to the end product. Leavy's (2015) main argument addresses the intellectual issues in recent discourses of embodied and reflexive ethnographic fieldwork and research. In the current era, when the concept of spatial distance has been substituted by the virtual world, the presence of the Internet is inevitable in different fields of research. Ethnographic researchers are no exception; many cannot avoid the inclusion of (or the option to use) the internet in their research, due to archived resources available at the click of a mouse. Sociologist and acclaimed research scholar in the field of science and technology, Christine Hines (2015), is a major contributor in this sub-genre; she theorizes and augments resources for digitized research and data construction in social sciences (2015).

The following section delves into the postmodern era and how recent developments in the field inform my research, data collection and writing process—of a three-dimensional embodied

practice (dance) into a two-dimensional format (writing). The discussion in the next section will deal with the methods, strategies and tools employed in this study which have helped and guided me to remove many a false assumption in my mind and the minds of the research participants. This has informed a holistic way of observing and reflecting based on experience. It is an amazing process to interconnect the mind-body-soul of the dancer and to communicate, in written words, how the body stores knowledge and is the locus of meaning, translating time, space and culture.

Dance Ethnography: Interdisciplinary Research Strategy

Research that travels through the unknown realm of the human mind and body cannot be studied within restricted compartments; rather, it becomes a myriad of disciplines that overlap each other in content. Therefore, dance ethnography is an inter- and intra-disciplinary subject which allows the scope to structure the research according to the requirement of the topic. It is not bound or limited by strict disciplinary rules beyond which one cannot explore unique research options. History, anthropology, archeology, geography, sociology, psychology and economics, along with cultural studies, performance studies and gender studies, are the dominant influences that comprise the realm of dance ethnography. The research method itself is absolutely representational in nature. Unlike fiction, the facts and components of human life and society—the practices and activities; histories and traditions; current trajectories and developing trends—are narrated through the lens of an observer. More specifically, today's radical research and scholarly writings emerge from postmodern anthropology (Zeitlyn, 2012), and cultural studies (Spivak, 2010), where it extends the possibilities for grassroot political action. I hereby attempt to identify the primary landmarks,

in the journey of the discipline of dance, from a disposed sustainability on cultural anthropology through its evolution into an independent research method.

Pragmatic Implementation of Ethnographic Tools

I'm not sure I can tell the truth... I can only tell what I know

– James Clifford (1986, p.8)

The word "dance" can refer to physical actions, cultural practices, social events, ephemeral cultural products or specific performances, and the term "ethnography" can refer to either a particular type of study, a sub-discipline of anthropology or one part of a research toolkit utilized by researchers in the humanities and social sciences. Ethnographic research is a form of non/fiction articulated through a narrative; a body of knowledge manifested through qualitative research, participant-observation and objectivity-subjectivity, combined and juxtaposed. These modes of investigation run hand in hand, in a dynamic of ethics and aesthetics.

In social science, there is a constant change factor in research; it produces a sense of "becoming" and creates a site for experiential growth, thus the datum gathered from observation (of a given society and their social behavior) cannot be determined under a fixed set of criteria. The observations from research participants can be represented with textual references, which tally with their interpretations and understandings of a culture or a cultural practice. And these can be contextualized within the participants' socio-economic background, the socio-cultural environment and their individual identifications (such as sex and gender, as is the case of this study). Ethnographic research involves interactivity between observation, analysis, thinking, reading, participating in field work, interrogation and, finally, articulating the observed data

through writing—while locating the work within contextual research, theories and writing principles guided by the ethnographers' toolkit.

Today, when I sit down to write the chapter on research methods that influenced my data collection process and reflect on my choice of strategies, I look back at the level of involvement I had as a dancer in the fraternity that I had with the research participants. According to the ancient interpretations of Indian philosophy on life and the principles to enhance the quality of human interaction, every element evolves out of one source of energy, and yet, nature has multiple manifestations, in varied forms, of man and woman. It is the societal structures preassigned for "man" and "woman" that is at the root of my research question; I question why accessibility to a dance form is limited, restricted or denied to an individual because of their physiological gender manifested in the human form?

In the course of reiterating my exploration as a dancer-scholar, and a freshly trained ethnographer, I critique the historical landmarks in the development and establishment of "dance ethnography" as an available research method in humanities to study and observe this primordial question. I focus on various trajectories and recent developments within the genre of Mohiniyattam through the enriched methodology of dance ethnography that has developed since late 20th and early 21st centuries. There are multifarious components in dance ethnography with different routes that we can take to conduct research, and these have been strongly influenced by interdisciplinary fields with intersecting pathways in studying human subjects—fields like cultural anthropology and performance studies are exemplary. These developmental landmarks have been a point of reference, influencing my research methods and fieldwork in multiple sites. They have contributed to mapping my process of data accumulation and interpretation as well as my articulation of the

phenomenological aspects. The selection of certain methods—that have developed through the first-hand experiences of scholars who utilized ethnography during their fieldwork—and the data triangulation has guided me in my journey through the most challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Multi-sited fieldwork was made possible within a time span from 2019-2020, due to years of association with the research subjects; and my relationships with the participants has grown over a period of more than a decade because of the nature of our work and our geographical locations. These commonalities also aided most of the interviews as I was able to conduct these online, in virtual meetings—a preferred choice of communication I was permitted due to the physical distance requirements and in terms of our current geographical locations.

The ethnographic research method demands involvement, trying to live life as the people being researched as much as possible. But in this study, multi-sited fieldwork was unavoidable and important for researching how Mohiniyattam has travelled; how the transmission of the genre has taken place and passed through the body of teachers to students which was initiated by relocation and migration. The strategy to live and experience the space, time and culture of those being studied is impossible to recreate. However, I was able to build from years of living, learning, teaching and performing Mohiniyattam in the sites of Kolkata and Toronto, with frequent trips to Kerala. I, myself, became a witness to this process of travel and the transmission of Mohiniyattam, with knowledge of the related historical components.

The selection of research participants was a conscious decision based on the types of questions that arose in conversation with male Mohiniyattam dancers, along with Kathakali actors. During the first few weeks of this ethnographic study, all the subjects were observed following the

strictest interpretation of the correct procedures. As time progressed, however, it became increasingly apparent that almost all of them had “work-arounds” and “short cuts” which were used liberally in order to speed things up. These behaviours were very instructive and helped to redesign the process flow. Had I not stayed in communication with them over a long period, even before the inception of this research, there would still be enough to observe, identify and analyze, which otherwise would have gone unrecorded. Thus, I found myself benefiting from being involved in this process of transfer, as a participant myself, and undergoing similar trajectories.

The only exception is that I am a female Mohiniyattam dancer who experienced inclusivity in the community, unlike male Mohiniyattam dancers. Moreover, long term association with my researched subjects allowed me to evade the lengthy fieldwork that would typically be conducted physically by visiting the various dance schools in Kolkata and Toronto, multiple times, to understand, observe and write about them. I was able to transcend the introductory phase of meeting people and collecting preliminary data because I was in communication with my research subjects from the inception of this project. The early phases of this research, formulating the research proposal and questions were simple and straightforward. There were challenges and set-backs, some meetings were cancelled, some participants backed out of the project, some “unfriended” me from their friend list on Facebook and I even received warning messages to not pursue this controversial project. Nevertheless, I tried to handle the limitations dexterously.

One of the main advantages associated with ethnographic research is that ethnography can help identify and analyze these kinds of issues. The most striking change that I observed, in the process of data collection, was that my participants matured in the ways they handled the social stigmas, and they became more bold and determined to pursue their passion. In a sensitive research

topic, where sexual orientation comes under scrutiny, one has to talk about the gender inequalities and inquire about unsupportive parents and family members. Because of this, trust and rapport takes time to develop. Faith and confidence take a long time to build in this context and is particularly difficult when there may be some danger to those from whom one is trying to learn about such facts. Being one of them, a fellow dancer, significantly helped with the process of building trust; it became fairly easy and quick to establish. The participants were able to confide in me with their personal stories, their pain and grief, suffering and success, without hesitation. They had confidence in this project and believed that their oral narratives will benefit the next generation of male dancers.

Dance Ethnography: Qualitative Data Collection

Anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler warns dance ethnographers of guarding themselves against the ethnocentric biases and suggests the use of Indigenous categories which are discovered in fieldwork (1972). She is also equally concerned about the different approaches to dance research (anthropological, social, historical, folkloric and ethnological perspectives) and argues that there are major qualitative and conceptual differences in the findings of one researcher from another in the fieldwork. Hence observation connected to participation and reflexivity for studies of human movements (and their connection with mind and soul) have methodological approaches inherent in the long tradition, which it owes to cultural studies.

For me, as an ethnographer taking a similar route with a phenomenological approach, this view provides an added benefit because Indian Classical Dance forms are spiritual in nature which transcend the western understanding of dance as only a physical or athletic activity or a set of

movements in the exploration of space and time. The strategies in my toolkit (described above) helped me to investigate and evaluate the questions that arose within the artistic environment of the practice of Mohiniyattam; my findings essentially endorse Margaret Le Comte and Jean J. Schensul's definition that claims "[e]thnography is a peculiarly human endeavor" (2010, p. xviii).

To analyze and study male participation in the learning and deconstruction of Mohiniyattam, the strategy of approaching the arts as a human endeavor has taken root in this ethnographic research. The process involved answering basic questions like: What made you join dance lessons and not any other athletic subject like soccer, basketball, cricket or karate? Did you join the dance class with the consent of your parents? How supportive were your parents and family members in your decision to pursue dance as a profession later in life? Asking these questions was not simple or spontaneous within the ongoing community events or in a studio/dance class setting, especially to those who are skeptical to open-up and interact freely. I asked these questions in the course of the participants' journey, and I recognized that even asking these questions, with the intent to understand their challenges, was quite a sensitive matter.

Some participants were frank and introduced themselves at the beginning of the session with their stories of struggle, pain and the challenges they encountered to enroll in dancing. But some students, who are secretly pursuing dance as their passion or hobby, tried to shy away from the probing questions. Even in dance performance sites research participants hesitated to engage in conversation. This demonstrates how not all questionnaires can be planned or evaluated through structured, strategic, quantitative and/or statistical data collection procedures. It is important to recognize that the variables in my research are human participants who share their individual

experiences under unique circumstances which cannot be replicated or created to the same degree for each participating candidate.

It is their journey that shapes the cultural practice and gives rise to the innovative pathways that students or other fraternity members might traverse to achieve their goals as male dancers. The case studies in this research cannot be strictly evaluated or grouped under assigned categories as they have unique variables. It is quite a challenge to evaluate these life histories through the dynamics of a pre-assigned strategy, or through the lens of a quantitative data collection process. At times, research questions required some flexibility, particularly questions such as: What do you prefer in regard to *Aharyam* (costume/make-up)? Is it important to adopt the *Stree Vesham* (female attire of Mohiniyattam) to portray the dance form for you? If not, then what is your justification to perform in male attire?

Such personal questions for specific participating groups (dance students of different genders; dance teachers and choreographers; and dance scholars) cannot be clearly designated during the interactive interview sessions. Doing so could have hinted directly to their personal choices and reveal the identity of the subjects embodying Mohiniyattam. As a dancer myself, I consider it my right to dress in a specific way while performing (while aiming to parallel the theme that I intend to share with my audience). Thus, I do not support the practice of dictating certain specifications just because it authenticates the traditional cultural practice.

Male Mohiniyattam dancers are exploring multiple options in terms of their performance costume, the *Aharyam*, and constantly negotiating with many variables in terms of gender, sex and freedom of choice. Personal communication with individual participants brings forth many unexpected questions which could not have been anticipated and this allows for multiple

perspectives from a phenomenological standpoint. Ethnographic research tools provided a valid and important way to find out what is happening within a socio-cultural environment, and will help readers understand the validity and importance of the questions raised in fieldwork. As such, ethnography remains the most amenable method to solve such complex, socially-based research problems which are otherwise not feasibly analyzed through "traditional, quantitative experimental methods alone" (Le Comte and Schensul, 2010, p. xviii).

Pragmatic Ideologies in Post-Positivist Ethnography

Misconceptions in the field of social sciences have long been negated, and dance as a mode of inquiry has been successfully established in ethnographic research. To develop a particular ability to see dance as a representation of a historic lineage, culture and emerging trends, the researcher needs to initiate these dynamics through the strategy of research design. The strategy of creating the research design thus shifts the focus from outside to the inner self. Within the context of defining and observing others it is the voice of the researcher, their personal experience and embodied phenomenological exposure that comes in harmony and synergy with the participants. The researcher negotiates the boundaries of the observer and the self-reflection by situating their agency, their approach to representing their research topic, within the boundaries of the mainstream or the margin of a developing trend within the cultural practice of a definite space and time. Awareness of this dialogic process happening between the interactions of the researcher and the researched thus becomes the first-hand experiences in the ethnographic research method.

With my understanding and experience as a dancer-researcher, my approach is in contrast to the postpositivist inquiry. Rather, my position is in line with Jill Green and Susan Stinson's

suggestion that "[o]ntology, or how we look at reality, and epistemology, or how we know" are considered significant trajectories because, according to the theory, truth or reality are social constructs that become relevant within a specific context (1999, p.93). Green and Stinson state that "we construct reality according to how we are positioned in the world, and that how we see reality and truth is related to the perspective from which we are looking" (1999, p.93).

In contrast to positivists, this framework encompasses "prediction, understanding, emancipation and construction" without any predetermined value attached to it (1999,p.93). Subjectivity is not enlisted under the inquiry with a negative connotation, rather it is believed to give a wholesome organic understanding of the people and the practice under the umbrella of the research topic. Unlike scientific research, this is not to uncover hard evidence, but on the contrary, this is about the aesthetic selection of relevant data with reference to the context of discussion. As Green and Stinson claim: "The postpositivist theorist is seeking coherence of a statement more than correspondence to an external reality. Coherence refers to the unity, consistency and internal logic of a statement... one reason why many researchers who do this kind of work experience it as a kind of art making" (1999, p. 93). According to sociologist Norman K. Denzin, the evolution of the postpositivist or the "postmodern turn" which he also refers as the "new ethnography" does not rely or depend on the objectivity, prediction, generalization of the collected data, but instead opens up broader possibilities through recognition and emancipation of individual experience; the cultural values and social environment are considered a cohesive framework for analysis (2001, 2003, 2013).

As a dancer and a researcher, I entered the field with such broad questions as: Who are your role models in dance? When did you realize that you have the special skill to engage in

choreographing dances, and how? In the course of engaging with participants from three groups (teachers, choreographers/dancers, students), and with multiple open-ended and general queries regarding their love for dance and their initial period of dance training, the research tools utilized multiple modes of inquiry; in addition to the methods mentioned earlier (participant observations and semi-structured interviews for instance), I also utilized dancing and sharing movements in the same space and time, observation of one another in the course of choreographing and learning the dances and short-answer questionnaires.

Not following a rigid, structured pattern of data collection provided some leeway and allowed me to have a frame of the experience which shaped the thoughts and realization that unfolded. During our interviews, Dancers voluntarily informed me about their fears and inhibitions and their limitations to pursuing Mohiniyattam due to social stigma or peer pressure. And the questionnaires took a different trajectory altogether during such interview sessions. I was able to engage reflection and recollection of these encounters in real time and virtual space; and in repeatedly reviewing the recorded interviews I could explore alternative ways of sharing my findings—regarding the gender binaries in Mohiniyattam and how male dancers are pushing, adapting and traversing boundaries to voice and embody their love and passion for dance.

While this was beneficial for my study, the experiences cannot be generalized to a larger population; rather, this data remains case-specific and offers unique examples. The time required for the collection and assessment of the data can be easily limited to the subjects. It encompasses the "emergent nature of the research design" based on the requirement and the context of the observed as it undergoes mutual contouring which cannot be predicted ahead of time. Thus, as stated by Green and Stinson, "the researcher shares much in common with the choreographer,

remaining open to emerging patterns and meanings and to forms that are appropriate for them" (1999, p. 95).

Taking the role of an interpretive researcher, my relationship and association with the participants is of pragmatic importance. With multiple readings and multiple viewings of the data, interpretive work needs a critical assessment and social analysis leading to a more emancipatory research. Because, in my research, experiential components and spirituality define the phenomenological understanding of the dancer's experience, it gives voice to the unheard "other," the male dancers, who have a subaltern status in the world of dance where it is female-dominated. Emancipatory research allows the marginalized to give voice to themselves from within the authoritarian social structure—wherein I critically assess my participants through the lens of masculinity (Connell,1995).

The validity of the research topic and interpretation is completely based on the theoretical framework (outlined in chapter four) and it is based on the context that the researcher has situated the topic in. This dissertation can be considered a catalyst for initiating future research and it can help deconstruct alternative representations constructed through the manifestations of individual case studies. For an evolving trend in the world of Mohiniyattam, a qualitative methodology is my personal preference because of its evolving nature which is not based on rigid philosophical beliefs but constructed according to the socio-historical reality and knowledge and the demand of the aim and purpose of the performing art. To confirm the analytical assessment of Madison; "critical analysis is grounded in social theory, ethics is grounded in moral philosophy, and performance is both a practice and a theory…(hence) the researcher engaged in ethnography, ethics and performance needs both theory and method" (2012, p.14).

Primary Tools of Inquiry

Interaction and being a witness to the growth and career of male dancers within the dance fraternity for the last twenty years, my research methods in this dissertation corroborate the post-positivist ideology. The following tools of semi-structured interviews, art-based research, visual research, auto-ethnographic reflections and, last but not the least, Internet ethnography, have allowed me to collect and assess the data over the last two years of my fieldwork. All the tools have been implemented in dual sites and spaces: Toronto, Canada, and Kolkata, India. A considerable amount of data collection happened with technological aid and interactions in social media. These methods helped me both as the observer and the researcher to push boundaries and overcome challenges imposed due to time constraints, the complexity of international trips and the financial scarcity involved in these kinds of circumstances. This situation underwent constant change during the last phase of my fieldwork, in March 2020, and was coupled with the restriction of physical and social distancing. Actually 'social distancing,' a term which came into existence due to the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic, forced me to continue my research and fieldwork virtually, I was left only with the option of Internet ethnography.

With Internet ethnography, I used the Internet as an alternate medium of communication with the participants and met them in virtual spaces, to observe and learn about their experiences in the pedagogical environment. The advice to use and implement virtual sessions as a mode of interaction in my fieldwork came during the initial years of my PhD studies. While planning my research methods and mapping out my fieldwork, a senior Professor in the Department of Dance at York University suggested the possibility of using the Internet in ethnographic research. Thus,

the inclusion of this technology, as a dominant tool for gathering data, became an essential method. It was fruitful with respect to time and the ability to avoid the funding issues, along with the practical challenges that are faced by the new researchers with limited resources and experience.

In today's world of technological advancement, it is not surprising that eBooks and scholarly articles are readily available to a researcher at any time point without the hassle of travel. Articles and reviews from various Indian and international newspapers, written by art critics and dance scholars, critiquing male dancers and their performances are also easily available over the Internet. As anthropologist David Zeitlyn suggests the Internet is an archive (2012, p.468), and part of my research is to take into account the large amount of written and visual media that has contributed to the construction and perpetuation of ideas in the world of performing arts. If the Internet is to be considered an archive, my work also involves virtual archival research, in addition to the information gathered through first-hand sources. This gives me access to past dance performances and lecture-demonstrations in real time and space through the virtual mediums of YouTube, Facebook and Instagram on which they are recorded, uploaded and saved and accessible at any time. Because my research questions deal with performing arts, analysis of performances is mandatory, and this option of using the Internet is greatly advantageous. Scholarly literature is limited on this topic so these materials act as an alternative resource to situate my research questions. The documentation and archives are created with the purpose of publicity and propaganda and not for evaluation, yet they become instruments of power and the "evidence of witnesses" (Zeitlyn, 2012, p.463) for the sake of the research.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection as these "provide a rich focus for ethnographies of contemporary and illuminate how... mode[s] of knowledge

production intersect with the practices that play crucial roles in... a wide range of professions" (Briggs, 2007, p.551). There are generations of substantial data that can argue in favor of or against my research questions and the socio-cultural grounding of these, since the post-colonial period. Therefore, I applied multiple formats for interviews, to generate knowledge and provide answers to multiple sets of questions.

Because the group of participants are mostly adults, responsible dance professionals and teachers, the interviewees (as well as myself) knew how to make the best use of time during these sessions, as they "are accustomed to efficient use of their time" (Bernard, 2006, p.212). Hence, it became one of the best tools in my research. The use of stimulants and prompts, (like the silent probe, "Tell-Me-More" prompts, and the phased-assertion probe) helped the participants open up and speak for themselves and this enabled me to gather adequate data(Ibid., p.210-212). I documented the semi-structured interviews with audio/video-recordings on mobile devices and a computer, and I used note taking and observation as well. The recordings were instrumental and constitute a "permanent archive of primary information" (Ibid., p.227). As such, this mode of documentation eliminated the need for verbatim note taking, as one can listen/view the recordings multiple times; it is of importance for the archival value and future accessibility to other researchers.

Art-Based Research was also engaged as a research method, specifically dance which is considered "the most underutilized art form" (Leavy, 2015, p.150). "Dance can produce insights into various aspects of different cultures" (Ibid., p.152), with insights into the "gender performativity" (Ibid., p.158). I used "dance as a device through which to [aid in] my own research comforts and discomforts with embodied masculinity and femininity," and the practice was

examined and critically assessed under the tutelage of great masters of the genre (Ibid., p.158). It is the implementation of the postmodern qualitative paradigm that has expanded greatly in recent decades, politically and methodologically, that has helped arts-based research evolve as an alternative research method (Ibid., p.11), thus becoming effective for my research topic.

Visual ethnography provided support to the arts-based method I worked with—dance, as it is a visually mystical art form, always in motion. It is evolving every moment and rarely constant in space and in visual imagery. Motion is central to the art and in this context capturing and archiving the moving body is primary for future reflections and research. “Technologies and theoretical paradigms to use photography [and] video...” (Pink, 2007, p1) became mandatory in my work. My objective was to use “methods (that) serve the aims of the research,” art and otherwise (Ibid., p.5). Images cannot replace written words but speak for themselves and can be a meaningful element of ethnographic research for future scholars (Ibid., p.6).

Visual ethnography incorporates appropriate knowledge creation, discourse, with other data and adds a sensorial touch for readers. These interwoven materials transcend time and become valuable in terms of social relationships, practices and understandings by reducing the distance between the discipline and the subject studied. My exploration illuminates the immense possibilities within the genre of Mohiniyattam, which yet remains unexplored in terms of gender fluidity. I will generate literature on an attempt to increase sensorial awareness, of sexual discrimination associated with particular Indian Classical Dance forms, that are predetermined by socio-cultural taboos and stigmas. Visual ethnography helps me explore how gender and power structures define roles, agency and identity in the field of Mohiniyattam which can be analyzed with visual presentations.

And finally, auto-ethnography was a primary approach to this research. The research included self-reflections on my experience being a participant-observer during my apprenticeship in classroom settings and with other students. I use an auto-ethnographic strategy to explore the overall cultural experience through "look-think-act" prompts and by attending training sessions as well as performances. This allowed me to walk through the process, exercising embodiment and "reflexive engagement with the discourses, materiality, sociality and sensorially of a particular" practice (Pink, 2007, p.193). Through informal conversations and regular interaction with the student community, I got an insight into their emotional challenges and conflicts; personal stories of failure and success; pedagogical hurdles; social discriminations and professional expectations; and their problematizing of the social gaze.

Positionality was an important part of the auto-ethnographic method. I am an insider, as a practitioner, yet I also remain an outsider geographically, as I come from a different state of India—and am not from Kerala. Further, I am settled in Toronto and pursuing dance studies which complicated the insider/outsider position—though, this academic perspective has provided me with the theoretical framework as well as the research methods used in this study which has involved a negotiation of embodied knowledge and disciplinary knowledge to articulate and write down my experience (Chakravorty, 2008).

In "How Black is Black?" Patrick Alcedo provides a glaring example of the insider/outsider dichotomy in conducting research in social sciences which has enmeshed the struggle (2014). The author implemented basic tools, using field-notes, interviews and participant-observation as his primary research methods (Ibid.). He also implemented dance as a tool, as well as a medium, for conducting socio-cultural research on communities and to understand their behavior (Ibid.). He

considers resources ranging from historical texts of ancient languages, to lived experiences (Ibid.). Individual accounts and innovative ways of implementing basic tools, such as Alcedo's, opens new vistas of opportunities that were implemented, under circumstances not preconceived, in my work.

Lament is made over the fact that dance never received its due importance in academia or otherwise since the anthropological research era. It has always been a secondary resource for anthropologists who considered dance either a recreational activity that a group of people indulge in, a ritual, a social gathering or mere entertainment. Dance as a practice, and its essential representational value embodied through the moving body of humans, has never been considered significant enough for scholarly research. Western academia classified dance under categories of the royal court, classical or folk in terms of their geographical origin and depending on the groups who participated in the practice and disseminated it. While in India it got classified as folk, classical and Bollywood dances. These categories are highly representational of the subject matter that they dealt with independently. While folk dances remained in practice for group participation and enthusiasts during festivals, family gatherings and other community events, the classical category demanded trained and skillful dancers with many years of vigorous training under skilled dance teachers. On the other hand, Bollywood dances became the melting pot for eastern and western dance genres acquiring a unique status of their own popularity, globally, and in lieu of Bollywood movies.

With the development of dance ethnography in the early 20th century, dance studies gained importance as an independent genre of study and research. Scholars in academia had weak criticism or insufficient resources and knowledge to talk about the subject matter. But at the dawn

of the 21st century, the socio-cultural contextualization of dance has helped the field to move away from narrow perspectives and marginalization. Debated within the social sciences and related disciplines along with inter- and intradisciplinary approaches, dance ethnography has moved beyond its limitations, where the dancing body has gained prominence through reflectivity and is considered as a reservoir of knowledge with embodiment of the embedded culture that it represents.

Delimitations and Limitations

My choice of participants is delimited to male dancers who willingly agreed to be a part of the research topic. Interestingly, a few men hesitated to be a part of it in order to avoid exposure, which reflects the stigmatization I discuss in this research. Some students and dancers shied away from the project with the excuse of being too busy, or lacking necessary language and communication skills, while some argued that this research topic was unnecessary because it is not a dance form suitable for men. In fact, I even lost a few long-time associates due to my involvement with this topic, simply because I intend to showcase the challenges male dancers face and study the trend of emerging gender fluidity in the genre of Mohiniyattam. Such orthodox and stereotypical views have pushed male dancers to the periphery of Mohiniyattam, where they are eagerly waiting for the outcome of this research.

Time, distance and funding raise questions of accessibility in studying and observing large groups of men participants, particularly due to the physical distance between my field sites: Toronto and Kolkata. Frequent travels were out of question for me, due to the limited funding available to graduate students. Hence, technology became a primary resource, and my savior, as I

was able to interview and meet my participants virtually over the last three years in lieu of in-person research. As a graduate student, one must work within the constraints of time, and so I offer this dissertation as a springboard to initiate this topic into academia, and as a model for future researchers who want to work on similar grounds, using interdisciplinary studies across various platforms (in-person and otherwise). The topic of my research has the versatility, dimensionality and possibility of working within various fields such as psycho-analysis, somatic studies and kinesiology in the future. But, within the scope of this dissertation an explorations from these perspectives was not feasible—it is important for me to also recognize my own limits in expertise.

Additionally, we must also acknowledge that unforeseen circumstances can arise. During my fieldwork in Kolkata in March 2020, a global lockdown for the Covid-19 pandemic began. The new regulations and social distancing protocols further curtailed the possibility for face-to-face interviews. Within the one-month duration of my trip to India, I managed to acquire as much data as possible along with some rare scholarly articles and books from the archive of Kalamandalam Kolkata. The archive is currently under construction, and due to the improper and unplanned assimilation of the materials in the archive and the library, it was difficult to access the resources in stock from the magnanimous collection of books, magazines and articles at the institute in Kolkata.

This left me confused, but with my teacher's guidance I fished out some treasures that are of significant value to the study of Mohiniyattam. If time would have been in my favor, I could have accessed more valuable materials and pictures which could have been very insightful in order to evaluate the contribution of the Kuttys in establishing the dance forms of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali in Kolkata. Their enormous body of work and the pictorial evidence could have enriched

my dissertation, but unfortunately, they were not readily available; and I had to critically analyze their contribution from oral narratives of the students and dancers who had the opportunity to learn, work and witness their choreographic process.

Chapter 4: Female Dancing Bodies

From Pre-Vedic Age to Modern Times

In this chapter, I weave through the scholarship on post-colonial studies and subaltern studies, as well as the socio-historical factors shaping, structuring and gendering dances in the Indian subcontinent for more than 2000 years. I explore this layered context to analyze the current trends that are both dissolving and disseminating Indian Classical and Contemporary Dance practices on a global platform, as a cultural and artistic identity that is challenging the gendered binaries. My critical inquiry weaves through the historical legacies of multiple foreign influences that have dissolved into the cultural realm of the Indian subcontinent over centuries, and whose marks and effects can be seen in daily interactions and altering social relations.

Understand how the multiple invasions of Mughal and British colonialism left permanent traces in socio-cultural environments, impacting the tradition of the *Devadasi*[2] system, is a challenge because of numerous and varied characteristics that contributed to a process of assimilation and absorption over the years of coexistence. It is difficult to assess these processes as different or distinct from each other because of the value of resilience and perseverance in Indian philosophy—which has the power to withstand multiple invasions and mold foreign influences

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[2] *Devadasis*: Davesh Soneji, in his book, *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity*, refers collectively to a variety of temples and performing women in the 19th and 20th centuries who were given an enormously traditional Pan-Indian impression. He adds precision to the distinct categories of these hereditary dancers ranging from *Devadasi* to *Tawaif, Baiji* along with other temple workers and courtesans. He claims that the secular component of their lifestyle and dance practices were lost due to middle-class and upper-class intervention in the early 1900s, with the mission to sanitize the dance practice in search of components, and use dance to symbolize nationalism and heritage to the world. He pinpoints the consolidation of *Devadasi* identity to the *Nayaka* period (16th and 17th centuries) and characterizes it as involving non-conjugal lifestyles as well as "simultaneous investments in temple, courtly, and public cultures, complex dance and music practices, and matrilocal kinship structures" (Soneji 2012, p.30).

into its very own shape. As such, Indian civilization has shown trends of being a culture of tolerance and assimilation, where various trends have happily come together on the shores of the Indian Ocean (Rele, 1973, 1992).

Historical Invasions Inducing Change

It is rightful to claim, without any doubt or debate, that all the prominent Indian Classical Dance forms have come a long way from merely being representatives of antiquity and heritage, as promoted by the bureaucracy in the post-colonial era of the 20th century. The West has always connected Indian Classical Dance forms with a "quintessential representation of Indian authenticity," as a marker of ethnic culture from Indian diaspora (Chakraborty, 2000-2001, p.108). This includes the history of the *Devadasi* which "ranks among the most controversial and powerful incentives of Western fantasies about the East" (Keresenboom, 2013, p.715). Indian Classical Dance, from the common understanding in the West, is "a product of a complex mix of Hindu nationalism, regional chauvinism, and national revivalism and is embedded in patriarchal views of the role and function of women in society" (Chakravorty, 2000-2001, p.108).

Although reconstructed Indian Classical Dance forms evolved, survived and thrived as a sacred temple ritual of Hinduism, the oldest religion of the human race, we cannot overlook the influences of other religions like Islam and Christianity which travelled into the country and eventually altered the definition of the age-old temple ritualistic dance practice. Influences from the West, as well as, from the far East have been consistent with repeated invasions and trading relationships. Among all the invasions, since the time of Alexander the Great, the impact of the Moghul Dynasty followed by British colonization had left a permanent imprint on the social,

political, economic and cultural spheres of daily living which gets reflected in the arts, along with definitive translations in the Indian dance forms.

The Changing Status of Women in Performing Arts

In lieu of analyzing why men dancers were invisible entities in the world of dance, which was practiced and nurtured by the temples and the royalty, I take you back in time to provide an overview of the primary practitioners of dance—women, who were dedicated and devoted to the arts for their entire lifetime. Without understanding of the socio-economic conditions of these women; the lifestyle and challenges of the hereditary dancers; the commodification of women's bodies; and the symbolization of dance as a national identity, my discussion of the invisibility of male counterparts would be incomplete.

The status of women since the Vedic times was respectable, in comparison to the later ages, and underwent a total degeneration around the 17th century and onwards. Rekha Pande and S. Jeevanandam, f trace the growth and decline of the temple reformers or performers (whom we address as the *Devadasis*) from the 12th to 18th century, noting evidence from various regional texts, scriptures and travelogues of foreign visitors. They state:

Devadasis were the women who were dedicated to the particular temple deity or specific symbol. A *devadasi* was considered *nitya sumangali*, a woman eternally free from the adversity of widowhood as she was married to God and married forever. In that auspicious capacity, a *devadasi* was not governed by the strict rules of sexual morality as applicable to married women. She was married to a deity or god, but that did not mean that she had to live her life without the normal pleasures of sex and childbearing. She was a respected member of the society. These *devadasis* performed ritualistic and non-ritualistic performances and were at the height of their glory from

the 12th to 16th century. However, by the 17th century we found that the *devadasis* were moving away from the temples into secular spaces (2013, p.81).

In the realm of arts and literature, Vatsyayana's ancient text *Kama Sutra* is considered the foremost work on erotica and is believed to have been compiled "around the fourth century during the reign of the Gupta kings" (Ruth, 2000, p.45). Vatsyayan, the ancient Indian philosopher, advocates for the study of this text by both men and women and emphasizes that not just courtesans but also young girls should be taught and advised by older experienced women about the theories and practices. The text depicted the daily life of the rich aristocrats where the courtesan was a very normal figure in urban life. From this text, we learn about the period, before invasions of the Mughal rulers, when women participated in poetic recitations and their compositions were heard in public gatherings.

This idea is supported with other texts. Poet Kalidasa, who is believed to have written his plays and dramas around the 4th5th century, mentioned the presence of many *Devadasis* in the city of Ujjain, and the Chinese scholar Hiuen Tsang also spoke about their presence in his travelogues. Courtesans and *Devadasis* enjoyed freedom and property rights and had a respectable class status in society. Shivaji and Vijayalakshmi similarly discuss how courtesans were common in the Southern part of India and in the Chola dynasty. They explain,

Abbe Dubois, a French Jesuit and an astute observer, gives a detailed description of the *devadasis*, after his association of 30 years with the people of southern India. He observes that the courtesans were the only women allowed to read, sing and dance. Any other woman would be ashamed to own that she had learnt to read. Curiously enough, courtesans and dancing girls were always associated with good luck" (Shivaji and Vijayalakshmi, 2004, p. 26).

With the growth and institutionalization of temples in the Dravidian peninsula, the citadel of socio-economic activities, the number of employees required to serve and perform the ritual services were a large group of people who became an integral part of the system, and the temple girls became mandatory contributors to this socio-economic and political set-up. The growth and maintenance of the temples established them as the site for development and sustenance of multiple forms of profession, and the King acquired a perfect homologation with the God. Furthermore, as Pande and Jeevanandam contend, "[t]he temple firmly established the agrarian feudal order... there were a number of attempts to authenticate and legitimize the new feudal policy of the period through a parallelism between the deity and the king... and a parallel world of authority is reconstructed on the spiritual plane" (2013, p.86). We see a mutual exchange of wealth and honour between the two most established institutions of the society—the king and the temple, as social and political authorities; and the King eventually maintained and mentored the temple. Gradually, the temples became the "nexus of power... and no festive occasion was complete in the temple without the performance of the temple girls" (Ibid., 2013, p.82).

On the other hand, the women folk within the feudalistic patriarchal society, rigidly demarcated through caste system, enjoyed a mixed status of respect and control as mentioned in *Smriti Shastras* coupled with other textual evidence written by ancient scholars and saints—one such example is Manu's *Manusmriti* which is the foremost celebrated book on laws and social conduct for humanity in India. A contradiction, however, in rules of treatment of the household woman existed from the Vedic times; as we know, Manu gave absolute power to men to inflict corporal punishment on woman, in case she was disagreeable to him. Among the exceptions we learn of women like Gargi, Ghosha, Apala and Maitreyi who had access to ancient scriptures, knowledge and the right to learning.

With the invasions and settlement of Mughals in 1562, the position and status of women in the arts gradually decreased. The patronage they enjoyed, unlike the ancient period, did not remain the same. While "music and dance… [had] been among the most popular forms of entertainment," these forms became closely linked with "physical pleasure" (Bano, 2009-2010, p.251). The elite status of courtesans and ordinary prostitutes were quite fluid and blurry as the line of demarcation between the two groups were not clearly laid down by the state laws. The status of being a courtesan or a prostitute as the class of women performers was based on notions of sanctity and purity which they claimed themselves. However, apparently coalescing boundaries among these separate groups, with the shift in roles and respectability, was under threat with the Muslim invasions. As Bano describes,

Dance and music in the early Sultanate Chronicles was seen as performances mainly by the captive-girls. Dance at the court particularly at that stage was performed only by women dancers. The chronicles boasted of turning the women of defeated Indian *Rajas* (kings) into singing and dancing girls… the point of emphasis in these accounts had been to completely humiliate and demoralise the conquered enemy, first by enslaving their women and then by making them sing and dance (Ibid. p.251).

The introduction of Islamic practices creeped into the orthodox Hindu male-dominated society, which is apparent with practices like *Purdah* (the facial cloth used by women to cover the face so that her identity is not revealed to the outside world), *Andar Mahal* (the interior of households where outsider or unfamiliar males were denied entry) and *Talaq* (divorce). The position of women in society became restricted within the closed quarters of their homes. Polygamy, child marriage, *sati*, *purdah* and divorce, along with the existing orthodox Hindu

system of the class and caste distinctions, made the life of women pathetic. In the arts, male dancers adopted female impersonation to meet the absence of female dancing bodies because it was considered "taboo" to do public performances as women were restricted within the boundaries of their household. Dance scholar Hari Krishnan states:

In the South Asian context... women of status had long been secluded within private domestic spaces, masquerades of gender were productive new ways of imaging and viewing the female form. Through the transvestite performer, the external look of the 'woman' was regulated by minute attention to details of… feminine accoutrements. These male performers of *devadasi* dance clearly had a place in the courtly aesthetics of colonial South India" (2009, p.383).

Indian and World Arts and Crafts, India's first monthly tabloid news and featured magazine devoted to performing arts, crafts and culture, speaks about the advent of male performers in an article titled "The Indian Women and the Arts" by dance critic Leela Ramanathan. She states:

When I was asked to speak on the subject "Women and the performing arts" at a recently conducted conference on "Women-studies" it suddenly struck me that we Indian women have always been associated with the performing arts in some way or the other, from the beginning. Perhaps, the only period when we were not allowed to participate in certain forms of dance, drama and music, was between late 16th century and early 20th century, which explains the preponderance of men as performers then in dance-dramas like Kathakali, Kuchipudi and the Bhagavata Mela, and also in dramatic presentations and in public presentations of music. Men enacted the roles of women when necessary, and some of them were renowned for their characterization of the fair sex! (1988, p.7).

Ramanathan claims economic hardships as the reason for this change in status of women from respectability to prostitution—in their search for work outside the temples. Our acquired knowledge of Victorian morality through the British system of education translated the erotic sensuous element of *Bhakti Sringara* in dance to crude and vulgar and "banned it in our temples, which had hitherto been the focal points of our culture" (Ibid, p7).

Despicable Transformation of *Devadasis* in British India

The condition of the *devadasi* community worsened with the colonial laws that were imposed on the hereditary dancers to control their activities and limit their access. Significantly, "[d]uring this period there was a debate whether a *devadasi* could be charge of prostitution. Prostitution was a classical offence under penal code Section. 372 and 373. However, scholars argued that the Vedic *dasi* found no place in the colonial idea" (Angaleswari, 2018, p.59).

Davesh Soneji brings forth the despicable situation of these hereditary dancers in his work (2012). By focusing not on the privileged few in the early 20th century who were allowed to perform in public, but on the many who were never integrated within the so-called "modern," post-colonial Indian community, we get to know the kind of degeneration that dancers had to undergo due to several invasions and their after-effects on the socio-cultural environment (2012). They were left behind to face continuous disenfranchisement, loss of personal dignity and social stigmatization. Soneji's personal encounters with the *devadasis* from the matrilineal families provide deep insights into the personal challenges inflicted on the community due to the legal[3] actions against the *Devadasi* system during the colonial and post-colonial era.

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[3] Legal Acts: Anti-Nautch Movement (1881-1910). The "Anti-Nautch agitation was a movement in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to abolish the tradition of dedicating minor girls to the Hindu temples in India. The movement was on track by Colonial government, Christian missionaries and

The effort to make dance free of sexual and vulgar interpretations, and to make it accessible to the middle-class and upper-class women of the society, the community of hereditary dancers and their matrilineal families became victims of the implementation and enforcement known as the "Reformist or the Anti-Nautch Movement from approximately 1890 onwards," when legal acts were enforced by the colonial powers on the hereditary performers (Mitra, 2006, pp73). In a campaign to reform the pitiable condition of women in the society "the social reform movements spearheaded by Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Govind Ranade ...and other prominent social thinkers, questioned the practice of [the] *Devadasi* system and leaded for its abolition" (Mitra, 2006, p.73). The philanthropists worked in two directions: one group was focused on the reform aspect to improve the destitute of women while the other group was dedicated to the revival of the ancient arts and freeing them from the immoral practices that years of slavery under foreign powers inflicted upon them.

The Indians who were an educated middle-class and pioneers in steering the Indian Freedom Movement during the British rule were influenced by Christian morals and Victorian social values regarding the chastity and purity of womanhood. They started questioning the association of the divine with the immoral sexual practices in the *Devadasi* system, and initiated the process of rescuing and purifying the arts by discarding the practitioners. But in this ordeal the victims were the hereditary practitioners of the dance forms who suffered an irreparable loss of status and were plunged in deeper misery, socially and of course all the more financially. This

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Indian social reformers. The colonial rule and missionaries state marginalized *devadasis* in various ways claiming that the Indian tradition of dance which *devadasis* were representing, was inherently immoral. The colonial government began regulating gender norms in the public sphere based on western understanding of morality; whilst the Indian social reformers marginalized the *devadasis* by appropriating this particular western discourse and claiming that their construction of religion was sacred and needed to be rescued from *devadasis*. Eventually the *Devadasi* system was ultimately pushed to the fringes of the society and into void" (Angalesari, 2018, p.58).

overall failure of the reforms is mirrored in the eyes of the women as they saw the success of men; as *Gurus* of the dance forms in their communities, these men benefitted in terms of social and financial gains. The women on the other end, were sidelined and stripped of their property. With open arms, the nation embraced the religious dance practice and cherry-picked aspects of it from within the *Dasiyattam* while the secular dance and hereditary female dancers were both framed by the laws of the state as "archaic emblems of a degenerate[d], embarrassing past" (Soneji, 2012, p.187).

The works of Davesh Soneji (2012), Hari Krishnan (2009) and Anna Morcom (2013) are important interventions in the realm of Indian Classical Dance; they speak to the suffering experienced by the community of these hereditary dancers on the basis of class, caste, religion, gender identity and socio-economic mobility without any political agency in a democratic secular republic of India. Women dancers, as *devadasis*, have long been objects of fascination and commodification within India and outside, and these scholars have problematized their status through the narration of their own stories, in their own words, with compassion, respect and appreciation for their artistic achievements. We can never negate the efforts of these dance practitioners, referred to as "hereditary dancers," the handing over of their past arts practices to modern society and with which the nation recreated its package of heritage to promote Indian national identity on a global platform. Kapila Vatsyayan, active in this process of reconstructing these dance forms during the post-colonial era, with bureaucratic power, confirms antiquity and markers of heritage are key issues that promoted these art forms on the global stage (2007). Our consciousness was molded by the burden of colonialism and the euphoria of nationalism that reconstruction of the temple art forms which affected its austerity with the woman's body losing

dignity and respect, which would be reinstated within the mainstream credentials and upward mobility.

However, the community that retained the practice in midst of all odds were absolutely forgotten and forced to take up degenerative practices for financial needs. Thus, Morcom attends to historical accounts of hereditary female performers and how they were excluded from Indian modernity, first by colonial policies (Anti-Nautch Movement), and then by post-colonial discourses of nationhood and independence (2013). She offers similar accounts of the processes by which female performers were gradually stripped of their unique position in Indian social life, deprived of what power and influence they wielded, and relegated to newly created "illicit worlds" (Ibid.). In her version of this narrative, Morcom stresses the "powerful universal ideologies and moral discourses" that tended to "sweep away the crucial details of the social, cultural and historical context of female performers, reinforcing crude dichotomies and inaccurate categories," for example, by conflating professional female performers with prostitution, which Victorian morality cast as mutually inclusive categories (2007, p.36).

Morcom includes both genitally female and transgender and transvestite performers in her discussions, to examine relevant performing arts in the 21st century, including Bollywood, bar girls, and *kothi* performers. These "illicit worlds" formed as "modernity, nationalism, and colonial and bourgeois morality began to sweep definitively across India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," creating a new space in India for upper-class/caste women in performing arts and relegating once powerful, but now "disreputable," performers into underground worlds—a process that Morcom calls "embourgeoisement" (2013, p.11-12). To assess the process of any cultural production the relation of nation, race, class, caste, gender identity, history and power dynamics are integral to the construction, which is why Pallabi Chakravorty follows Edward Said's

analysis, in the context of Indian Classical Dance, and considers how "every cultural document contains within it a history of a contest of rulers and ruled, of leaders and led" (2000-2001, p.110).

Krishnan shares his "ungendered" experiences in the blog of *Purush* with the hereditary dancers from the past. He goes further to explore the concept of eroticism and sensual aspects assigned to the *Lasya Bhava*. His critical analysis of the difference between vulgarity and sensuousness executed through dancing bodies, speaks of negotiating ideas and representations of gender. He comments on the displacement of identity which feeds into the day-to-day discourses affecting the core as human beings (Blog: "Purush: The Global Dancing Male," , 2013). Thus, the 21st century witnessed the struggle between rejection of the hereditary dancers, who despite all odds practiced and nurtured the dance forms in the closed quarters, and the group of reconstructionists (of these hereditary practices) in their attempt to sanitize the same arts.

When Indians were busy fighting against the colonial rule there was also a group of art revivalists who were involved in heated debates about sanitizing the society of its prostitution and dancing girls to establish a freedom of rights in pursuing arts. In this socio-political agenda the *devadasis* were the victims and the male members of the hereditary practitioners' community became the masters and acclaimed *Gurus*. These *Gurus* were instrumental in the reconstruction of the Indian Classical Dance forms and nurtured the arts for the non-hereditary dance lovers. However, the 20th century witnessed a dissociation of economic gains among the passionate pursuers of the reconstructed dance forms. As a result, there was a strained relationship between the profession of dance and the commercial aspect of it, which even today places the job of being a dancer under scrutiny in terms of financial stability (personal interviews with dancers in India and Toronto 2017-2020).

Positionality of *Mohinis* within this Turmoil

Under such a lineage of historical turmoil, the *Devadasi* system existed as an accepted practice, as a temple ritual, patronized by the King, promoted by the royal courts and considered a true part of the heritage and tradition of Mohiniyattam. Dravidian cultural texts and literary works like *Cilappatikaram* and *Manimekhalai* are primary sources that provide a comprehensive understanding regarding the lives of dancers in Tamil Nadu and Kerala with special mention of the styles of dancing that they practiced along with specifications on the pedagogical structure (Shivaji and Vijayalakshmi, 2004; Venu and Paniker, 1983). Scholars can evaluate a dance form from various perspectives, but I strongly believe that a historical background promotes a comprehensive holistic understanding of the genre.

Along this vein, G. Venu and Nirmala Paniker provide a brief outline, detailing that "The *Devadasi* dance tradition which developed through the temple danseuses is an important type among the dance patterns of India. Bharatanatyam in Tamil Nadu, Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh, Odyssey in Orissa and Mohiniyattam in Kerala took shape in the tradition of *devadasi* dance and grew and developed a classical status" (Venu and Paniker, 1983, p.1). Furthermore, scholars claim that even if Mohiniyattam was performed in the temples, it was not exclusively a temple art as it was simultaneously performed in the courtyards of wealthy families and nobilities and historical records tell us that "its purpose was not exclusively religious" (Jones, et.al., 1984, p.5). Likewise, Y.G. Doraiswamy states in the exclusive Marg edition of Mohiniyattam that it is "largely a secular and social art" (1973, p.4), while Balakrishna Kurup affirms that "there is evidence that it was not a temple art, but a social or rather a palace art" (Marg, 1973, p.14).

Mohiniyattam did not have the opportunity to move through history with unhindered continuity, nor with the passing down of traditions and a repertoire of movements by observation

and transmission from teacher to student in *Guru-Shishya parampara*. Rather, it went through repeated phases of dissolution and disapproval; periods in which the transmission or replication of movements and dance pieces were interrupted, forgotten and not shared as a continuous process. "This process of replication is also described as occurring over longer stretches of time, as a process that creates history…" but, with Mohiniyattam. "[i]conicity can neither explain, nor account for, certain developments in the tradition" (Lemos, 2012, p. 48). Thus, for Mohiniyattam, accountability from a handed down repertoire is barely existent so the focus is on the process of reconstruction and revival, by teachers and dancers for audience members, and in reclaiming the tradition and authenticity.

Three Dominant Stages

Scholars, dancers and revivalists of Mohiniyattam broadly assign three dominant trends to the origin, degeneration-hibernation and reconstruction of Mohiniyattam; moreover, "[t]he history of Mohiniyattam has three main overlapping stages: *Tevadichiattam* (8^{th}-12^{th} century), *Dasiyattam* (12^{th}-19^{th} Century) and Mohiniyattam (17^{th} century to present)" (Lemos, 2012, p. 54). The terms *Tevadichi* (in Kerala) and *devadasi* (in Tamil Nadu and rest of India) are synonymous, and *Tevadichi* is the regional interpretation of "being the servant of God," a socio-cultural entity present in throughout India from very early times (Venu and Paniker, 1983; Rele, 1992; Shivaji, 1986; Shivaji and Vijayalakshmi, 2004; Lemos, 2012).

In *Mohiniyattam: The Lyrical Dance*, Kanak Rele speaks to this context (the development of the arts in Kerala), and confirms the abundance of scholarly works on the theatrical genres of Kerala based on the historical, social and political characteristics shaping these genres. The dominance of theatrical components made it stand out and among all the practiced theatrical art

forms such as *Krsnattam*, *Ramanattam* which is believed to have culminated into Kathakali... in the course of time these newer elements harmonised perfectly making the drama a well-balanced structure... this new theatrical trend is believed to have started sometime in the latter half of the 17th century and by the time the 19th century was underway we had this fully synthesised and exquisite art of the Kathakali firmly established in the soil of Kerala, having danced its way into the hearts of the people (Ibid. p. 108). The dominance of the theatrical component in the arts of Kerala, envisioned by encompassing the traditions of the land, adhered strictly to Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and became an integral aspect of the temples. Within the dominant tradition of theatre arts in Kerala, "[d]ancing was employed only to emphasize the mood, to enhance the dramatic impact" (Ibid, p. 112). Thus, I wonder, where can we position Mohiniyattam in this scenario?

In the special edition of Marg publication (1973) entitled *Mohiniyattam*, Balakrishna Kurup states "there are people who believe that this art form existed before *Cilappatikaram,* which was written by Ilomkovadical, the younger brother of Cheraman Perumal, then ruler of Kerala" which is believed to have been written between the 5th-6th century (Marg, 1973, p. 11). This "great treatise on south Indian art and culture, has always been a source of inspiration to the people of Kerala" and confirms the fact that "Dravidians had developed an independent civilization long before the Aryans came here" (Panikkar, 1991, p. 4-5). The invaluable publication of Marg is an anthology of articles dating back to the reconstruction period of the dance form, and the credibility of this account owes to Kurup's identity as the eldest son of Vallathol Narayana Menon, who was a witness to the revivalist mission, with his father. Furthermore, he was central in re-establishing the classicism of Mohiniyattam and in the establishment of Kerala Kalamandalam.[4] Kurup, in the

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[4]. Kerala Kalamandalam is a University of Art and Culture in Thrissur, Kerala, which was established by Vallathol Narayana Menon in 1930.

course of historically tracking the tentative time and origin of Mohiniyattam quotes Shri K.R.Pisharody and says that,

at one time Mohiniyattam was immensely popular, and that the families of… (all villages in central Kerala), which staged Mohiniyattam, were probably people from Madurai, Thanjavur and other places who emigrated and settled down in Kerala during the Muslim invasion. If the contention that Mohiniyattam became popular in Kerala due to close contact with the Pandya kings was true, according to him Mohiniyattam can claim a life of 600 years (Shri K.R.Pisharody qtd. In Ibid. pp. 12).

Thus, the *Devadasi* system found a different interpretation in Kerala. With reference to the temple dancing girls of Kerala it seems that "the earliest record of this system is found in an inscription dating back to 932 A.D. in Chokkur Temple, 70 km of Calicut, in north Kerala" (Shivaji and Vijayalakshmi, 2004, p. 25). This record mentions the mode of payment to the *Nangiars* (dancing girls, *devadasi* of Chokkur Temple) and *Nattuvanars* (who teach and conduct dance) and "is considered a genuinely reliable record... but it is doubtful that these dance forms which existed in Kerala for a long time could have been Mohiniyattam. The Mohiniyattam of today cannot be claimed to be so old. However, it can be justly claimed that this dance form has passed through various changes and assumed its present form" (Kurup, 1973, p. 12). It can be claimed with literary and ethno-historical evidence in paintings and sculptures that there did exist some sort of solo female dance form in Kerala (Rele, 1992; Panikkar, 1991). Women in the Chakyar community (*Nangyars*) were active participants in the theatrical presentations of *Nangyarkuttu*, claims Panikkar. These women were married and part of the family and not a *devadasi* who used to share the responsibilities at par with their men in life and art (1991, pp. 138).

Alongside these facts, scholars Venu and Panikkar reveal that a prevalent dance form called *Teviticci Attam* came to be called Mohiniyattam around the 16th century (1983, p. 17). First mention of the term Mohiniyattam is found in the 16th century text: *Vyavahara Mala*, in which Mazhamangalam Narayana Nambudiri, a poet, scholar and author of various regional texts of Kerala, talks of a dance style called Mohiniyattam (Panikkar, 1991; Rele, 1992). This was in reference to a "payment made to a Mohiniyattam dancer" (Shivaji and Vijayalakshmi, 2004, p. 42). This is considered as the first textual reference of the dance form in terms of its nomenclature. The Nambudiri community were the Brahmins who, by virtue of extraordinary intellectual prowess and inherent nobility of character, held the top position in the social hierarchy and contributed immensely to Malayalam literature (Rele, 1992, p. 96.).

The 16th century saw an upsurge of poetic activities in Kerala and most of these poems were written to describe the beauty of the courtesans, and the dominant mood of these poetic works were love and eroticism—to which we can assign the major influence on Mohiniyattam repertoire. But, during this period, it was considered a matter of great pride and "honour to be associated with the *Kuttachi"* (Shivaji and Vijayalakshmi, 2004, p. 41). The royal court of Travancore was a great connoisseur of dance, music and various artistic and literary activities and patronized artists and creativity (Rele, 1992; Shivaji, 1986; Lemos, 2012, 2016). Thus, it speaks for itself that by this time the popularity of the dance form must have gained momentum as we also find references in *Ghoshayathra* mentioned by Kunchan Nambiar who brings the glorious era of Travancore Maharaja (Rele, 1992, p. 114).

The greatest impetus came with the reign of Maharaja Karttika Tirunal Balarama Varma (1724-1798), a contributor about whom we rarely read who nurtured the genres of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali with great love, precision and passion. History tells us, that it was during his reign

that the country was attacked by the Muslim ruler Tipu Sultan of Mysore and the Hindus fled in search of shelter to Travancore. He provided thousands of Hindus protection, and the people who fled from forced proselytization found refuge under the royal court of Travancore. He was not only a benevolent ruler, but also a very talented artist and a poet. Dasiyattam, from the neighbouring states, impressed him.

In fact, his book *Balaramabharatam*[5] discusses the science of *natya* influencing the Keralian dance and theatre forms. "It can be concluded that the practice of Mohiniyattam as it existed in those days would come in for technical treatment in this text" (Rele, 1992, p.133). Indeed, the systematization of the dance owed this to the king. "His monumental treatise... lays down the tenets of the dance techniques of Kerala in a very elaborate and authentic manner" (Panikkar, 1991, p.137). Keeping in view the Champu Kavyas of the 13th and 14th centuries, we can say that a dance form similar to Mohiniyattam must have been in practice. "But it is quite certain that by the end of the 17th century it was a well-established dance style with a set of well-established rules and, in all probability, was recognized by the name of Mohiniyattam. "Kartika Tirunal appears to be the patron who gave it the required impetus and made it popular in Kerala" (Rele, 1992 p.115). There are also records in the famous murals of Padmanabhapuram and Mattancherry palaces affirming this fact.

Maharaja Swati Tirunal (1813-1846) was the successor of Kartikka Tirunal who is credited for the current day stylization of Mohiniyattam, its primary structure, formation and literature is associated with him (Lemos, 2016, p. 39). The palace records of this time provide eloquent proof

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[5]. This is a Sanskrit treatise of *Natya* written by the king Kartikka Tirunal Balarama Varma. He was a scholar, a musician and a linguist who complied and contextualized the fundamental principles of theatrical components from Bharatamuni's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Nandikeshwara's *Natyadapranam.* This treaty is followed in Kathakali and other art forms in Kerala.

of rewards and presents given to dancers, musicians, poets and literary experts visiting the royal court of Travancore for performances, as well as evidence of the restructuring of the local arts, to be at par with the various other dance practices prevalent in the Indian Subcontinent. Shivaji and Vijayalakshmi suggest that,

[i]n an attempt to revive this form, the Maharaja invited the famous Tanjore Quartet, who were exiled by Sarfoji *Maharaja* of Tanjore and had taken refuge in Swathi Tirunal's court. They were accompanied by two very accomplished Bharatanatyam dancers... the influence of the Tanjore Quartet and Bharatanatyam seems to have played a vital role. With his vast knowledge of arts along with the assistance and influence... possibly enhanced whatever form of Mohiniyattam that was prevalent (Shivaji and Vijayalakshmi, 2004, p. 43-44).

The dance evolved in the court of Swati Tirunal during the 19th century. Being a linguist, he is rightfully accredited for various poetic compositions designated as Swati Tirunal *krithis*, composed in multiple Indian languages which constitutes major literary sources even in the current day repertoire of the reconstructed Mohiniyattam. Along with him, Parameswara Bhagavathar and Irayaman Thampi also contributed to the poetic reserves of Mohiniyattam. During his reign, the dance form explored *Lasya Bhava* as it was performed in the royal courts more than in the temple premises. The untimely death of the king in 1846 proved to be the greatest setback for Mohiniyattam (Jones, 1973; Kavya Krishna, 2015; Rele, 1989; Shivaji, 1986, 2004; Lemos, 2012, 2016). Due to his death and British legal constraints, Mohiniyattam lost its glory and essence with the malpractices that engulfed the dignity of the practitioners and was thus considered as "the essence of all vices and immoral activities" (Lemos, 2012, p.55).

Under the rule of his successor, *Maharaja* Uttiram Tirunal (reigning from 1846-1860), Mohiniyattam lost the institutional patronage. It was only in central Kerala that Paramesvara

Bhagavatar nurtured the form after its exit from the Royal court of Travancore. Eventually the viewers, who were rich locals, became more interested in *Mohinis* (dancing girls) and the attam became a way to access these women's bodies, increasing their sexual vulnerability. Mechanisms for these transformations affected the novel art form, as various erotic interpretations and views of vulgarity became part of the dance repertoire and found their way into the traditional practice.

Dances were created in such a way that audience members are in close physical proximity with the dancers during the performance. Scholars Venu and Panikkar describe the prevalence of dance pieces like "*Polikali, Esal, Mukutti, Chandanam*... that found a place in the Mohiniyattam repertoire" (1983, p. 18). In *Polikali* pieces dancers collected money from the audience; in *Esal* two dancers assumed the characters of the wives of Vishnu and Shiva and mocked their husbands, ending up in a row; and in *Mukutti* the piece was more of an interactive session between the performer and the audience. For example, the dance *Mukutti* was based on losing the nose ring of the dancer who went on a frenzied search among the audience and "finally she retrieves it from the turban of one in the audience" (Venu and Panikkar, 1983, p.19). Similarly, with the dance piece *Chandanam* the dancers applied sandalwood paste on the forehead of the audience who offered donations of money in return. All these dances became a part of the Mohiniyattam repertoire along with the dance items like: *Cholkettu*, *Varnam, Padam, Jatiswaram* and *Thillana.*

Mohiniyattam scholars consider the inclusion of these aforementioned dance numbers into particular Indigenous folk art forms of the land, namely *Polikali, Esal, Mukutti* and *Chandanam*, to enable the Mohiniyattam dancers and *Nattuvanars* to survive during the dark era when the genre suffered from lack of royal patronage. Essentially, the form lost its glory, and Mohiniyattam exponent Rele mentions how the ultimate downfall of the form resulted due to this decadent period. "The audience were easily pleased to witness the bodily movements of the young and beautiful

girls even though they were devoid of artistic beauty and full of absurdities and obscenities" (Rele, 1992, p. 116). In a frantic effort to meet financial needs, these dancers and *nattuvanars* emphasized the sensuous, erotic and voluptuous content by ignoring the aesthetics and nuances of the genre (Mohiniyattam through the Ages, documentary 1990, 3:40, accessed 27th Nov 2020). This environment of compromise led to the loss of the dancers' social status and elite society men were hesitant to be associated with Mohiniyattam dance and or even viewing dance performances (Lemos, 2016; Rele, 1992; Venu and Paniker, 1983; Jones, 1973). Further, Lemos claims that within this era of stigmatization of *Devadasis* all over India and especially in Tamil Nadu

Mohiniyattam, as a dance practiced in public by women, became associated and synonymous with (other) devadasi practices... it is significant that during the time period in question (the mid-late 1800s into the 1940s), new legal codes within Travancore and Cochin constituted female dancers, [and] their practices... [As a result] in the early 20th century, as elsewhere in India, women's dance throughout Kerala underwent stigmatization and subsequent reform" (2016, p. 45-46).

It was only in the early 20th century that the resurrection of Mohiniyattam was initiated by Philanthropist Vallathol Narayan Menon (1878-1958). Menon is credited with revitalizing the traditional art forms of Kerala by establishing the performance academy Kerala Kalamandalam in 1930, with the help of Manakkulam Mukunda Raja. Institutionalization and reconstructive pedagogical methods were monitored in 1932 and onwards to redeem the lost dignity of the dance form. The tumultuous journey of Mohiniyattam, from *Tevadichiattam*, involves first being performed as *Dasiyattam* being patronized by the royalty; followed by the degeneration phase and losing out on royal patronage, designated a remorseful site of social vice and immorality performed

for the sake of financial needs; only to be later rectified by reconstruction and reclaiming the classicism of the unique dance technique.

Because Mohiniyattam was understood by the masses to be a vulgar and disrespectful practice, the mission of reviving the dance practice in Kerala became very challenging for the poet with the added pressures of searching for Mohiniyattam dancers and teachers. Print media and the society of Kerala was not receptive to the idea of reviving the art form, and as a consequence, Vallathol faced immense criticism and mockery at his attempt to revive Mohiniyattam; he was ridiculed "for his support of women's dance practices (Lemos, 2016, p. 59). Lemos claims that:

During the reconstruction of the dance, between the 1890s and 1960s, there were starts and gaps in Mohiniyattam practice. Gains in momentum were due to a cultural renaissance and the willingness of teachers to transmit Mohiniyattam and of students to learn the form. Gaps were due to the shame associated with women's dance. When Vallathol initially wanted to resurrect Mohiniyattam, it was difficult to find students or teachers. Only after the form had been "sanitized" of elements associated with multiple marriage *devadasi* practice, bare breastedness, and dances like the *Mukutti*, were women willing to learn the style (Ibid, p. 61).

Kathakali exponent Kalamandalam P. Govindan Kutty, in his book *Kathakali Nritter Ruprekha*, claimed that Vallathol was a great scholar, poet and a linguist who was inspired by his father Kadungotte Mallisseri Damodaran Elayathu—a great connoisseur of Kathakali and Mohiniyattam (1992). He grew up traveling long distances with his father on foot to watch performances. As fate would have it, he turned completely deaf by the age of 28 and this was perhaps a reason for his love in the gestural communication prevalent in dances of Kerala. In collaboration with his dear friend Mukunda Raja, he started planning for the establishment of Kerala Kalamandalam from 1922-23. By December 20, 1927, Kalamandalam was registered

officially. In an effort to acquire finances for the establishment of the institution, he started selling lottery tickets for a value of one rupee (the equivalent of $0.018 CAD) and eventually made 75,000 rupees, with which he established the institution on the 9th o fNovember, 1930, in the district of Thrissur.

After a few years of shifting from one place to the other, the institution found a permanent address in Cheruthuruthy, Thrissur. In 1941, the Cochin Government undertook administrative responsibility, and in 1963 it was assigned the status of the "Kerala State Academy of Arts" (Kutty,1992, p. 6-7). In 2006, the Government of India accorded Kerala Kalamandalam the status of "Deemed University for Art and Culture," under the Cultural Affairs Department.

First Few Mohiniyattam Teachers

During the initial years, it was very difficult to find teachers and *nattuvanars* of Mohiniyattam, to teach at the institute. The foremost teacher was Kunju Kutty Amma, and her training was under Karuvattil Kunjan Panikkar *asan* (the Malayali word, meaning teacher or a guide), and a dancer Kalpuratte Kochu Kunjiyamma. Kunju Kutty Amma's dancing style was quite vigorous and distinct from others, and it is believed to be devoid of any external influence from other dance forms (Marg, 1973; Rele, 1992). Another teacher Chinnamuamma, who was a *devadasi* in her teens was "a very attractive woman at 76, " was known for her beauty and personal charm claims Rele (1992). Vallathol witnessed Chinnammu Amma, in Kottayam, after a 50-year gap, by sheer luck and the grace and of her repertoire of movements connected the missing links that Vallathol was in search for which were needed to restructure Mohiniyattam. She had trained with *asan* Krishna Menon, popularly known as Krishna Panikkar, and she remained the Mohiniyattam teacher in Kerala Kalamandalam from 1950. She had not learnt Kathakali and so

her form was not influenced by the movements of the theatrical vigorous form. Many reputed dancers had their training under her and among the noteworthy names who left their indelible marks in the field of dance are: Vyjayanthimala, Indrani Rahman, Satyabhama, and last but not the least my teacher Thankamani Kutty.

Moreover, Kutty shared her experience of the dance form and reiterates her teacher's legacy in and out of dance. Kutty recalls how the teacher taught and shared her dance pieces, which she recounted from her fading memory. Chinnammu Amma's teacher, Krishna Pannicker, was a male instructor of Mohiniyattam and one of the few male teachers that we learn of from these personal accounts. The dance numbers that Chinnammu Amma taught were *Cholkettu*, *Jathiswaram*, *Varnam* and *Pandattam* with a few more that Kutty was fortunate enough to learn and perform all over India under the umbrella of Kerala Kalamandalam—performing after completing her graduation in 1956 (Interviewed in Kolkata, India on 13th of March 2020).

Thankamani claims that her teacher who was a *devadasi*, in her youth used to dance in and around temples with musicians following her from one to the next. She was so beautiful and elegant that onlookers would follow her during the performances. She eventually got so frustrated by this kind of indecency and misbehavior by the local male population, that she finally decided to give up dancing. Eventually, she married, settled down and totally stopped dancing. It was only when Vallathol Narayana Menon invited Chinnammu Amma to take the responsibility of reviving the lost style of Mohiniyattam, that she came and joined the parade of the revivalists (Interview, 13th March 2020). Thus, during the initial years of the establishment of the premier institute in the early 20th century, the effort to propagate and nurture Mohiniyattam involved a process that was more semiotic than iconic in interpretation with emphasis on the phenomenological component (Lemos, 2012; Rele, 1992; Shivaji, 1986).

Kalamandalam Kalyani Kutty Amma (1915-1999), considered the mother of Mohiniyattam, evolved, recreated and restructured the style and technique. Her attempt gave cohesiveness and coherence to the loose ends of the genre, gathered over years of work from the group of the first few teachers—screened by Vallathol Narayana Menon. The reconstruction of the form continued with path-breaking research and resourcefulness, thereby rejuvenating the repertoire by bureaucrats, dancer-scholars and poets—namely: Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, Kanak Rele, Kavalam Narayana Panikkar, Nirmala Panikkar, Deepthi Omcherry Bhalla, Bharathi Shivaji and the list continues to grow with current researchers such as Neena Prasad, Justine Lemos and Methil Devika to name a few.

Evolution of Modern Womanhood

During the early 20th century, particularly with the cultural renaissance in arts and social life, women from middle class families acquired a self-imposed respectability and elite status by their association with learning dance and performing it in the proscenium theatres. As soon as the dance shifted from the body of a *devadasi* to the society lady, the audience gaze underwent a sense of alteration. Stigmatization of women's dancing bodies altered to adulation and praise of their capability to showcase Indian Classical Dance forms with dignity and grace. In this post-colonial era, women from the middle and the upper class were assigned the fresh connotation of *Bhadro Mohila*[6] whereby they were given access by the patriarchy to education and freedom of choice to

[6] *Bhadro Mohila*: The concept of a gentle woman. The *andar mahal* interior sections of the house was the primary abode of women where the young girls were trained for their future roles of being an ideal wife and mother, and accept the head of the family, the man of the house, as their ultimate altar for surrender. By the beginning of the 20th century this ambiguous subjugation of women underwent a transformation. The ambience and ideologies underwent significant change in response to the Bengal Renaissance and their active participation in Indian freedom movement. The boundaries of *andar mahal* (Bengali: interior of the house with limited or no access to the outer world) and *bahir jagot* (Bengali: the outside world

participate in the arts. Bengal Renaissance, influenced by the French Renaissance, envisioned new Indian women in a fresh caste with a positive combination of skills: education, arts and an adept homemaker capability.

Partha Chatterjee, in *Nation and Its Fragments* (1993), highlights how the colonial past remodeled, through the need of independence from colonial rule, to establish nationalism, a system within which women and the nation speak about both women's education and reform. Indeed, the memoirs are written by educated women themselves on their own relationship to their new position in the home and the outside world. In speaking about the push for women's education by nationalists, "the new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honor of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate subordination" (Chatterjee, 1993, p.130). The new nation institutes new and old forms of subordination, policing and exclusion, upon negotiating its own forms of modernity, community and citizenship that are based on cultural differences with the West.

Thus, as subaltern subjects,[7] women enter a new version of subjugation and the power-desire dichotomy. This raises the questions: How much are they allowed to voice their thoughts and ideas until date remains a glaring question? And with our focus on Indian Classical Dance is it not evident in the thwarting of the free choice of women choreographers that we have witnessed repeatedly? Chandralekha, Daksha Seth, Kumudini Lakhia and Mallika Sarrabhai need no

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beyond one's household) altered and dissolved, reshaping the status and class mobility of the "weaker gender" of the society. The modern Muslim middle-class Bengali women and their counterpart the *Bhadro mohila* of the Brahmo Samaj was reformed and reinstated.

[7] Subaltern subjects as we learn from Gayatri Spivak Chakraborty's theory.

introduction for their prolific use of the idiom of Indian Classical Dance vocabulary to create and share their political agency within one of the largest democracies in the world. Chatterjea showcases how women's bodies are used as markers, or symbols, for "renegotiating," "cultural practice" or "tradition." The "urgent questioning about the position of performing artists and their ability to work through bodily metaphors in an atmosphere of increasing censorship" is repeated under similar circumstances (2004a, p. 103). Her positioning of Chandralekha's work with that of Sarabhai interweaves the trajectories of arts and aesthetics to project activism through arts by artists of colour.

Power, Politics and Desire

The concern with the issue is how much the dynamics of power and art, politics and free choice, is freedom from orthodox ideals. Spivak's concern is that the "subaltern subjects" do not have the voice or agency to acquire their desired rights. She claims that "conservative modernization" leads to the growth of "hegemonic bloc" which pushes practice in a conservative direction. The process is not simple, but rather complicates and problematizes the situation where consumers choose products in self-interested ways rather than citizens' collectively mobilizing their performances for public awareness/good. Hence, there is a reflection of Spivak's theory in the case studies in which Ananya Chatterjea argued for cultural activists, through the inclusion and exclusion, the visible and the invisible practices—moreover, how power and political agency can be exercised in silence, to silence or foreclose the possibilities of expression and resistance. "They are likewise about how those who speak can simultaneously be unspoken" (1988, p. 8).

Stemming from this, I ask what is the ratio of power and agency allowed, within this nationalistic cultural symbolism (in this case the Indian Classical Dance forms), to artists

irrespective of gender and sexual orientation? Are we truly aware of the types of negotiation that dancers have been inflicted by, through the ages? How much authorship can they claim of their creativity?

Guru-Shishya parampara, along with individual *Sampradaya* (or schools of training), are the repository of symbols and reflections of the patriarchal feudal setup. Male teachers/*nattuvanars* dominated the environment where they trained women to embody their creation and perform. Whether it be the temple premises or the King's court, the female body was a desirable object of commodification which takes me back to the description of a *nartaki*/dancer[8] in *Abhinaya Darpana* which comes with specifications as evident in Coomaraswamy's translation of this ancient text (1917).

Bonded within a Female Body

The sensuous physical description showcases that since the day of inception of artistic creation through body-oriented mediums such as dance and acting, physical appearance of a woman had specific categorizations. It assigned a desirable, sensuous female body as eligibility criteria, required to embody and represent these arts on stage. Bharata Muni, in the oldest dramaturgical text of *Nāṭyaśāstra* meticulously discusses the physical nuances of being a dancer/actor. The text defines dance as an art that is acquired to perfection through conscious

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[8] Here, Ananda Coomaraswamy mentions the right/not so right kind of body for a biologically female dancer as a criteria of eligibility as mentioned in *Abhinaya Darpana*. It is understood that the Danseuse (*nartaki*) should be very lovely, young, with full round breasts, self-confident, charming, agreeable, dexterous in handling the critical passages, skilled in steps and rhythms, quite at home on the stage, expert in posing hands and body, graceful in gesture, with wide-open eyes, able to follow song and instruments and rhythm, adorned with costly jewels, with a charming lotus-face, neither very stout nor very thin, nor very tall nor very short (1917, p. 16).

discipline. Indian acting or dancing cover both these ideas and is thus a deliberate art. Nothing is left to chance, the actor no more yields to the impulse of the moment in gesture than in the spoken word. It is the action, not the actor, which is essential to the dramatic art that the actor represents. The text elucidates on a wide range of topics and considers them in minutest details, suggests Manmohan Ghosh in his translation of the same. But he also argues that the "work does not prove to be adequate for our needs. This is probably because "Bharata Muni wrote the commentary with a view to help scholars of his time, whose knowledge on many things …(in this case the physical stereotyping of gender along with the impacts of post-colonization within a globalized multi-cultural society) his commentary sometimes falls short of our needs" (Ghosh, 1950, p. LXXVII).

The philosophical views and aesthetic concerns indulged in the exhaustive explanation of multiple topics related to the gendered sexualized body of the dancer/actor has been done in a "masterly fashion" but "such scholastic discussions are not often of much value" in the current Indian Classical/Contemporary Dance practices of the 21st century (Ghosh,1950). The body is given prime importance in all genres of dance which makes a trainee aware of the self—a strong connectivity of the mind-body-soul is what a dancer learns to explore through artistic interpretations. Among all existing arts, it is dance which uses the body as a primary medium to execute the ephemeral, mystical movements initiated within, embodied physically, which gets transmitted onto the gaze of the *Rasikas* through the ripple effect of the motion. Actually, *Angikam Bhuvanam Yasya*, the invocatory line of Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana* (The Mirror of Gesture), posits the human body at the core of creation. In other words, the connectivity of the human self, the micro with the macrocosmic reality is emphasised.

Chatterjea elucidates the significance of this statement, claiming that "[h]ere, even when the repertory delineates an abstract aesthetic framework as in *nritta*, or pure dance pieces, the

reference to a specific world view, which in turn often immediately indicates a philosophical-religious orientation, is inevitable" (Chatterjea, 2004a, p.108). Thus, she says, there is a coexistence of aesthetic imagery with specific philosophical religious worldviews. There exists a peaceful harmony between ideas and ideals—"your body is your world" and essentially adopts "elasticity" in "being" a dancer, representing an identity (2004a, p.108). Having been removed from the divine premises, transported to the public, proscenium theatre environment, attaining purification from sensuality, Indian Classical Dance forms emerged codified with specific usage of physical space and also devoid of personal growth and corporeal expression. As Mitra explains, "it has instead come to represent a highly skilled and visually stunning spectacle" representative of chastity and grace (2006, p.76).

Conclusion

Within this discourse, where women's bodies have been showcased as a marker of identity and culture, sensualism and representing the "other,", it is not improper to say, in words of the renowned Indian dance critic Leela Venkataraman, that "the male dancer is losing his space in the dance scene today … some of the finest male dancers languish for want of performance chances. It is not unusual to hear comments like 'How does one watch a man dance?'"; 'Dance is meant for the female body (2006, p.95-102). I arduously hope that multiple gender and/or sex matters within the politics of identity and creation will stimulate further investigation, to re-enact everyday gender vs sexualized bodies; and will provide a context for experiment through artistic aesthetic movements previously denied to the "other" in this context the male pursuers of Mohiniyattam or the female counterparts in Kathakali within the everyday routine. In fact, Kathak dancer-

choreographer, Vikram Iyenger's interview[9] in the blog-*Purush*, protests the same ordeal as a male dancer.

Exploring the historical, political and societal factors, I have tried to analyze the journey of exploration in dance to answer the following questions: How did multiple foreign invasions of India intervene in the gendered roles and sexual binaries within dance? What effects did these invasions have on heteronormative stereotyping of the temple dance forms since 18th Century? And in the process of reconstruction of temple dances, how did a woman's body become commodified in the 20th century, pushing the male performers out of the limelight? Further, I wonder, within the larger scenario of the *Devadasi* system and the degenerative period, how do I position Mohiniyattam—which is a self-enforced statement of femininity.

Scholars and historians factualize the similarities and differences, if I can claim it to be the uniqueness in the aesthetic artistic system and its perpetuation through a woman's body considered as an offering to serve the sublime, the deity of the temple and in most cases also serve the superior men of the society is controversial, as we get to learn about the *Devadasi* system from the evidence found within the rigid socio-political environment of a patriarchal society. Extensive

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[9] The dancer complains: "Today we are marginalized in both numbers and visibility. A man practicing a classical art form is tagged feminine but a man practicing Bollywood-style dance is not. Perhaps the biggest roadblock to Indian male dancers getting equal performing opportunities is the silent issue of sexuality. A dancing man is automatically presumed to be homosexual, and thus many male dancers strive to appear "hyper masculine" on stage. Today, those stigmas are rapidly fading and men can choose their "role playing" on stage, choosing to interpret a poem in the feminine sense rather than always appearing to be energetic and strong and thereby masculine. While power structures still reside in the hands of men as *sabha* secretaries, corporate sponsors and agents, dancers are citizens of a fast-changing society where role playing has crossed gender borders. Dance is fast becoming "ungendered." Unfortunately, the male gaze might still prefer to watch a moving female body, but men themselves are as energetically vaulting over walls to claim their place on the dance stage." See Blog: "Purush: The Global Dancing Male" http://purush2013.blogspot.ca.

ethno-historical and anthropological research has broadened the periphery of knowledge generated for future research and study on the Mohiniyattam dance form.

The emphasis in this chapter is to portray the practice of Mohiniyattam against the contemporary dance traditions developing in the neighbouring states of India. However, Mohiniyattam stands unique in comparison to the other popular dance forms as it had the credibility to revive its lost glory, undergo a sanitization process and free itself from the degenerative practices associated with it over a long period of time and survive under the tutelage of dancers and *nattuvanars* who struggled to retain the form under immense financial scarcity.

Within a very different social context of matrilineal family, distinct laws of the land of Kerala regulating marriage ties, *sambandhanam*, the roots of Mohiniyattam truly the power of enchantment within itself and is not devoid of mysticism, myth and illusion. This data will lead audiences to the exchange of vocabulary of Keralian dance forms, Kathakali and Mohiniyattam at different levels of pedagogy and performance in spaces and sites away from Kerala and will give future researchers an ability to analyze how the orthodox traditions of the art forms underwent constructive deconstruction for aesthetic and creative process.

Chapter 5: Mohiniyattam of Kerala

Contextualized in Kolkata and Toronto

This chapter builds from the previous. In chapter two, I discussed the social structure within which dance practice in Kerala thrived over centuries. I also confirmed how distinct Mohiniyattam was by nature of who practiced it and for whom it was meant, ultimately with the motive of entertainment. In chapter four, I positioned the practice of Mohiniyattam by comparing and differentiating the form against the backdrop of the ancient and prevalent dance practice in the neighbouring states of India, by analyzing the rise and fall of the *Devadasi* system. In this chapter I contextualize the evolution of the practice of Mohiniyattam in three distant sites of Kerala, Kolkata and Toronto. These sites are unified through the embodiment of Mohiniyattam by the researcher and the research subject who are connected through these geographical locations, in terms of birth, training or work, and have all shared the phenomenological aspect of being in connection with each other by dance. This chapter also analyzes the genre, its practice and fluidity after the reconstruction in 1930s, and how the repertoire and structural pedagogy has been evolving over the years of its resurrection by Vallathol Narayana Menon. I try to uphold the type of changes, alterations, adaptations happening in the post-reconstruction period—this journey is a new one in comparison to the sister style Bharatanatyam and its span of 90 years of practice. This is done by evaluating, comparing and studying the popular practitioners of the genre who have had the chance to learn in Kerala and propagate the style in different parts of India.

The current form of Mohiniyattam, which is not even a hundred years old, has already witnessed consistent growth, research and development (of the pedagogy and the repertoire) under

the umbrella of Kerala Kalamandalam from the 1930s. Contributors, like Kanak Rele and Bharati Shivaji, have come from other states of India to conduct research and study Mohiniyattam. They generated resources and enhanced the genre with their contributions and performances on a global platform—aesthetically as well as artistically. Eventually the dance travelled outside the state of Kerala beyond orthodox society to various parts of India. Here, I focus on the sites of Kolkata and Toronto to analyze the practice of Mohiniyattam.

Kolkata is a site where there lies an untold story of growth, development and deconstruction with Keralian dance vocabularies, perpetuated through training since the 1960s. With globalization and mobility, in the 21st century dancers from Kerala and Kolkata united in the distant land of Toronto, Canada, in 2012. Within this unknown cultural and social environment, they came together to share their passion for dance and the nuances of Mohiniyattam. Dance became their common language of artistic communication. In this way, the arts brought together distant geographical locales and people, revealed untold stories and are challenging pathways with the hope that this will ignite further research and studies along untraversed avenues.

Kerala

In Kerala the poet Vallathol Narayana Menon established Kerala Kalamandalam in 1930, for the propagation of traditional art forms—as I discussed in chapter two But his attempt of reviving Mohiniyattam from its disreputable was status met with social upheavals and severe criticism (Lemos, 2016). It was difficult to find teachers, as well as students to learn Mohiniyattam which had infused inappropriate practices in the repertoire (Rele, 1992; Shivaji, 1989; Lemos, 2011).

Vallathol invited girls with ardent requests from among his close acquaintances and promised financial support to them in the form of stipends, paid to the selected students who would be lodged on the Kalamandalam premises. Middle-class families rarely sent girls for dance training, and Vallathol went in search of families from within his close acquaintances to bring in students to the institute (Kutty, 1992). The students were promised training for four years with all expenses covered. *Guru* Thankamani Kutty claims that the poet was a family friend and a close associate of her father, and due to their intimacy, she was able to learn dance and join the institute for a stipend offered to the students.

Vasanthi Menon, Vallathol's youngest daughter, was a role model whose dancing inspired the young Thankamani to learn Mohiniyattam at the age of ten. Thankamani was mesmerized with Vasanthi's body movements, and the mysticism engulfed her completely with an entire lifetime dedicated to Mohiniyattam. She claims that "Vasanthi brought eternal *vasanta, spring* in my life" (Interview, 13th March 2020). The dance number she saw was *Panthadi* (a dance piece based on a metaphorical ball game which compares the bouncing ball to the changing phases of life), which was composed by the poet himself. Vasanthi pressed her father, Vallathol, to accept Thankamani as a student of Kerala Kalamandalam and so she underwent an audition—the selected juries included Chinnammu Amma and Vallathol himself. Though the audition was intense, it was Thankamani's spontaneity, ability to do adept footwork and graceful body moves that made them select her immediately (Ibid.).

During this time there was no other school of Mohiniyattam, and Thankamani along with five other girls, learnt under the tutelage of Chinnammu Amma. After graduating in 1956 from the institute, she went back home to her family. But, after four years of training and two years of performing all over India under the umbrella of Kerala Kalamandalam, when Thankamani returned

home she was glared at by onlookers whenever she went outside. As a young teenager, Thankamani recollects that there were negative views and sentiments running high in society, towards dancing and girls who learned dance. These glaring looks made her feel uncomfortable and awkward. The awkward gaze, from being a dancer, was disturbing and she decided to leave her hometown with the proposal of marriage from the Kathakali artist Govindan Kutty; it was an opportunity to escape the known realm of Kerala into the "unknown world of Bengal," and in 1958 Thankamani came to Kolkata (Ibid.).

Kutty claims Chinnammu Amma's style of Mohiniyattam to be the most convincing school of Mohiniyattam, but due to a lack of documentation she never earned the prominence she should have received otherwise (Rele, 1992; Jones, 1973). Specifically, Kutty identifies the insufficient documentation, fading memory in her teacher's oral history and lack of language skills, as the primary causes for the limited access to training and performance of Mohiniyattam in Kerala during her training period. The orthodox mental set-up in the Malayalee community has rarely witnessed an exchange of traditions and practices on a national or global platform, and Priyadarshini Ghosh, a Fullbright Scholar of Mohiniyattam, considers this a major reason why the arts have not gained the amount of popularity they deserve—in comparison to the style of Bharatanatyam (Interview, 17th March 2020). The showcase of the rich arts, dance and theatre forms of Kerala have been limited to stage presentations with few dancers, we only see a handful of practitioners propagating the practice of Mohiniyattam in comparison to the gamut of artists in other genres like Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kathak.

Mohiniyattam *Gurus* in Kerala Kalamandalam, who were trained in the institute and later became teachers, rarely travelled outside the state to propagate the dance form. Once, while I was in Kolkata, at my teacher's dance school, I had an opportunity to attend a workshop and lecture

demonstrations by a visiting *Guru* from Kerala Kalamandalam. The experience was a once-in-a-lifetime experience to remember, and thus I wondered why these visits were not frequent enough to train enthusiast learners in Kolkata and elsewhere. But, in utter despair, the teacher never came back and from their absence we learners recognized a lack of communication skills as the cause of hindrance to our learning. Her inability to communicate in any other language rather than Malayalam was a barrier, and the primary reason to avoid further trips to other places outside Kerala has been a constant pessimistic factor in training and the transfer of knowledge.

Over the years there has developed a few dominant schools of Mohiniyattam, and here "school" signifies a distinct style and the result of a process of creative evolution, that was organic as well as deliberate under the guidance of practitioners who have earned a niche for themselves in the dance fraternity with their contribution to the development of the genre—bringing it into to its current stature. As G.S. Paul comments (a dance critic from Kerala), in a national daily newspaper called *The Hindu*: "In the absence of a well-defined structure, Mohiniyattam had earned qualifiers like 'poor cousin of Bharatanatyam,' 'an off-shoot of Kathakali' and so on during the 60s and the 70s. This had motivated quite a few dancers to make serious attempts to provide the dance form with an identity indigenous to Kerala" (22nd December 2011).

As a result, we see four dominant schools: Kerala Kalamandalam, Kalyani Kutty Amma, Bharati Shivaji and Kanak Rele. All these schools of practice are fluid in structure with the attempt to redefine the form by keeping the essence alive in spirit. Mohiniyattam researcher Priyadarshini Ghosh is currently training students in Kolkata at her institute Natyanova Performing Arts Centre and has had significant input on the emerging schools of practice. She had the opportunity to train under Thankamani Kutty, which she considers the foremost school of Mohiniyattam, and then went to Kerala Kalamandalam and eventually learnt under Kalyani Kutty Amma over the years.

Such a practitioner, who had the opportunity to embody and learn under the changing and shifting structure and pedagogy, shared insights into the evolving pattern of the genre.

Priyadarshini Ghosh agrees with Chinnammu Amma's style, as the oldest and the most graceful style of Mohiniyattam free of influences from Kathakali, and these views are echoed by Kanak Rele (1992). According to Rele, the later reconstructed styles of Mohiniyattam are very different from what she had learned previously in Kolkata with Thankamani Kutty. Ghosh states that the Kalyani Kutty Amma style (that she embodied and reflected) has moved away from the *andolika* through the torso and *ati bhanga* movements and being primarily based on *aramandala*, as no traces of *ati mandala* can be seen (Interview, 17th March 2020).

Whereas the practice in Kerala Kalamandalam was given a strong foundation by Kalyani Kutty Amma, by trying to codify the basics, shaping and enlarging the repertoire and nurturing students such as Nirmala Panicker, Bharati Shivaji and Kanak Rele. These stalwarts contributed in their own rights to the genre. She grouped and classified the *Adavus*, adopting a few from the Thiruvathirakali and improvised on them, mentioned Priyadarshini Ghosh (Interview, 17th March 2020). Ghosh reflects that the form got a more organized pedagogical component which was furthered in terms of *aharyam* and performance by faculties—namely, Kalamandalam Satyabhama, Kalamandalam Kshemavathy—who transformed it into a slow and medium tempo whereby the dancer finds adequate space for improvisation and suggestive facial-expressions (Interview 17th March 2020).

I corroborate Priyadarshini Ghosh's experiences of the differences among the four dominant schools, or styles, of Mohiniyattam in practice. I experienced distinct attributes in the style, with respect to execution of movements and intensity of *andolika* which were embodied differently, while attending extensive workshops under Kanak Rele and Bharati Shivaji in Kolkata.

Bharathi Shivaji's style of Mohiniyattam, who worked from New Delhi, India, emphasized creating a distinctness in the movement quality, and the choreographed body movements showed a strong departure from the closely related dance styles of Bharatanatyam and Kathakali. Shivaji's research and inclusivity of the various dance traditions, regional traditions of Kerala, music, culture, architecture and paintings had a role to play which she is believed to have stringed together to enhance Mohiniyattam. She worked in collaboration with Kavalam Narayana Panicker who was a theatre personality from Kerala. Her style is enacted by her daughter-cum-student Vijayalakshmi and, as Malayalee critic Premsa Manmadan puts it in *The Hindu* newspaper, the duo (being outsiders in Kerala) and cannot speak Malayalam fluently yet are the cultural ambassadors of Mohiniyattam (17th May 2012). On the other hand, Kanak Rele, a trained Kathakali artist from Mumbai, India, showcased a strong affinity in movements with her physical skills and *Abhinaya* which was more attuned to the basics of Kathakali. But her research skills have enriched the repertoire of Mohiniyattam and resourced the next generation of practitioners with a scientific approach towards learning the science and the kinetics of dance (Rele, 1992).

Apart from the four dominant and popular schools, faculty from Kerala Kalamandalam taught outside the premises of the institute where gender fluidity is observed and documented through the personal interactions with my research participants, Harikishan S. Nair, Hari Vattappilli, Kalamandalam Siddharth and Sanga Vo Van Tao. Due to this digression, these male dancers had the opportunity to embody Mohiniyattam, which otherwise would not have been possible—in the policy of the institute lies a strict, gender-based rule regarding the accessibility to Mohiniyattam, which is still present even today, as young, male Mohiniyattam student Sanga Vo Van Tao confirms (Interview, 17th January 2019).

Within this study, I situate myself as an outsider who had the opportunity to embody and explore the genre and someone who has faced repeated skeptical comments and inquiries by Malayalees in different parts of the world. For example, I have been asked: "why did you learn Mohiniyattam being a Bengali?" I shared the painful experiences of being considered the "other," not one among them, and I immediately heard about equally hurtful and segregating comments directed at other Bengali male and female dancers who went to Kerala to learn Mohiniyattam or Kathakali dance forms (Ramyani Roy, Interview 15th March 2020; Proloy Sarkar, interview, 15th January 2021).

I recognize how these types of reactions come from the socio-cultural context of Kerala, and I suggest this view of the "other" is a fear, ingrained within the orthodox mindset, of losing the authenticity of their traditional practices and the idea that outsiders contaminate and dilute their regional arts and local dance forms. In other words, locals fear that the genre might be misinterpreted if it is embodied by anyone other than a Malayalee, as they will fail to understand the phenomenological association of the language, literature and aesthetics of their land.

Priyadarshini says that "now slowly segregation is dissolving in Kerala in spite of the orthodox society who do not like to share their practice with others" (Interview, 17th March 2020). It is most likely one of the reasons why we often see how "other" Mohiniyattam practitioners try to "become" local by adopting their style of dress, learning the language or even by acquiring the last name Nair by marital ties—which is a prominent surname in the region. I began to wonder if there is a strong sense of adaptation by outsiders to become one with the Malayalees, in their effort to authenticate the practice of Mohiniyattam. And this thought was confirmed by many of the Bengali dancers from the fraternity, during our informal talks after our practice sessions in Kolkata, on sultry summer afternoons.

Bengal

Ties between the state of Kerala and Bengal can be traced back to the days of the Bengal Renaissance, and in relation to how the diminished status of dance was reversed by Rabindranath Tagore's impetus. He initiated attempts to make dance a household passion for high and middle-class Bengali families. His enduring efforts to incorporate regional and international dance vocabularies to generate a new definition of dance through embodied an art form was an inspiration to many later generations of artistes and was only possible for a visionary and art connoisseur of his stature.

As we enter into the third decade of the 21st century, I feel the need to ponder over the developments in the field of dance, in the state of Bengal, with major influences from Kathakali and Mohiniyattam. The introduction of the dance forms of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali from Kerala Kalamandalam in Bengal is a landmark by itself which has generated a deep interest in pursuing South Indian dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam and Kathakali among the Bengali community. Rabindranath Tagore invited Kelu Nair to introduce the rhythmic elements of Kathakali with emphasis on the communication skills embedded in the *Hasta Mudra Abhinaya.*

For the lyrical and graceful movement quality, Kalyani Amma (not to be confused with the Kalyani Kutty Amma who was later addressed as the "mother of Mohiniyattam") and later Velayudh Menon were invited to teach Mohiniyattam in Shantiniketan, at Viswa Bharati University in 1934. There they taught group dance compositions based on techniques of Kaikottikkali and avoided teaching expressional dances as there was a limitation of language and communication (Ghosh, 1983; Banerjee, 2005). Though his work of establishing a modern dance idiom in Bengal remains uncodified, due to his death in 1941, the process that he initiated has

acquired significant expression through the works of the next generation of Indian Classical Dance teachers and choreographers who started settling in Bengal in later years. Their creative projects were based on Tagore's dance-dramas which constantly imparted the poet's philosophy of simplicity and the expression of the dual meanings embedded within his creative works.

In an article titled "A hundred years of the call of dancing: the chimes continue", published in *Narthaki* magazine, Bandyopadhyay, a scholar and a faculty from Viswa Bharati University, Shantiniketan, confirms that

> ... dance was transferred into Bengali bodies, which were not prepared for dancing... This was the beginning of dance in middle class Bengali society. But with time other dances also came to Shantiniketan, which were used in dance compositions thereby bringing a unity of dances on Rabindranath's songs. Today we can claim that dancing on Rabindra Sangeet has become a tradition and Shantiniketan is still continuing this practice. But with trained bodies in dance, the presentations have graduated and a distinction is perceived (Bandyopadhyay, 2020).

Inspired by his views and ideologies, we have had dancers trained and worked under Tagore's tutelage whose thought provoking conceptualizations had always been exemplary in the field of Indian Classical Dance and pedagogy. Stalwarts, like Mrinalini Sarrabhai and Manjusri Chaki Sircar, are two such people whom I am constantly reminded of in relation to my research and fieldwork in Kolkata, among many other dancers. The dance fraternity of Bengal are greatly indebted to these dancers not only because they were passionate but also adept at the complex conceptual study that went into honing the skills of other dancers as performer, choreographer and educator. Their lives and their artistic creations are reminders of a significant combination of

morals of this ancient civilization—the India that embraced any religion, ethnicity, language and art.

Tagorean inheritance was all about the shared culture, art and spiritual ideas among nations. Tagore's choreographic process in making dance was intercultural in nature, drawing inspiration from painting, architecture and the various body types which are influenced by the different cultural movements. Shantidev Ghosh states that it was called the *rashayonik shongmishron* (chemical synthesis in Bengali) which became integral in understanding how the modern dance aesthetic developed in Shantiniketan (1983). With female dancers participating in the dance-dramas, their agency proved to be "an important example of the bourgeois Indian women and their right to self-representation" (Purkayastha, 2017, p.81). Therefore, the scholar claims that the university was a citadel of re-choreographed gender ideologies and dancing was a medium to "access examples of those very important intersections between race, gender and national identities, revealing an embodied decoloniality valuable to the history of Indian women and [the] freedom movement" (Purkayastha, 2017, p.82).

Tagore's response to the anti-nautch movement against the *Devadasi* system is best identified in his first full-length dance-drama, *Natir Puja* (Worship of a dancing girl) from May 8th 1926. "Situated in the immediate political context of the *Devadasi* abolition movement and moral anxiety surrounding the dancing woman's body, *Natir Puja*...marked a deliberate idealization of the dancing girl by Tagore" (Chakraborty, 2020, p.93). Reflection of his concerns were reiterated through his dance-dramas which were emphatic statements on practices within an orthodox social and cultural society of the emerging independent India.

Activism voiced through the reconstruction of Tagore's dance-dramas, like *Chandalika* (the untouchable girl) and *Chitrangada* (a warrior princess from the epic of Mahabharata),

showcase the status of women and reflect on women's empowerment, gender and class equality. As taught by Tagore, and followed by choreographers like Mrinalini Sarrabhai and Manusri Chaki Sircar, they mapped out the space with a focus on the specific ways bodies moved and implemented Classical Dance vocabulary to generate the modern dance in India. According to the western world, Indian dance is grounded in the theoretical structure of the oldest dramaturgical text of the land, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which remains untouched by the colonial empire. Or, the modern world is thought to be Indigenous in nature, but then the author of the text never restricted the artist from innovative use of the vocabulary which welcomes creative and artistic use of the same to coin a new mode of expression—and that is what Tagore's ideology reflects.

Guru Govindan Kutty and the next generation of dancers envisioned their choreographic process by following the phenomenological and ideological guidelines observed from the exemplary works produced by these two dancer-choreographers. After graduating from Kerala Kalamandalam, Govindan Kutty joined the Darpana performing troupe of Mrinalini Sarrabhai in 1949, where he came in contact with the choreographic process of Tagore and toured with the dance company for years before settling in Kolkata as a faculty of Kathakali in Rabindra Bharati University in 1956. He was invited to teach the technique of Kathakali by a male dancer in Kolkata, Krishnan Nambudri, a member of the Uday Shankar dance company. Students were eager to learn and imbibe the rich technical instructions to enhance their vocabulary from a teacher who was well versed in other languages, like Hindi and English. And thus a new chapter was initiated by the Kuttys, with establishment of Kolkata Kalamandalam in 1968, and with his dancer wife Thankamani, a fresh graduate from the premier institute.

Kutty started imparting the pedagogical nuances of Kathakali, but he reconstructed the elaborate costume and accessories to suit the presentations and increase the acceptability of

Kathakali among the Bengali audience (1992, p.70). The technical brilliance of Kathakali dance is hidden behind the elaborate attire of the actor; but with Kutty's brilliant execution, the young generation of dancers, both male and female, started flocking his dance classes. His creative process focused on the *Āṅgikam Abhinaya* and *Swatvikam Abhinaya*, and excluded the theatrical character based *aharyam* (costume and makeup) in his dance productions. His attempt was to highlight the brilliant footwork, bodily movements and acting that is the basis of Kathakali by contextualizing the form to the place and time—which was reflective of Tagore's ideologies behind generating a new mode of embodied expression (Kutty,1992, p.71-2).

"Traditional Indian dance is the thread that underlies the trajectory of changes; while some artists stay close to idioms, changing the externals such as costumes and music, others transform the traditional vocabulary from the inside, along with creatively bringing in other movement styles to make new hybrid work... Hybrid work involves a reworking from within the traditional dance forms ...with their shared vocabularies of *nritta* and *abhinaya"* (Katrak, 2011, p. xix).This ideology is ingrained in the dance practitioners of Bengal; and I recognize that the dancers in Kolkata are all trained in one or more of the Indian Classical Dance forms, like Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Kathak, Odissi, Manipuri or Mohiniyattam. Furthermore, dancers in Kolkata contribute to evolving dance movements, influenced by the dance vocabularies which are in their toolbox and reminiscent of the *nritta* or the technical dance and *Āṅgikam Abhinaya* of a genre, to explore the poetry or narratives in their dance productions. Further analysis of the dominant dancer-choreographers Kaushik Chakraborty and Kohinoor Sen Barat's dance productions reflect this hybridity and their pedagogical approach embedded in their creative process is discussed in the sixth chapter of this dissertation. Their dance genre is tilted Creative Dance and can be grouped

under the category of modern/contemporary Indian dances. Their idiom explores a dynamic, evolving language which acts as a translational interpreter of ideas and *bhavas.*

Mohiniyattam, as an independent genre of practice and performance, was introduced to the Bengali audience by *Guru* Thankamani Kutty who imparted the pedagogy learned from Chinnammu Amma. Since the inception of Kolkata Kalamandalam in 1968, many dancers enrolled under Kutty to master the form; and Kutty herself cherry picked students from the Bharatanatyam classes to enroll into Mohiniyattam. It is surprising that the student never got enough exposure to make it a parallel subject of study along with the other dominant genres like Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Manipuri in Kolkata. Until the 1990s, audiences in Kolkata rarely witnessed Mohiniyattam performances, except on a few occasions where dancers like Priyadarshini Ghosh, Mohana Iyer and Molly Roy started performing on a regular basis. It wasn't until in the latter half of the 1990s that Kolkata dance and theatre festivals witnessed Mohiniyattam repertoires performed regularly by Momm Ganguly and Sanjukta Banerjee.

There were quite a few dance productions based on the vocabulary of Mohiniyattam under the artistic direction of Kutty, choreographing Tagore's dance-dramas and poetic dramas through the communicative *abhinaya* and *rasa* of the genre. Actually, I was the dancer who was featured in these dance productions, to perform the characterization of Tagore's heroines through the vocabulary of Mohiniyattam. Specifically, the dance-drama *Chitrangada* was choreographed by using three different dance forms: Kathakali for the male character of Arjun, Bharatanatyam for the female form *Kurupa* (the ugly female form) the warrior princess, Chitrangada and Mohiniyattam for *Surupa* (the beautiful female form of the warrior queen blessed by *Ananga Dev*). This became a highly acclaimed format and the production toured all over India and abroad in various Tagorean festivals.

The gender identity surrounding the genre of Mohiniyattam started becoming questioned during the latter half of the 1990s in Kolkata, where I witnessed male dancers suffering as they were not welcomed to Mohiniyattam dance lessons. They questioned the ancient texts and the interpretation of the concepts of *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* and *abhinaya* in *Nāṭyaśāstra.* They consider it a gendered interpretation to assign the soft and the graceful movement quality as something only suitable for the female bodies, and they challenged this idea by asserting that male bodies can also represent the same—with well controlled torso movements, for instance. Still, some quit dancing while others shifted to different genres to search for the food of their soul. Some even relocated to other states of India in search of work and started learning other genres, like Kathakali, and eventually became skilled *Stree Vesham* Kathakali actors (Interview, Proloy Sarkar, 15th January 2021).

Toronto

In Indian dance scenarios migration is not a phenomenon confined to modern times. Artists have moved regularly for numerous reasons and people are still travelling with their performances and for their livelihood. In many cases, this professional mobility is neither voluntarily done nor casually chosen as a working basis. Market laws, globalization and/or societal mechanisms of oppression, censorship and violence are often the reasons for artists to leave their place of origin and seek the stylistic expanses of the world in different corners of the globe, as they relocate themselves throughout the Indian diaspora. Dance, especially for men, has frequently been morally controversial, even in recent times. Depending on which religious, political and social system has prevailed, dance is considered to be an indecent, forbidden act only to be viewed and not articulated by the members, both male and female, among the orthodox Indian families. With migration and

moving, these stigmatized victims have found ways to express and engage with dancing by distancing themselves from the familiar social and cultural environment they were born in. In this study two research participants who relocated to Toronto, Rohit Tyagi and Hari Vattappilli, are glaring examples.

To know and mingle with the Indian diaspora, many newcomers try to participate with their artistic skills in various dance and music programs that are organized and conducted by the social committees in the Greater Toronto Area. Younger families moving to Toronto try to enroll their kids into cultural activities such as dance and music. After relocating to Toronto, due to family ties, I was fortunate to be connected with the Indian diaspora because of my dancing skills. I got absorbed into the cultural fraternity very quickly with performances and by training younger generations. Through my interactions, I started getting introduced to innumerable dance teachers who are conducting Indian Classical Dance lessons, particularly Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam, Kuchipudi and Kathak following the path of *Guru-Shishya parampara*.

The only difference in this environment is the class venues which are mostly conducted out of professional dance studios in different locations of the city. The popular practice in the North American cities is a more controlled environment of dance studios where the students get their formal training, instead of the living rooms of their *Gurus* back in India. On the other hand, teachers in Toronto who conduct their dance classes from their residential spaces convert their basements into a reconstructed site, replicating their place of origin; they decorate them with a "nostalgic feel" reminiscent of training sites from back home. The decorations and accessories that they incorporate into the space include idols of *Nataraja*, wooden carvings of *Krishna*, *Ganesh*, *Saraswati*, artefacts and metal lamps, lighting candles, as well as sensory elements such as burning

incense sticks to create an atmosphere that allows the teacher and the student to relive the known smells and sights of dance classes back in India.

It is an arduous attempt to reconstruct the phenomenological component through embodiment of *Lāsya* quality of movements, to impart the cultural dance practices to our next generation who are living thousands of miles away from the place of its origin. The reconstructed atmosphere allows organic internalization of the traditional practices by giving them contextual reference. Unlike the students of the current generation in India, who are expected to know and relate to the ancient Indian texts and epics, in Toronto it is a preferred practice to indulge during dance lessons, share mythological stories and analyze philosophical discourses of the ancient land. The sound of the cymbals, or the stick on the wooden plank; the syllables narrated by the teacher, or the mellifluous music played on the laptop; and the inhaling of the sweat and the smell of the dancing bodies, transports participants to a land of mysticism, India. They live and breathe through their dedicated training in the land they have migrated to, opting in for better opportunities.

In Toronto various dance companies, primarily under the artistic directorship of Lata Pada, Menekka Thakkar and Janak Khendry have witnessed people moving from their places of origin into new adopted homes, and this relocation has necessitated the cultural propagation among the second-generation people to retain their ethnic identity. Artists travel with their embodied skills and negotiate their positions within the complex social hierarchies of a foreign land; they reconstruct and interpret the ancient Indian texts like *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and the vocabularies of Indian Classical Dance forms, within an interpretive framework. The economic constraints of surviving as a dance professional are challenging but not impossible. There are educators of various genres emerging from the Indian subcontinent and though Mohiniyattam, comparatively less in numbers; yet within the site of Toronto, there are at least five dance schools teaching the form to the second

generation students who come from different states of India, like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Gujarat and West Bengal, as well as from the neighbouring states of Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Conclusion:

Individual journeys of artists in Kerala, Bengal and Toronto take different and distinct trajectories, influenced by ethnicity, gender politics, environment and social issues—such as stigmas against male dancers, women's empowerment, and individual and personal matters relating to the realization of the true self and sexual identities. These different geographical locations all share rich traditions, and the journey of the dance form through the body of a dancer is not a linear one since there are complex intersections, fascinating and significant routes, that generate the grounds for practice and propagation of a genre in multiple sites within the Indian diaspora. This cultivates a new history from the migration of art and artists: by enhancing the mobility and versatility of Indian dance genres, through content and context, and by transcending the regional segregation and conservatism in the sharing of art forms.

This ethnography moves away from the geographically bounded territories of cultural production. By studying Mohiniyattam as a globalized phenomenon practiced by a global dance community rather than confined to a specific regional one, I show how the form has the ability to move across barriers. Further, the genre has the potential to be fluid, and is a mobile medium that crosses boundaries and is constantly reinvented by the practitioners. Looking at the practitioners in my fieldwork, there is a sense of connectivity through each one's experience which helps them to translate their Indian Classical Dance training and exchange of those acquired skills in different geographical sites. In their efforts to self-produce and or be produced by various organizations, the artists are competing with the resources available within a climate of financial stress and instability

both in India and Canada. They are negotiating and charting new territories to create and perform at local, national and international venues. This challenge has taken a further step with the added hurdles of language and gender that play a vital role in determining the flow of resources and opportunities, and in their ability to dance and perform.

Chapter 6: Men in Mohiniyattam

This chapter provides the empirical analysis of the male maneuvering of Mohiniyattam, with focus on male dancers and students located in Kolkata, India, and Toronto, Canada embodying *Lāsya* quality of movements characteristic of the genre. This group of dancers are transgressing age-old stereotypical boundaries of the stigmas attached to the directive to "dance like a man" and showcase a natural skill to empower themselves with the attributes of *Lāsya.* I also come across a few male participants in my research study group who have shifted away from the practice of Mohiniyattam to the male dominated genre, Kathakali, due to the gender bias towards male dancing bodies. Here, I analyze their personal narratives to examine the primary reasons behind their decision of doing and undoing dance.

This chapter examines their engagement with the Mohiniyattam genre in the present era, presents a study of the current challenges of Indian dance within institutionalized structures and policies and explores the gendered biases my participants are encountering in their attempts to become a Mohiniyattam dancer. This examination is based on many years of practice, past and present, the recollection of memories, as well as the visual evidence of their performances that I have gathered from the personal archives of teachers and dancers and my own, as well as from public platforms such as social media. To a certain extent, I position myself in this research with my reflective inputs resulting from my involvement with the dance production and in association with these male dancers in Kolkata, India, and Toronto, Canada. I ask: how do these dancers overcome the social taboos in pursuing Mohiniyattam? What helps them to sustain themselves

financially? What are their future plans with dance? And how would they like to generate an enhanced male articulation in Mohiniyattam?

The case studies in my research revealed three primary reasons for the affirmation or negation of their ability to embody Mohiniyattam. A few shifted away from the profession under the social pressure, while others continued their practice of dance to break down the stereotypical boundaries imposed upon men in Indian society. The first reason arose from the fact that male participants are victims of the social stigma and peer pressure because of their association with dance. This reason remains a constant factor which looms large in the entire study.

With colonial influences, Indian society associated dance with female sexuality and as an object of entertainment, states Kathakali—an exponent of Kalamandalam V.R.Venkitt who had his training in Kerala Kalamandalam and who currently is a professor of Kathakali at Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata (Interview, 11th March 2020). Moreover, Venkitt claims that he got into the institute because of the financial support he received as a stipend which aided the sustenance of his family. Joining dance lessons was not by choice but due to necessity and to avoid the social glare—his preference was Kathakali. An accomplished Kathakali *Stree Vesham* actor, Venkit claimed that male dancing bodies suffer stigmatization even today.

Secondly, with the concern of effeminacy, male dancing bodies are always thought to be gay. It is a concern that all male dancers have to deal with at some point in time or another. As Bharatanatyam practitioner and educator Arkadev Bhattacharya asserted, the community of men dancers have suffered in their attempts to nullify any related conversation of effeminacy which brings their sexual orientation under scrutiny (Interview, 16th March 2020). Bhattacharya organized an all India symposium and dance festival in Kolkata, "*Gandharva:* The Male Dancers

Summit," in February 2020 exclusively for men to highlight the persuasion of arts irrespective of the gender of the artist. The imbalance in ratio of female and male dancers was the context of the Summit due to which it was exclusively created for the male participants. This was to fill up the vacuum and the imbalance between the female dancing bodies and the insignificant number of male dancing bodies in Indian Classical Dance forms. Their identity is questioned due to their desire to translate the graceful movements of Mohiniyattam and because it is believed to be a dance form only suitable for female bodies.

However, Bhattacharya believed this to be a social construct. It is argued against its stereotypical idealization on the basis of the capability of a body to master the skills and perform the different quality of movements, irrespective of being male or female. This is not a judgmental concept but is situated on the feasibility of a particular body type which has the ability to embody and perform any Indian Classical Dance form, either with vigorous or graceful quality of movements. retorts Raktim Chanda, a male Bengali Mohiniyattam student (Email communication, 25th March 2020). The transgression or adaptation of the graceful movement qualities is his way to channel emotional outbursts, and *sadhana* of Mohiniyattam becomes generative site of spiritual upliftment for the practitioners, whereby their medium of expression finds a way through the embodiment of the enchanting movements.

I find the immediate effect on arts and development in the genre of Mohiniyattam, including the male maneuvering of the form, is linked with this question of effeminacy—a concern that all the participants shared in their oral narratives unanimously. I consider this in relation to Judith Butler's theory of "performativity" and the concept of "becoming" (1990), as a response to the claim of being an effeminate male, and instead I look at the movements of Mohiniyattam as

grace and lucid in quality which allows these male participants to embody the skill to enhance their physical and emotional needs.

Last, but not the least, I take into account the day-to-day implications for the practitioners with attention to the financial concern. It is the economic stability associated with dancing Mohiniyattam that informs their ultimate decision to pursue the genre as a full-time career. Male Mohiniyattam dancers are a rare phenomenon because they are a minority group of performers in the dance fraternity; there is a lack of performance opportunities and instability in the work environment, and as a result their financial needs and requirements are challenged. The "*Gandharva* Male Dancers summit" in Kolkata, February 2020, was an initiative to encourage male dancers to become professionals, as many are reluctant to take it up professionally. The economic stress is enormous, as initially it is not lucrative and one has to invest a lot of money which is not possible for dancers who hail from middle-class or lower-middle-class families. The government should come forward to encourage youngsters, particularly male dancers. Financial stability is very important for the rise of any dancer for that matter, states Bhattacharya, the curator of this summit (Interview, 16th March 2020).

The case studies in this chapter reflect the binaries of two juxtaposed situations which come from different perspectives of being a male Mohiniyattam dancer. This chapter also brings forth the practicing male dancers in the dance fraternity who are relentlessly striving to pursue the genre in spite of gender-based discrimination from various organizations and policy makers in India. Finally, in this chapter I also look into how south-Indian dance forms have migrated to Bengal and have become a household name.

There were only a few dancers and teachers in Kolkata, India, who were practicing Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam and Kathakali, and they left a significant impression on the locals with the propagation of these genres since the 1920s. Among these practitioners and along with the practice of the traditional genres, we often see a tendency to reconstruct and choreograph Tagorean compositions—which draw their inspiration from the vocabulary of the technique and theatrical components of Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam and Kathakali. Dancers and choreographers in Bengal have nurtured and practiced a free flowing, self-created style of dance with appropriation of various Indian Classical Dance vocabularies, which have travelled to Bengal, since the early 1920s. As choreographer-dancer Kohinoor Sen Barat confirms, it is the lived experiences of the teachers and dancers that is central to this effort to deconstruct the traditional vocabularies and support the ideals of Rabindranath Tagore[10] (Interview, 21st May 2019). This analysis will be helpful in the study to formulate knowledge with equal importance in the transmission of the art within the site of the male body, inside and outside of Kerala, with focus on the dance vocabulary and technique of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali.

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[10] Dance scholar Utpal Banerjee reiterates that Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) is a towering genius and a visionary, instrumental in the creation of a unique neo-classical dance style in Bengal. He initiated the cultural Renaissance in the early 1900s with the establishment of the Vishwa Bharati University, Shantiniketan, in the outskirts of Kolkata in 1921. He was the forefather who introduced the practice of dance, music and theatrical art forms as independent genres of study in post-secondary education and revolutionized the concept of equal participation irrespective of any gender bias. During the mid 1920s, evolution of the dance making process began. He incorporated influences and vocabulary of various regional and international dance forms to build a repertoire of contemporary, and modern dance style, popularly referred to as *Rabindra Nritya*(Tagorean dance). This particular stylization is a slow and gradual adaptation of the traditional format of *Nritta* (Sanskrit for a dance technique in the traditional repertoire) primarily from Kathakali, Mohiniyattam and Manipuri with modernization of the expressional component in Indian Classical Dance forms (2011). He invited Mohiniyattam and Kathakali teachers from Kerala Kalamandalam who initiated the traditional pedagogy in Viswa Bharathi.

As mentioned earlier, this ethnographic research on Mohiniyattam was conducted for over two years in Toronto, Canada, and Kolkata, India. It was designed with research protocols, keeping in mind interdisciplinary fields of study, including dance and gender studies along with post-colonial studies, that intersect in this project to provide a springboard of tactical analysis. The perspectives of a research group, consisting of twelve student participants and thirteen renowned dancers and educators, open up new directions of study and understanding which will lay the foundation for future research on the topic.

How they negotiate dancing, being men in a biological or and physiological definition of the term, is what we observe from the research conducted. They speak directly or indirectly about the ways they connect with dance and manipulate hours of the day by compromising with other jobs to earn money. Alongside all these hardships, they challenge the historic struggle of society by confronting the question: "why do men need to dance?" I observe how notions of gender identity and sexuality come together to shape their journey. The study brings to light stories of success and failure and highlights the individual experiences of dancing.

Before outlining the benefits and the phenomenological aspects of the research, I will delve into the strategy that I adopted in data triangulation by positing the analysis within the narrative of three male dancer's biographical journeys. The life experiences of these dancers are juxtaposed in content and context and provide the basis for my evaluation of the invisibility of men in the Mohiniyattam practice. Through the course of analysis, I will focus on the Mohiniyattam fraternity, of male and female dancers, teachers and peers, whose valuable trajectories allow me to build a cohesive analysis of the discursive aspects that the male dancers in India are struggling with, in current times.

Data was collected from personal interviews with the selected group of participants and critical analysis of newspaper articles based on the current trend of male participation in Mohiniyattam. These articles are reviews of dance performances, critiqued by eminent Indian dance scholars and published in prominent Indian newspapers. For an assessment of a dancer these newspaper reviews are an impactful resource of information and bring to light the perspective of the dance scholars who review these performances and analyze the changing dance scenario. I have also turned to performance videos, lecture demonstrations and documentaries along with interviews related to Mohiniyattam and male dancers on YouTube to enhance my understanding of the visual aspect of the dance form and allow for a formal analysis of the genre. Personal and group posts regarding Mohiniyattam on Facebook offer secondary resources.

These individual narratives will facilitate our understanding of their journey to make themselves a dedicated dancer, pursuing genres of their choice, even without support and acceptance. Further, these narrative highlight the social stigmas in Indian society that are attached to the profession of dancing, and the derogatory views of male Mohiniyattam dancers, seen as the effeminate "other," in a subaltern perspective which was discussed in chapter four (Spivak, 1988). This is a holistic approach to bring together information using different technologies; to tie together history, gender theory and dance in an organic manner.

Debate and academic research have always explored the nuances of a dancer's body which is the primary medium of communication of an embodied art form. From the feminist viewpoint, researchers have claimed how the female body in the world of dance, irrespective of the geographical location she belongs to, has always been a medium of "commodification" (Srinivasan, 1983; Chatterjea, 2001; Nilsson, 2004; Soneji, 2012; Morcom, 2013; Kavya Krishna,

2014). This is understood as a result of the patriarchal social organization and how social constructs of codified behaviour get associated with the female body. Social constructs of prescribed Indian traits (like shyness, being tender and soft spoken, caring, loyal and gentle) are strongly recommended for a socially respectable woman, while the other traits (like being outspoken, confidant, decisive etc.) are considered to be a subversive or vulgar exposition of "femaleness" which is reflected in her body language (Burt, 2007; Morcom, 2013; Kavya Krishna, 2015). The research questions why aggressive social behaviour by men is considered macho, smart, cool in society (see Appendix D)? The social gaze assigns specific codes of conduct to physiological male or female bodies. The view espoused by the French philosopher Simon de Beauvoir (1908-1986), suggesting that "one is not born a woman, one becomes one," is critiqued from a metaphorical perspective (noted in chapter four), suggest men are not born men but become men with pre-ascribed social behavior attached to their biological bodies (1949). This reflects the idea that every man and woman, being social identities, are continuously negotiating their performance to meet the code of conduct idealized by the society.

Case Studies

The following case studies in this chapter, from India and Toronto, are grounded in the theory of performativity and the construction of masculinities with deep insights into gender relationship between the dance, dancer and society. From my professional experience, as someone trained in Indian Classical Dance forms, I have recognized an explicit link between body-dance-agency, especially the concept of repression, which I identify as a dominant factor in how the adult

personality of a male dancer is formed. These pressures conform with society, mainly by the way in which they are experienced by the young male child within the family and social context.

Case Study-1: Economics over Arts, "a life of adjustments but not compromise"

Kalamandalam Siddharth was introduced to dance during his years growing up in Kolkata as a young teenager in the 1990s. After graduating from Hotel Management in 1998, he travelled through the southern part of India, exploring multiple dance forms. During his travels he was so fascinated with the graceful, elegant dance form of Mohiniyattam that he started training in it. He recalls:

It is not that Masculine or Feminine element that matters to me. What is important is the grace of the form itself. It is that flow of movements that transforms from the natural beauty and culture of the land of Kerala to a performer's body, which makes me feel that it is me. The fluidity of movements that is inspired by the swing of the coconut trees, or the movements of an elephant attracts me the most. Also, the dignity which the performers carry while performing this form attracts me a lot. While performing, I certainly feel relieved as it certainly used to take away a lot of stress and mental pressures. I remember those days when we had no stability in life, no money in our pocket to support us or no forthcoming programs to perform. There certainly were a lot of challenges in our life then. However, Mohiniyattam did give me tremendous mental support. It used to take away all the stress that we have undergone (Email communication, 2nd April 2019).

Siddharth claims to be one of the foremost male practitioners from Bengal and the one who had the opportunity to research and plan on reconstruction of the male Mohiniyattam *Aharyam* (costume, jewelry and accessories used by a dancer during a stage performance), under the

guidance of Kerala's scholar, historian and poet Kavalam Narayana Panikkar. He was one of the few male dancers who initiated the idea of the male dancing body in the genre and had the support of Panikkar. He states:

> Kavalam Narayana Panikkar (who) was supporting my (his) views of having a Male Mohiniyattam Performer as this dance form needs to elate from these gender differences... have been emphasizing on the form itself to be elevated above the gender boundaries. So, a male performer must perform in a male costume. I understand that there has been no male Mohiniyattam performer to present the form in India so there has been no dress that has been designed especially for the Male Performers yet. However, when I was studying, we did work with Kavalam Narayana Panikkar extensively on many elements, along with the dress. It was he who suggested male perform bare bodied, with a sacred thread and a dhoti in the bottom. We agreed on a Kerala *Kasavu Munda* to be on the bottom, with a fan on the top and a waist cover with all that same material. We also agreed on making some fresh new wooden ornaments as wooden ornaments are much of a Kerala Tradition than the metal ones. If we see other Kerala art forms, both classical, Indigenous and folk we will see the existence of wooden ornaments and hence Mohiniyattam should follow this tradition as well. We have designed the belt and other ornaments patterns from the Suchindranathan Temple Sculptures of Kerala as well (Ibid.).

All this is lost in time and when I analyze Siddharth's amount of research and hard work towards the "becoming" of a male Mohiniyattam dancer, the reason for his sudden departure from the dance form is concerning. He was passionate about Mohiniyattam, yet in 2004 he shifted his focus to Kathakali for the rest of his life. Was there any specific reason for this shift to Kathakali?

Why, or for what reason, did he quit Mohiniyattam? The reason that he shared during conversation for his departure from the genre of Mohiniyattam after five years of vigorous training, was the lack of financial support that he had to endure during his initial years of performing the dance form. He argued:

> Kerala people are used to seeing the Mohiniyattam dancers as young, charming women- someone like *Mohini*. Even when a woman grows old, they lose their ability to get shows. In this context no men do have the right courage to take up Mohiniyattam as a dance form to get the right support financially by getting the right performances (Ibid.).

During Mohiniyattam tours abroad that were funded by Canada Council for the Arts, for Menaka Thakkar Dance Company in 2004, Siddharth, along with the other artists, was not paid the remuneration that they were promised by his teacher. She denied him the 40K she had committed to and instead claimed half of the amount as the teacher's commission. He claims:

> We were initially confirmed by Didi that we are being paid 40K INR as a show charge for 2 months. We were jobless at that time and this money certainly mattered a lot as I was requiring this money then to study Ayurvedic Therapy. After going to Canada, we realized that although Menaka Thakkar dance company is paying 40K per artist from India, the main leaders of different groups are mostly taking a commission out of it. So, at the end the artists are only getting 20K. None of the artists, even after knowing that they are being cheated, felt the need to open their mouths as they mentioned that they need to keep a healthy relation for future shows and contacts from these influential people. It was me who protested against this (Ibid.).

Multiple circumstances like these gave rise to differences between the student-teacher relationship (name of the teacher not revealed on ethical grounds). A mother figure whom he respected and loved, deprived him of his rightful claims. This is an example of the inequalities that he experienced in being a male Mohiniyattam dancer, in terms of performance opportunities as well as performance fees that were otherwise easily availed by female dancers; and this pushed him away from the genre. Henceforth, he decided to "make adjustments but not compromise with his art" and quit Mohiniyattam forever. Kathakali *Stree Vesham* became his forte, as he eventually developed into an excellent performer and an encouraging mentor for the younger generations. He settled in Kolkata where he nurtured and nourished the Keralian art forms until he left us all shocked in the year 2019. The last few posts on his Facebook page makes me reflect on the multiple challenges that he might have endured as he wrote "Artists of all forms are the biggest protests in society. Most of them can't tolerate any sort of injustice in society... *Never Compromise*. Try adjusting to all the situations that radiate positive vibes" (Facebook, 9th September 2019).

Answers to many questions that come up from his many posted messages in a public media site such as Facebook will remain unanswered forever, to the dance fraternity and the society at large, claims his student Proloy Sarkar (Interview, 15th January 2021). But they do arouse queries from different trajectories that can be argued within the theoretical framework of subaltern identity. Gender bias, economic instability, partiality of organizational policies for performance opportunities to male dancers and lack of family support might be a few reasons (out of many unknown others) for his depression and untimely exit from life. The power and mental strength to fight against all these odds for the sensitive mind of an artist is very stressful and vulnerable. The individual gets shattered as the support system is in a state of flux. His actions and his expressions

in Facebook posts, using words and phrases like ‘tolerance,’ ‘being optimistic’ and ‘adjustment’ are in contradiction; they complicate things as they do not reflect the untimely demise of the accomplished dancer and a scholar in the field of dance, a void which will never be replaced.

It is clear that dance plays a significant role in peoples’ lives. In *New Indian Express* magazine, dance critic Parvathy Nambidi claimed that “Kathakali remains the driving force for him, who is spreading the vibrance of this dance form in the eastern state….The artiste has immortalized many strong female characters like Panchali, Sita, Damayanthi, Kunthi and Urvashi”; and the dancer stated that “Kathakali is something that soothes my soul. Whatever other activities I may be involved in, this art is the passion and driving force of my life” (April, 2013). Although important, dance is often not a financially sustainable venture.

In the case study of Siddharth, I observed how his passion is being exploited on economic grounds, being an emerging artist. Newcomers to the fraternity of dance are always fearful of losing their network and opportunity to showcase their talent by virtue of asking for performance fees. In India and in the Indian diaspora, dancers, irrespective of gender, accommodate and adjust constantly on economic grounds. Opportunities afforded by performances are traded against nominal or honorary grounds of payment. Dancers for whom passion and profession coincide, struggle in their careers and have to maintain multiple jobs to make ends meet. Teaching remains the only option for them. But even to earn the experience of an educator of rare dance forms like Mohiniyattam, where student communities are negligible, it is a challenging decision to carry on with your life.

Siddharth’s case demonstrates the economic aspects of Mohiniyattam and makes reference to the very basic and comprehensive relationship between arts and finances. Because the essence

of the dance is only visible through a dancer's body, I wonder how the dance form will flourish if it is devoid of any economic stability for dancers. To ensure a healthy economic environment for the Indian dance fraternity, government or organizational policies should ensure that the artist is promoted and supported by professional standards in dance.

CADA (Canadian Alliance of Dance Artists) is one such example where artists in Canada are guided in terms of financial transactions; CADA sets guidelines regarding hours of work, fees schedules for rehearsals and performances and also the working environment of the artist. Standardization of such rules will allow arts and talents like Siddharth to sustain themselves without giving up on their passion. Indian dance professionals are specifically independent dancers and hence their suffering and the inequalities that they have to endure to create a niche for themselves in the world of Indian Classical Dance forms goes unnoticed. Artists hesitate to share their stories of pain and suffering because of financial constraints and not many can sustain the very cost of learning the artform.

The post-colonial history of Indian dance forms most often testifies that it has been nurtured by wealthy upper and middle-class families who supported their daughters to learn the art form. Thus, the labor of dance within the political-economic terms remained unaccounted for, as it was understood as more of a hobby, a status symbol, than a serious profession for these women. But with changing times the production of dance has intersected with the concept of labor, operating within the formal economy, and Indian dancers, male as well as female, emerge as independent, self-employed wage earners making money through performance and teaching (Srinivasan, 2011, p.4). It is this vital factor, the eco-dynamics, which need to undergo a change in the Indian dance environment, and need to be accomplished globally in Indian diaspora.

The Indian Dance Scenario in Toronto:

The following two case studies, that I had the opportunity of studying in Toronto, Canada, constructs a paradigm of reality which is otherwise not revealed within the socially constructed stigma around the male dancing body. The exploration is based on the knowledge of individuals within a strongly phenomenological framework. These two case studies reflect the fact that these male dancers are able to liberate themselves from the stereotypical constraints imposed otherwise within the orthodox Indian society.

Within the Indian diaspora, arts and the skills these male dancers are empowered with, is a reason for establishing their identity as dancers among the community. In Toronto, Indian Classical Dance schools are being run by trained dancers who have immigrated to Canada and the numbers are going up regularly. These institutes train young, aspiring dancers as well as have adults who want to continue their passion of dancing after a gap in time—often due to higher studies and the search for employment. Mohiniyattam is being taught in as many as five dance institutes in Toronto. Here too, female students are still higher in numbers than the male learners in Mohiniyattam, but the students who come in for training are dedicated souls regardless, according to teacher Harikishan S. Nair (Interview, 9th December 2019). Their performances are being aired by local Indian and Asian television networks that promote Indian arts and provide a platform to nurture and motivate local talents.

There has been a shift in the Indian diaspora in Toronto, away from the colonial perspective of masculinity which strongly viewed dancing as a feminine profession, with dominance and stereotypical interpretations of *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya*. Thus, Indian male dancers, who grew up in different states of India—as in the case study of Rohit Tyagi who comes from Uttar Pradesh and

Hari Vattappilli who was born in Kerala—are experiencing a transition from the restrictions and orthodox patriarchal ideologies inculcated within the Indian social system to a sense of liberation that they have been able to explore through their passion of dance in Toronto, Canada.

Human beings build themselves out of the resources available to them in the socio-cultural environment in which they are born. By default, their choices transform them according to the desires strongly controlled by the parents and the extended family and friends they live with. Everything we are is the result of the society we live in, as are the expectations we develop regarding gender (and other identifications). Exceptions or deviations in India are censored by society, considered as disobedience or discrepancies in the norms that have become established. Thus, attempts at creating a self-identity and self-definition are often prevented by parents who consider it their right to control or manage a child's personality traits; deviation from expectations can lead to a situation in which the child is threatened, or in extreme cases, physically beaten up. Society, with its conservative ideas about dance and dance professionals, presents an ambiguous picture of the freedom of choice. As such, dance is a profession that struggles against the apparent disadvantages of its historical associations—such as the disrespectful viewing of a woman's body as discussed in chapter three and the exclusion of men from dancing (Risner, 2008a, 2009b).

Case Study-2: "I am my own boss!"

Rohit Tyagi grew up in the 1990s as the youngest son in a conservative family from the state of Uttar Pradesh in northern India. During childhood, he lived in a society that did not accept the profession of dance—nor treat a woman dancer with respect. Tyagi reflects, "I always wanted to dance since my childhood but the environment in my home was more inclined towards

traditional academics of engineering or medicine. Hence, dance was not considered as a professional choice at all" (Email communication, 9th May 2020). Always passionate about dancing, Tyagi and his sister would sneak out of the house to dance for fun at social functions, only to be caught red-handed one night by his uncle. When this happened, they were physically punished for dancing in public because his family believed and would say: "dancing is not for us... you can watch dance but not dance yourself" (Interview, 16th Feb 2020). As Tyagi recollects,

> Coming from Uttar Pradesh which is a conservative society with a lot of 'ism', distribution of power and gender biases come along, dance is never seen as a profession as you don't make money. Division of power is related to money and dance never brings money (Interview, 16th February 2020).

In Tyagi's hometown, he regrets that:

> dance is classified as a woman's work. Anything women do is of no value or not as good that men can do. The stereotyping of gender roles was very prominent, and no man can dare to do the so-called women jobs. Dance is one such thing. Dance is considered as something that women can do and is not considered as a respectable profession (Email communication, 9th May 2020).

Scholar R.W. Connell discusses the gender divisions of labour in terms of "production relations" in the form of an allocation of tasks, which is strongly related to an unequal share of economic power within specific social environments (2009, p.254-257). And this is evident from Tyagi's response. However, Rohit's perspective changed as he moved to Canada on 9th January 2010 and two months later had open-heart surgery. Being very hesitant and distressed, Rohit

confessed that he was at "a time in his life when [he had] hit the rock bottom… and was no longer a perfect child to [his] parents which [he] used to be back home" (Interview, 16th Feb, 2020). His decision to move out of India to pursue a Master's in Environmental Sciences made things very different. He recalls that his "eyes twinkled" as he was overjoyed to see a woman driving a public bus in Toronto, and his stereotypical ideas found an opportunity for change. Initially, he was hesitant to learn dance because of the social stigma attached to it—stemming from the patriarchal society in which he grew up. He recalls:

> After moving to Canada in 2010, I had my independence, and money to spend on things I really enjoy. I was going through some personal family issues and it was during that time I decided to start dancing. Dancing helped me in overcoming my personal struggles and gave me a deep insight in understanding society... I followed my heart and did what I wished to do all these years (Interview, 16th Feb 2020).

Tyagi speaks of his fear in joining the dance class at the beginning, as he was the only boy in the class. He reflects that the uncomfortable feeling was not due to the female dominated classrooms, but to the fear in his mind which is a feeling shared by his (male) peer Alif Shahel who experienced similar inhibitions when he was the first to join dance class in his Muslim orthodox family (Interview, 16th February 2020). What is more, Tyagi was struggling to come to terms with his sexual orientation too. Breaking out the shackles of conservatism, it took Tyagi's much strength to honour his sexual orientation and coming to terms with being gay. Yet it is the moment of liberation from the social constructs and the fear of the unknown, that he treasures today. As he elaborated:

> Whenever anybody tries to break these rules, all these barriers come to play and you do not want to cross those barriers... we are scared, afraid of unknown what's on the other side... but somehow, I managed to cross this fear and dancing and nursing are the best things that I have done in my life (Interview, 16th February 2020).

A full-time nurse by profession and a dancer by passion, Tyagi's story is remarkable. He demonstrates how the desires of an individual are monitored and regulated by social constructs and is an example of someone who has the strength to transgress stigmas with determination and hard work. He has challenged stereotypical ideologies on the spectrum of his life; in his profession as a nurse and in his passion as a dance student for the last ten years. In a work environment where men constitute 9% of Canadians who pursue nursing as a profession, he claims that the managerial jobs are all bagged by the male nurses. Male dominance persists even in these meagre numbers within the profession of nursing.

Likewise, in the Indian diaspora in Toronto, where dance is primarily a female dominated field, when I relocated in 2012 the community had a handful of upcoming young male dancers in the Indian Classical Dance forms of Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Mohiniyattam, who performed regularly in all major community events and dance festivals. I learned that these male dancers immediately got noticed because they are so few in numbers—particularly in the genres of Kuchipudi and Mohiniyattam (Nair, interview, 9th December 2019). Thus, within the Indian diaspora for every hundred female students there might be only one male in the classroom (see figure 2).

Tyagi has metaphorically embodied Simon de Beauvoir's statement and reflects the essential truth of this matter: it absolutely depends on the individual how that person wants to free oneself of being an object of society's gaze (1949). The concept of being a woman is based on how men perceive women in society, and as I take the term "woman" as a metaphor I find it correlates to the idea of the "other." This is significant in this critical study, as male dancers tend to be treated as subaltern subjects; and similarly "othered." We are reminded of De Beauvoir's (1949), Butler's (1990) and Connell's (2002) assertion that gender is assigned through hierarchical methods of identification whereby at birth (and even before) a child is tagged as girl or a boy based on their biological genitalia.

But Tyagi adheres firmly to the fact that biological organs do not make the individual masculine or feminine and that these are social constructs and biological organs do not represent your gender. According to Butler (1990) and Connell (2002, 2005, 2009) these constructs are relative, and what this study aims to bring forward is that being a man does not require an individual to keep a checklist of societal requirements to claim one's masculinity. As a male Mohiniyattam student-dancer, Tyagi refutes the societal dictatorship over gender and claims:

> I believe it is important not to assign gender roles to any profession. Dance is one such profession which is socially accepted as a female dominated vocation. It puts society at an unease when a man wants to dance and decides to make dance his full-time profession (Interview, 16th February 2020).

Tyagi suggests that the social construct of gendered professions is very harmful for upcoming dancers. Male dancers who want to follow their passion sometimes hesitate to follow dance as their full-time profession because there is fear attached to it; the fear being that people

might see them as homosexual for transgressing gendered boundaries. Dancer Kohinoor Sen Barat, from Kolkata also regularly confronts such questions from the parents of male students in his dance academy (Interview, 21st May 2019). But, Tyagi voices with conviction that:

> I am a male dancer, and I am homosexual. I want to tell people that dance does not make people gay. I was gay before I started learning dance. And it's great to be gay. Dancing does not make any man less of a man. Dance has given me a different perspective to look at the world. I think through my dance I can give this message that it's okay to be a man and dance (Email communication, 9th May 2020).

Tyagi's introduction to Mohiniyattam was not by choice and he was hesitant to learn as his teacher Harikishan S. Nair initiated him into the art form. He faced more challenges to embody the art form than from his teacher or female peers in the class whom he described as "extremely supportive." Rather, his hesitance stemmed from the age-old bias attached to embodying feminine movements of Mohiniyattam, and moving like a woman; the derogatory feelings associated with a male body dancing Mohiniyattam aroused mixed feelings of self-disgust and shame in him.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in South India, men performing Bharatanatyam are widely accepted in the current times, but male participation in Mohiniyattam was banned in State Youth Competitions, confirmed Tyagi's teacher, Nair (Interview 9th December 2019). In the case of Tyagi, who started his dancing lessons in Toronto, Canada, he was not directly under the impact of the ban on male Mohiniyattam dancers in Kerala, India. In the Indian diaspora, the renowned teacher of Mohiniyattam, Nair facilitated the learning process for Tyagi and with disciplined pedagogical training Tyagi was benefited by connecting movements to thoughts, not because the

transfer of movements happened from a male teacher to a male student, but rather he assigns this to the technique itself (see figure 3). Tyagi says:

> I am connected to dance as the soul is connected to a body. Dancing has rejuvenated and has given a meaning to my life. Dance has fulfilled the voids which existed in my life. I strive to be better with every passing day and learn something new each time I practice... I want to develop my own culture, rather than following the customs and norms imposed on me by a society determined to cater to the domination of men. I can dance Mohiniyattam, Bharatanatyam and any artform which I believe is beautiful without thinking about what is culturally accepted. Therefore, I can say that social customs and belief systems do not play any important role in my life. My decisions are independent of society and are solely mine (Email communication, 9th May 2020).

Thus, Tyagi transgresses the stereotypical concepts and focuses on the fluidity of gender that dance empowers within him. Stereotypical concepts of masculinity did not seem to be an issue in this case study. Along similar lines, Suhitha Kumar, a Sri Lankan dancer and young practitioner in Toronto, shares that Mohiniyattam vocabulary—in its classical body language, comprehensive gesture and movement quality, predominantly executed with control and poise—empowers the dancer to mimetically present a metaphorical personification of the cultural nuances of eternal bliss *Sat-chit-Anand*, through *Sadhana* (Email communication, 26th April 2020). Although it took time and money to get into dance, Tyagi earned his way into his passion with grace and dignity, and came to define subjectivity by means of focusing on his own likes and dislikes, by separating himself from his past and by establishing himself in the world of the "other."

Tyagi's approach to stick to one's self-identity without succumbing to the pressures of the outside world chimes broadly with Simon de Beauvoir's sentiments (1949). Thus, this study demonstrates existential-phenomenological concepts, of being representative of what is commonly believed to be real but which might not be the case for all in nature. Within the social context of patriarchy to search for the true meaning of being a "woman," which in this case has been used in a metaphorical sense of being a man in the eyes of the society with the anti-essentialist toolbox, stands confirmed. Rather than attempting to unify an individual life story within a set of essentialist objectives, I propose looking at Tyagi, the male dancer and his repertoire of lived experiences within the historical, social and cultural context of dance. The constructionist view here (or constructionism) suggests that these concepts are cultural constructions (not based in nature) and thus they are constructed and held up by people/cultures/societies and these ideas are shaped by history among other social things. As a social construction, we realize that these concepts (gender, time, sexuality, etc.) can be challenged and can shift/change/open up/etc. because they are not set in stone. So Judith Butler takes a constructionist view. Thus the male dancers who are the oppressed "other," rejects the patriarchal concepts of gender and calls us to confirm the fact that gender is a social construct commonly assigned to a human body by biology or nature, and in realizing this, a human being is free to transcend these socio-cultural assumptions; identifying however feels true for them and thus pursue the profession of their choice without being penalized or stigmatized by society. As Tyagi says:

> "My decisions are independent of the society and are solely mine"
>
> (Email communication, 9th May 2020).

Case Study-3: Regretful Departure from Mohiniyattam

Hari Vattappilli who was born in the 1970s in Thrissur, Kerala. In this case study, Hari Vattappilli is a passionate male dancer who stopped dancing and had to give up his practice of *Mohiniyattam* under the dominant conservative gender ideologies with which male dancers are often bullied. I explore Vattappilli's case from within Connell's (2002, 2005, 2009) theoretical framework of masculinity—to understand the flesh and blood human being with a very significant question regarding the identity of the self as viewed by others. I posit the body remains the "primary mode of communication in dance" and "issues relating to the social construction of the gendered body are central to the way gender is represented in theatre dance. But theatre dance is also a spectacle. Different performances invite the spectator to look at dance in different ways'' (Burt, 2007, p.6).

Masculinity, as a social construct, is an unstable concept within this spectacle, which I argue is a relational identity marker in Indian Classical Dance forms. We have seen prominent examples in the Mohiniyattam fraternity: namely, Kathak maestro *Pandit* Birju Maharaj, *Guru* Kelucharan Mohapatra, the father of reconstructed Odissi and *Guru* V. P. Dhananjayan a dancer and choreographer in the field of Bharatanatyam, who have been able to reject stereotypical conventions in terms of gender and sex and the ways essentialist masculinity are understood in dance and society. While these exponents were successful in breaking the shackles of stigma, most male dancers are not that fortunate

Connell defines essentialist masculinity as equated with activities of men in contrast to the passivity of women actions; and he claims the concept of masculinity, in general, is "inherently relational" (2005, p. 68). Furthermore, according to Connell every society has their own inherent

historic accounts of gender, and "masculinity" and "femininity" are located within a context which distinguishes one person from the other; a man from a woman, and every man from another man. Connell suggests the "gender consequences involved in shaping of local culture" are a result of the colonial subjugation of India constructing different images of masculinity with a motive of social control and recruitment to jobs in different regions of India (2002, p.254). Connell's assessment of masculinity is critical and help understand the affinities that I identify within the male dancers in Mohiniyattam, Kathakali and Ottanthullal. Significantly, Connell states:

To define masculinity as what-men-empirically-are is to rule out the usage in which we call some women 'masculine' and some men 'feminine' regardless of who displays them. This is not a trivial use of the terms. It is crucial, for instance, to psychoanalytic thinking about contradictions within personality. Indeed, this usage is fundamental to gender analysis (Connell 2005, p.69).

Post-colonial scholar Ashis Nandy (1983) describes this colonial impact, as something that left behind influences which chimes with the case study of Hari Vattappilli who claims the stigma towards male dancing body to be a "colonial residue." According to the Nandy Indians rarely analyze the impact left behind on our subconscious self, and rather we tend to always follow the West blindly without paying attention to our land's heritage and our traditions that have been fine-tuned over generations. The polarity defined by the antonymous *purusatva* (the essence of masculinity), and *naritva* (the essence of femininity) was gradually supplanted, in the colonial culture of politics, by the antonyms of *purusatva* and *Klibatva* (the essence of hermaphroditism). Femininity-in-masculinity was perceived as the final negation of a man's political identity, a pathology more dangerous than femininity itself (Nandy, 1983, p.8).

These case studies exemplify how male Mohiniyattam dancers are affected by the obvious implication of the term "effeminate" in this historical context attached to the male dancing body. The fear of being associated with the not-so-perfect behaviour of being a man in the world around you, among your peers and in society, shifts the focus of a dancer-in-the-making away from the subject. Vattappilli recollects those days of his adolescence years, when he switched schools in grade seven, and the boys jeered at male dancers. He was hesitant among this crowd and never told them that he himself was a classically trained dancer. He felt bad seeing how a boy who was a dancer was bullied in school among his peers, due to his way of walking, sitting or talking. He understands these mannerisms not as the mimicking of feminine characteristics but to classical dance training which teaches a boy or a girl particular ways to sit, stand and walk (that are perceived as "perfect"). He believes that,

> because he (the male dancer in school) is walking in a different way it creates isolation among peers… and I was trying to be extra cautious… the seed of fear or feeling to hide it (dance) from others grew stronger within me… (Interview 16th of February 2020).

Being too perfect, according to Vattappilli, "is an issue among the young crowd of teenage boys" (Ibid.). Boys during their adolescence are commonly thought to be clumsy, not paying any attention to good posture. Vattappilli, the youngest among six brothers at home, often heard them crack jokes about the typical effeminate mannerisms of male dancers. He confided that he "became even more conscious of not being so perfect" as he overheard these comments (Ibid., 16th of February 2020). Though he had very supportive parents who recognized his dancing talent at the early age of four and enrolled him with one of the best teachers in town, he eventually "convinced

his parents that other things in life needs more focus" and quietly moved away from the training of Mohiniyattam (Ibid.).

Trained under a Kalamandalam Kshemavatahy teacher, since of the age of four, he enjoyed special privileges; he had the good fortune of being in the company of great female dancers and mastered various Indian Classical Dance and theatre forms like Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam and Ottanthullal. Unlike Tyagi, he had nurturing parents and a compassionate learning environment. He was cared for by the teacher, being the only male student in the class and because he was the youngest. For over ten years, participating in dance competitions and performing under the guidance of his teacher, Vattappilli was very busy performing and competing in Thrissur, Kerala.

After switching schools, though he did not dare to reveal his talent among his peer group, he still continued with "no support mechanism from the peers and managed to get recognition from others by winning many dance competition awards and prizes" (Ibid.). This made him and "his parents very happy" (Ibid.). He mentions that all these dance competitions were female dominated and the organizers were kind enough to allow him to enroll, being the only male competitor. But the creeping fear of an association with "femininity" did not let him forget the hegemonic gender criticisms of the society (Connell, 2002; Risner, 2007; Wedgewood, 2009). The fear found its way into the young mind of Vattappilli; he states: "people will see me as a typical male, effeminate dancer, wanting to hide that fear, I convinced my parents that I will not have so much time for dance and slowly shifted away to focus with my academic career" (Interview 16th of February 2020).

During those days, in the 1980s, an influx of "hippie culture" was evident among the youth of Indian society, and he could not escape that trend. Vattappilli elaborates that:

> I still regret my decision… becoming trendy yet I was not so much myself… and moving away from Mohiniyattam, especially… I did it as people looked at it with a big question because society never looked at being a male Mohiniyattam dancer with respect. Others questioning the male participation due to common belief system I reconsidered my decision of pursuing the form… they always questioned the men who were dancing Mohiniyattam and it was not settling well with me… others questioning I felt—maybe it's looking odd in the male body, that seed within grew due to the common belief system and got good of me… and slowly all these peripheral influences made me shift my focus from dancing (Interview 16th of February 2020).

To this day Vattappilli regrets making the decision to move away from dance, especially Mohiniyattam which he loved doing the most. He argues that in Kerala Bharatanatyam male dancers never had to face similar stigmatization perhaps due to the linear quality of movements with emphasis on the physically vigorous technique embedded in the form. But as soon as a male dancer embodies Mohiniyattam, "Mohini being the finest form of femininity," society raises questions: Are these concerns a result of the "racialized construction of femininity-in-masculinity" (Krishnaswamy, 2002, p. 295)? Who are we to blame for such stigmatization of male dancers? Further, this leads me to question not only the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity but their relation to and interdependence on power and desire.

Krishnaswamy claims "effeminacy could serve both as the cause and effect in colonial discourse" (Ibid., p. 297). In colonial India, dance being a female dominated profession (as I discussed in more detail in chapter two), male dancers are often labeled as effeminate and are quickly generalized as gay. Homophobia and gender prejudice are directly connected with male

dancers, as each of my male participants confirmed. There are many male dancers who are gay but at the same time there are also straight men in the dance fraternity, who dance. It is the generalization of all male dancers assumed to be gay which results in trying to be too perfect in the eyes of the "other" that leads to the consequence of hyper-masculinity, or in extreme cases like Vattappilli's, in shying away from the practice of dance altogether.

The observant Vattappilli links his decision of quitting dance to other causes also, aside from the stigma attached to the male dancing body. He states:

> It is not only a social stigma, but it is also the gender question, and most importantly the amount of money you can earn as a living... Men always had the objective of getting into a regular job and dancing is never a regular job to earn enough. Of not getting enough to live ...anything else is considered a job, but dancing! (Interview 16th of February 2020).

In this case study too, I learned that male dancers face economic constraints, whereby their accessibility to dance is always thwarted. Mohiniyattam, being a solo dance form, means that financial stability cannot be assured for a future practitioner. According to Ramsay Burt, the changing definitions of gender are always being constructed in theatrical art forms, but in this research the primary concern is the means by which the society dictates the parameters for a male dancer; restrictions on financial terms impacts their inclination to delve into dancing, limiting the spectacle of the male body in Mohiniyattam (2007). A successful IT professional at fifty, who is striving hard to move up the ladder by acquiring contemporary skills in AI, who is also a doting father of two kids, shares a somber tone at the end of our interview session. He said:

> A question was asked to my son by an elderly lady which made me realize the hard way, and that question I always ask to myself. She asked: Considering that you get the

> same recognition, same amount of money, value, everything is the same in the profession, which one will you choose? I have spent countless nights thinking of this question. And I wish I could take [dance] as a profession. And dance would be my first choice... only then you can understand the implication of the profession... it is not only the stigma associated with [the] male body, or gender but the time and effort to get to that refinement which you cannot bypass, that you to go through the rigorous training to achieve the skill and perform on stage that's my two sense of my past and present relation to dance and I don't say anything about the future which I feel remains unanswered (Interview 16th of February 2020).

It will be highly beneficial if Vattappilli, with such exceptional skill and scholarship on multiple dance forms from Kerala, returns back to dancing. He will be able to share his artistic brilliance with the future generations of Torontonians. He had the opportunity to train under some of the best teachers in Thrissur for almost ten years, and as he relocated to Toronto in 2010, as an IT professional, he also brought with him his skills and knowledge of the Indian Classical Dance forms. This makes him a resource to the Indian diaspora in Toronto, as Vattappilli slowly started performing in the Indian diaspora. Equally adept in Mohiniyattam, Bharatanatyam, and Ottanthullal, his technical skills and his execution of movements can enrich the learning experience of students studying the genres in Toronto.

In lieu of community events, I had the opportunity to share the stage with him and realized how passionate an artist he is; his technique never lessened during his thirty-two years away from dance, and he can still execute the technique with dexterity and poise even after such a long gap in his practice. This was evident during our collaboration on *Kavyanjali*, performed in Ottawa in

2018 (see figure 4, a picture of Hari Vattappilli and the researcher after the performance). Performing Ottanthullal, Hari Vattappilli was an active member in collaboration with the researcher and a team of dancers and scholars from Kerala, choreographing for the dance production and performance of *Kavyanjali*—which was based on the poets and multiple dance and theatre genres of Kerala.

While I draw parallels in the theoretical frameworks from scholars in gender studies and dance (Butler, 1990; Burt, 2007; Risner, 2009a; Connell, 2002; Wedgewood, 2009), I observe the interconnectedness of strong societal forces that are dominant among the stories of these successful and unsuccessful male dancers. Some have been able to overcome these structural stereotypes while others succumb to the hegemony of the social norms which come to control the decisions in their life. Nevertheless, for each of my participants, dance has always played a significant role in their lives: for Tyagi it played a role in his identity search, and for Vattappilli, his search for the correct moment when he can devote himself completely to the practice of the "noble art form of Mohiniyattam"—as he did as a child, and for Siddharth dance in central in his life and he couldn't give it up so he adjusted to the odds and became an exponent of Kathakali.

The "Performativity" of "becoming" a Mohiniyattam Dancer

Judith Butler's theory, based on this concept of "performing gender," is what I harnessed in the study of male articulation of Mohiniyattam (1988, 1990, 1993). According to Butler, gender is a social construct, whereby all human beings' social identities are constantly performing expected behaviour, pre-assigned to specific body types—whether male or female. On the social stage of day-to-day living, Butler emphasizes that the performativity of gender through specific

acts is constantly repeated and thus society accepts it as a reason to claim that the identity generated is stable (1988, 1990, 1993). This aligns with the concept of acquiring, or rather I should emphasize mastering, the skills of being a Mohiniyattam dancer; in other words, becoming a *Mohiniyattam* dancer parallels the process of "performing" and "becoming" Mohini, the enchantress, with repeated practice of the skill. It is the ability to adopt the attitudes and characteristic features of the "other"—in this case, men adopting the attitudes of grace and languid movement qualities of *Lāsya*, associated with femininity—that reflects the concept of "becoming" a Mohiniyattam dancer.

In becoming the enchantress, how much physical specifications hold strong in this post-structural, anti-essentialist era of interculturalism is a debatable topic for research and inquiry. In the current era of the 21st century, acculturation and appropriation are dissolving the stereotypical boundaries when the such constructs are constantly undergoing alteration. Under such circumstances, to assign stereotypical criteria based on visible attributes of the dancers' body is under constant scrutiny and is being challenged. In this context, I identify the experiences, challenges and negotiations that male Mohiniyattam dancers face in the course of their artistic journey, within the existing Indian socio-political environment.

How these dancers cope with the hetero-centric biases regarding gendered bodies is very well testified in the words of dance scholar Leela Venkataraman (2013). At *Purush*: The Global Dancing Male-Conference/Performance Conclave organized in Chennai, India, in 2013, Venkataraman discusses why Indian Classical Dance forms should become "[g]ender/less," and sheds light on the commodification of women bodies and exclusion of the men from dance. She claims that:

> It is not a question of the item, about a female attitude towards something, or a male attitude towards something. It's about how you feel about something and what you are going to show. I don't think you should be so gender-conscious and bothered about your own gender… there is something about putting on a female role, where they transcend their gender and body and become something else... I don't know why we started bringing in only females particularly in the 50s and 60s, in Kuchipudi and all these other styles. This craze for bringing in female dancers was so great. They thought that she was something people liked to see on the stage. They started bringing in so many of them—in the beginning it was alright to have both of them dance. Now, somehow, with film and everything else, it has given you a mindset where you are concentrating only on the body of the woman. Which is easy on the eyes. I don't think that is a really nice way of looking at the dancer. You look at the dance (Venkataraman, 2013).

In an interview with Venkat in *Narthaki* magazine, Leela Venkataraman's response about the specifications on a dancer's body, as mentioned in the ancient dramaturgical text of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, is:

> I do not expect the dancers to be like *apsaras* with divine figures all the time. But I cannot understand dancers who just do not look after their bodies [means taking care of the body]—the main instrument they work with. Dance is a visual art and to go beyond the physical into a realm where the body as an instrument ceases to be the focus is great. But how many achieve that level? I am not talking of physical beauty—just aesthetics... And dancers seem to think arrogantly that since they have arrived, nobody can talk of their bodies. There are instances of some wonderful dancers who are very heavy. Bala was not a beautiful body—but when she danced she became the dance itself (13th December, 2008).

Within the socio-political environment, where male Mohiniyattam dancers are dealing with the stigmatized gaze of a dominant cultural ideology, the participants understanding of the dance is genderless. It is true when a practitioner approaches his or her art within the context of the genre, it is the audience gaze that labels the body from within societal notions of being a man or a woman, what is masculine and what is feminine. Dance, being a performing art, is always presented directly to the audience, and it is hereby the viewers who are identifying the gendered conventions. "Because the body is the primary means of expression in dance, and because gender is an attribute of the body, dance is a key area through which gendered identities are revealed" (Burt, 2007, p.12).

Gender Constructs in the Embodiment of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali

A crucial part of the reason of the dominance of woman bodies in the practice of Mohiniyattam, is that Kerala provides a critical feminist objectification within the historically specific masculinities represented through dance and theatre forms. Acknowledging the varying degrees to which Keralian society plays a significant role in the reproduction of dominant forms of masculine and feminine identities is important. Essentialist understandings of sex-role theory, as critiqued in chapter one of this dissertation, are evident through the dance genres of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali.

In their article "Who wears the skirts in Kathakali?" Diane Daugherty and Marlene Pitkow investigate an all-female Kathakali troupe called Tripunithura Kathakali Kendram (TKK)[11] it was

[11] Tripunithura Kathakali Kendram Ladies Troupe often referred to as TKK consisted of 15 all-female members who ventured into the male-dominated form of Kathakali (Daugherty and Pitkow, 1991).

based in Kerala in 1988. The scholars speak of the admonitions of the society, the gossip and insults that these female troupe members had to encounter and state "clearly the taboo is sexual" among the audience (1991, p. 144); as Daugherty and Pitkow elaborate, TKK performers declined the scholars' "feminist appraisal of the cross-gender casting. They explained that they enjoy the male roles because they can use all the training they have received. When performing any role, they first imagine themselves as the character; gender considerations are secondary" (Daugherty and Pitkow, 1991, p.144). These scholars noted that the women were successful in playing the male roles as they could take on the performer's two-fold task: one being the physical score and the second being emotionally "filling out the role". On this trajectory the female dancers were constantly challenged as "biologically inadequate," "lack[ing] propriety;" and the female articulation transgressed and "violate[d] the essence of the form" unable to do justice to the execution of the vigorous *Tāṇḍava* movement attitude (Ibid., p.149).

Ramyani Roy, a female Kathakali actor from Kolkata, is an artist who is crossing boundaries and challenging the stereotypical exclusions on a similar trajectory assigned to female bodies accessing the genre. Roy who had the opportunity to train under Kalamandalam V. R. Venkit from 2003 and graduated with a Masters of Dance from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, India in 2007, performs dexterously as both male as well as female characters in Kathakali. During the course of training, in the traditional repertoire of the genre, Roy mentioned initially "it was very challenging to learn the technique;" specifically the vigorous leaps and jumps of male characterization was difficult to embody (Interview, 15th March 2020). Further, when a

dancer reaches the point where she needs to prepare herself to perform it becomes impossible to carry the weight of the traditional attire during the performance. She has witnessed how her peers have failed to continue the vigorous training, or at a later stage are unable to bear the weight of the traditional attire, and slowly shifted away from the practice. This stands true to all bodies and not particularly to females, Roy claims.

Thus, the arguments against the female articulation in Kathakali, that the scholars Daugherty and Pitkow (1991) mentioned, from the viewpoint of physical adaptation stand true and cannot be ignored in totality. To perform Kathakali with the traditional attire is a very challenging task and involves years of dedicated practice with a deep sense of devotion—as with *Bhakti*, claims Proloy Sarkar (another Kathakali actor), as the actor undergoes a metamorphic transformation on the day of the performance which starts hours before the event (Interview, 15th January 2021). Trying to "become" a character from the Indian epics, either good or evil, through the process of *aharyam* is the requirement in Kathakali, which is an act of transformation in the performing arts that transcends and takes the dancer through a meditative uplifting process, reflects Roy (see figure 5). To her it is not just making yourself beautiful to get ready and dance on stage, but rather becoming one with the qualities and attributes of the character irrespective of the attributes of *Tāṇḍava* and *Lāsya* that she intends to perform on stage (Interview, 15th March 2020).

This process of transformation that a dancer undergoes leaves the gender identity behind to perform the "other," and here the artist does not consider the self to be deprived or subjugated, but rather enjoys a sense of liberation as they can celebrate the gender binaries through one single body and their medium is dance. There is no space for skepticism in terms of sexuality with the concept of performativity. But when men traditionally take on the *Stree Vesham* in Kathakali to

perform female characters, the audience or the society never points a finger at them, confirms the Kathakali exponent of *Stree Vesham* Kalamandalam V.R.Venkitt (Interview, 11th March 2020).

Social and Institutional Adversaries, Limiting Male Maneuvering of Mohiniyattam

The institutional approach of Kerala Kalamandalam was to position male bodies in Kathakali and female bodies in Mohiniyattam. This was based on the psychodynamics of gender, within the social constructs of being a man or a woman, which they insisted are inseparable from the social relations that invest and construct the concept of masculinity—positioned relatively, in terms of femininity. This concept is reflected in the genres of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali which have been very gender specific since the time of its reconstruction and propagation from 1930s in Kerala Kalamandalam. To analyze this projection of the concepts of masculinity in male Mohiniyattam dancers, I refer to the seminal paper of Tim Carrigan titled-"Toward a new sociology of masculinity," heralding a new era of studying men (Carrigan et al., 1985). This was highly influential in turning the sociological spotlight onto men, the other half of the gender relations equation (Carrigan et al., 1985). This was a crucial development in gender theory, given that "[m]asculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts, which have meaning in relation to each other, as a social demarcation and a cultural opposition" (Connell, 1995, p. 44).

Social institutions have rampaged the accessibility of Mohiniyattam by male dancers, time and again since the 1930s, the era of reconstruction. I have examined (from the historical component in chapter two), the contribution of male dancers at the onset of the reconstruction period of Mohiniyattam under the premium institute of Kerala Kalamandalam. The little that we

get to know about them is from personal interviews and oral narratives of alumni of Kerala Kalamandalam.

In response to my question regarding the current visibility of men in Mohiniyattam, Thankamani Kutty, a Mohiniyattam teacher based in Kolkata and an alumnus of Kerala Kalamandalam (from the class of 1956), shared her thoughts and experiences on her Mohiniyattam *Guru* (see figure 6). Kutty connects the association of the male dancing body in Mohiniyattam to the puranic interpretation of the belief regarding the origin of the dance form where *Maha Vishnu*, the male God, takes on the female form of *Mohini*, the enchantress (Sen, 1999). Kutty points out how, with time, the concept of the word "enchantress" has undergone changes in the history of Mohiniyattam (as I discussed in chapter three). Her teaching philosophy is that:

> Thinking is developing... *Mohini* in Kerala is compared to the dawn, so we wear white and golden colours…. and because of the mythical legend of *Maha Vishnu* taking the woman form of *Mohini*... perhaps after reconstruction only women were taught this art form... but every art form is changing... so with education and cultural context how interpretation of concepts change and find better interpretations is perhaps the reason why we are seeing male dancers in Mohiniyattam currently... so presentations will also change according to the time... I believe in flowing with the river and not against the tide... I think all dance forms give almost the same and equal space to men and women, so why should it be different in Mohiniyattam (Interview, 13th March 2020).

In the documentary *The Thinking Body*, all dancers unanimously proclaim that all forms of dance should be celebrating gender binaries to broaden the scope of the creative process (Shivaya, 2016). The construction of gender is both the product and the process of its

representation and is constantly monitored by the social construct. This is evident in two case studies I conducted with Tyagi and Vattappilli. I analyzed their interviews, based on the limitations of the social constructs on the creative mind and the creative process. Kalamandalam Siddharth states, because Mohiniyattam is a Keralian dance form it is considered to be an art for women and Kathakali is for men, which has been also argued by scholar Kavya Krishna (2014) (Email communication 2nd April 2019).

Moreover, Kavya Krishna claims that in post-colonial India, to "sanitize" the dance form, Mohiniyattam got identified with "the 'restricted' body movements… in association with the historical norms of female behaviour, relating it to female 'shyness' and also to the desired and socially/culturally 'permitted' body language of 'decent' and 'aristocratic' women in contemporary and historical Kerala" (2014,p.2). Further, Kalamandalam Siddharth confirms, "[e]ven at Kerala Kalamandalam we have primarily two departments, Dance and Kathakali. In the Dance department boys are not allowed and in Kathakali, girls do not get admission. So, the social reservation extends in the administrative restriction as well. Also Dance in Kerala is considered as an act of feminine attitude. So, no man wants to get teased by society" (Email communication, 2nd April 2019). Kavya Krishna argues:

> "[i]n contemporary visual representations, Mohiniyattam becomes the 'traditional' and 'classical' dance form of 'Malayalee woman'. Moreover, it has emerged to become something more than an art form; it became the symbol and visual signifier of the 'authentic' Kerala culture, Malayalee woman and femininity. 'Malayalee woman' was fashioned in Mohiniyattam discipline by Vallathol and later through initiatives in Kalamandalam…" (2014, p.207).

Scholar Ananya Chatterjea claims women's bodies are used as markers of symbols for "renegotiating" cultural practice or "tradition," as she questions "the position of performing artists and their ability to work through bodily metaphors in an atmosphere of increasing censorship" (2004a, p. 103). This can be argued as one of the reasons why some male Mohiniyattam dancers in Kerala take on the female attire and adopt the attributes of femininity to escape the social scrutiny of being male and indulging in Mohiniyattam performance (see figure 7). Scholars argue the construction of gender is the product and the process of both representation and self-representation (Chatterjea, 2004a; Kavya Krishna, 2014). If the deconstruction of gender inevitably affects its (re)construction, the question is, in which terms and in whose interest is the de-re-construction being affected?

Since the form was revived between 1950-1960s it has been exclusively for girls in Kerala. This was once again confirmed when male participation was formally banned in the 1990s at state level dance competitions in Kerala. Dancer-choreographer Harikishan S. Nair, who immigrated to Toronto, Canada, in 2013 from Kerala, recalls that he himself had the opportunity to participate as a Mohiniyattam competitor in female attire, before the ban was imposed in the state youth competitions. Never were men encouraged to take up Mohiniyattam as a form and Nair claims "at some point male dancers were banned to do Mohiniyattam in Kerala in female attire" (Interview, 9th December 2019). He bangs the table and claims that "some male presentations were mimicking the girls... a controversy due to which they banned male participation" (Ibid.). Other participants from Kerala also speak of the state regulations in dance competitions where some male dancers started exploiting the art form, which was actually one of the major reasons they were assigned to

establish an unwritten rule in disclaiming men in Mohiniyattam. Thus, the State of Kerala restricted the participation of male youths in dance competitions since the 1990s.

Kerala School Kalolsavam is a festival, unique in its structure and organization, with the idea to promote the practice of arts by students at large, within the educational setting. From the school level to state level, *Kalolsavam* is monitored by the Education Department. Looking back into the history of *Kalolsavam* in the last 58 years it seems that *Kalolsavam* has refined much in letter and spirit. Students now get an opportunity to express their talent at the school level, sub-district level, district level and, at last, at the state level. When performers reach state level, perfection reaches its zenith. Unfortunately, male participation in Mohiniyattam has been restricted. This thwarts the spirit of the young students willing to pursue Mohiniyattam and dedicated male performers became victims of this negation of male bodies. In a newspaper and interview (see figure 8) with Jolly Mathew from Kerala confirms :

> ...that the Mohiniyattam competition for boys was taken away from the State School Youth Festival in the 90s. The fest had boys wearing women's attire to perform and the 'vulgarity' in the same was quoted as a reason to discontinue it, though men's costumes were also in use. Also, we should note that female dancers also show Krishna, Duryodana and more in women's costumes while performing, which never seemed to be a problem for these critics (Qtd in an interview with Soman, Times of India, 7th Oct 2020).

Physical factors certainly play an important role in the ways a body moves, and dance is embedded within the individual body which executes them. Gender studies scholar Connell notes "people growing up in a gendered society inevitably encounter gender relations, and actively participate in them... Young people learn to negotiate the gender order. They learn how to adopt a

certain gender identity and produce a certain gender performance" (2002, p.79-81). We often see dancers, teachers and choreographers are tolerant of the male body, but institutional policies assign strict binary codes against male Mohiniyattam dancers, by virtue of their gender, caste, religion in the competitive stage and the professional world of Indian Classical Dance. How can these specific problems be addressed? Krishna states:

> Contemporary appropriations of the Mohiniyattam figure in popular visual culture representations made it synonymous with the symbol of the 'authentic' Malayalee woman'. Moreover, the representations of Mohiniyattam make the very region of Kerala feminized and sexualized... Mohiniyattam has, thus, become a hegemonic cultural symbol which marginalized all other identities of women in Kerala and made the figure of upper caste women as the most important signifier of Malayalee women" (2014, p. 207-208).

Audience Gaze and Identity Politics in Kerala

Multiple dimensions are noticed in the context of this discussion, subjective to the cultural and geographical locations of the performer and the performance. The dichotomy between the choreographer-oriented approach and the spectator-oriented approach are undergoing a canonical transformation (Burt, 2007, p. XII). The audience gaze is a very gendered concept and has been frequently under critique in various interdisciplinary cultural analyses. Widespread criticism among Indian dance scholars towards the spectator gaze is often a subject of discussion (Venkataraman, 2013, 2019; Hari Krishan, 2013; Deboo, 2013).

In October 2020, when the media highlighted the suicidal attempt of a male Mohiniyattam dancer in Kerala, who was "disallowed from performing for the Kerala Sangeetha Nataka

Akademi, allegedly quoting gender as one of the reasons," turmoil unfolded within the dance fraternity (Soman, Times of India, 7th Oct 2020). The society seems to be approving of male dancers learning, earning higher degrees and teaching as faculty members at universities, but the question of gender looms large as soon as it comes to stage performances. It is important to ask why that is. Can we overrule gender bias based on fear of criticism and the audience gaze, as a reason to refuse the applicant (as we learn about the incident from the media)?

Jolly Mathew, a male Mohiniyattam exponent from Kerala, shared his experiences of similar incidents of discrimination by organizations in the past. Mathew says:

> I too have faced instances where I wasn't allowed to perform it due to my gender, but then, I compensated for them by presenting Mohiniyattam on as many stages as I can, even abroad. After watching me, many men have also become my disciples. We can perform even on social media, do a lot more choreographies, and even perform outside venues that stop us, as a protest. It's important to fight it in our own way" (Qtd in an interview with Soman, Times of India, 7th Oct 2020).

According to the report, a couple significant questions that my dissertation asks is: why men in Mohiniyattam are under scrutiny? And why and how dancers are categorized based on gender, race and religious belief in Kerala? Mohiniyattam teacher and research scholar, Neena Prasad says, in an interview to the Keralian critic, "Men are often better dancers as the art form comes straight from their bodies. More boys should get trained and perform Mohiniyattam, keeping their identity intact" (Qtd in an interview with Soman, Times of India, 7th Oct 2020).

Advocating male performance in male attire highlights the tone of acceptance in her statement. And her ideals are very well embodied by her male Mohiniyattam student Thomas-Sanga Vo Van Tao, an emerging practitioner (see figure 9), who says:

> I think that it is not a question of making the form (the movements, the spirit, etc.) gender fluid... It is more a process of making the patriarchal societies (especially Kerala) we live in more "fluid" about this question/issue of gender. I think that the Mohiniyattam art form is already perfect as it is and male dancers first of all should have the guts to take it and shouldn't try to make it more masculine. If we have to talk in terms of gender, I think that nobody is 100% male or 100% female each and everyone's gender is composed of more or less female or male so this "mixture" will anyway reflect on someone's dance, so transforming an art form into a male or female oriented one is going against one's nature (Messenger, 17thApril 2019).

A teenage female Mohiniyattam student, Indrani Ghosh from Toronto, who has been learning the dance form for the last five years, proclaims that men should perform as they are, and she connects the option of wearing female attire to stereotypical association. She says:

> The stereotypes of Mohiniyattam usually pertain to the perceived femininity of the dance. Thus, the Mohiniyattam costume, as someone who has been affected by these stereotypes, in my eyes, looks more fit for women... Thus, when a man wears it, it may be jarring to see because his body is unlike a woman's body. This unfortunate labelling of clothes to a certain sex causes problem like alienation or rejection when men wear the stereotypically feminine costume (Email communication, 2nd January 2021).

It is important to take note of what RLV Ramakrishnan, a male exponent of Mohiniyattam from Kerala, says with reference to adopting female attire and a female attitude in a male body (see figure 10). He states:

> Many still tend to look at the gender of the performer rather than the art form, when a show is on. That's one of the main reasons why there is so much judgement over it. Even Vallathol has said that it's the dance form that matters, not the performer's gender (Qtd in Soman, Times of India, 7th Oct 2020).

Conclusion

The concern with the issue is how much the dynamics of power and art, politics and free choice, is authentically 'free' in the presence of orthodox ideals. Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's concern is that the 'subaltern subjects' do not have the voice or agency to acquire their desired rights (1988, 2010). She claims that 'conservative modernization' leads to the growth of a 'hegemonic bloc' which pushes practice in a conservative direction. This process is not simple. It is a complex and problematic situation where consumers choose products in self-interested ways rather than citizens' collectively mobilizing their performances for public awareness. Spivak's theory is reflected through the case studies discussed in this chapter. As I have argued, and for the cultural activists, is it evident that there is an issue of inclusion and exclusion, of visible and the invisible dance practitioners, in Indian society at regional levels. We see how power and agency can be exercised in silence; to silence the possibilities of expression and resistance by the male Mohiniyattam dancers. As Spivak suggests, "[t]hey are likewise about how those who speak can simultaneously be unspoken" (2010, p.8). Still, the scenario is optimistic in the Indian diaspora of

Toronto and also in Kolkata where I observed the challenge is more from a financial aspect than from gender bias.

I strongly believe that the time has come to create a more inclusive environment when protests are surfacing in Kerala, in the land of Mohiniyattam. This research provides concrete evidence of how gender-bias impacts everyday life of those in the world of dance—through contextualization of facts with scholarly literature on dance and gender studies. Two basic queries of my research—first asking, why is the gendered interpretation so dominant in Mohiniyattam in Kerala, and secondly, how male dancers disrupting the traditional gaze and ideologies of masculinity—seems to arrive at a juncture; the question that has concerned me since 1990s will finally be answered not only for me, as a researcher, but also for the community of dancers and the society at large. There are strong examples of dancers who are relentlessly practicing and performing Mohiniyattam in male attire in India and Toronto, and these include: Thomas Sanga Vo Van Tao, Jolly Mathew, RLV Ramakrishnan and Harikishan S. Nair. Dance performances are being created and staged in India and Toronto, where male and female bodies are sharing the space and creating a more inclusive environment in the dynamics of Mohiniyattam. Choreographic work, like *Swaha*, which was presented in the Asia Pacific Dance Festival at University of Hawaii in 2019, are being presented in collaboration—in this case, the work includes Toronto based dancer Harikishan S. Nair and myself (see figure 11).This dance presentation was a rare showcase which included a male and a female duo practicing Mohiniyattam and engaging in a traditional repertoire. It highlights the *Purush* and the *prakriti*, the masculine and feminine elements of nature, working in parallel to maintain synergy and harmony in the universe.(url link to the Asia Pacific Dance Festival at University of Hawaii, 2019, http://manoa.hawaii.edu/outreach/asiapacificdance/swaha-

in-mohiniyattam/) . Eventually more shifting will occur within the arena of Mohiniyattam, as we have witnessed in other Indian Classical Dance forms in the past. This will bring forth an inclusivity in the maneuvering of Mohiniyattam by all bodies, sharing the space and complimenting the intentions of the genre.

Chapter 7: Hybridity in Bengal through Indian Classical Dance Vocabulary

My focus in this chapter is on how the male dancing bodies incorporate the graceful and lucid movement quality of Mohiniyattam and appropriate the dance movements to generate a whole gamut of artistic interpretations that are suitable to Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's musical compositions. The creative process of my research participants is generating the discourse between the traditional repertoire and neoclassical developments in dance. I focus on the fraternity of renowned dancers, teachers and choreographers that have influenced the process of hybridity in dance.

In this chapter I archive their experiences and enrich my dissertation with their repertoire of exploration, with a strong inspiration from the genre of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali. I explore the question of how the Bengali dancers deconstruct the vocabulary of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali to implement in soulful rendition of Tagore's poetic compositions (see figure 12). And I consider why it is a common practice to learn the Indian Classical Dance forms and recast the movements into a new form through creative dances in Kolkata. Specifically, I ask: when did this creative journey begin and why? This will guide my study to formulate knowledge with equal importance on transmission of the Keralian arts within the site of the male body, outside the state of Kerala. The dialogic discourse on performance scenarios in Kerala and Kolkata, encourages new understandings of the mechanisms of exchange, sharing and reshaping within the contours of performance studies and theatre historiography by the rise of the hybrid dancing style nurtured through the vocabularies of Keralian dance forms.

Visionaries and prominent dancers had a strong influence in negating the smirks that inevitably come whenever male dancers get on stage in Bengal: Rabindranath Tagore, Uday Shankar, Shambhu Bhattacharya and Kalamandalam P. Govindan Kutty are key figures. These are personalities who made significant contributions in challenging the sexual politics and breaking the stereotypical notions of masculinity, and gender roles more broadly, and negotiated the troubling issues that male dancers often face. In this context, Guru P. Govindan Kutty (1927-2007) is a prominent name whose creative journey is exemplary because he adhered strongly with the dance technique of Kathakali by shedding off the elaborate traditional costume, make-up and accessories of the genre. His pioneering work of using Kathakali dance technique to interpret poetry in Bengali literature has become an inspiration for the next generation of dancers (see figure 13). Bengali Dance critic Tapati Chowdurie reflects:

> It was on a summer's day in July, 1955, that Kalamandalam Govindan Kutty set foot in Calcutta [Kolkata]. His arrival in the city had a great impact on the cultural history of the city and East India too. Kathakali became an integral part of the dance scenario in West Bengal in a big way after the coming of Govindan Kutty... It was, however, Govindan Kutty who satiated the growing interest of dance lovers in West Bengal in this captivating dance drama from Kerala. He not only trained dancers, but was himself a performer with a research oriented creative mind. He has left behind an unmatchable record of performances and contributions to India's cultural heritage (Chowdurie, The Hindu, July, 2011).

Male dancers are shaping up their choreographic methods with Kutty's innovative way of using the dance technique by deconstructing the movement qualities of the traditional repertoire of Kathakali and translating them to compliment the music of *Rabindro Sangeet*. This has

increased the acceptability among the audience, and in the 21st century we see there has been no replacement for the immense resources that Tagore created. These works are constantly being performed by the Bengali dance community in Kolkata, following in Kutty's footsteps, and performers are also travelling with their arts to various places around the globe, among the Bengali diaspora.

In Bengal, when Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore invited Mohiniyattam and Kathakali teachers from Kerala Kalamandalam during the 1930s, the cultural bond between the two states of Bengal and Kerala was invoked. The cultural exchange continued with visiting teachers from Kerala Kalamandalam in the late 1930s and this received greater impetus with the establishment of Kolkata Kalamandalam in 1968 P. Govindan Kutty and Thankamani Kutty—a dancing couple and Kalamandalam alumni. This process was further enhanced by the choreographer Thankamani Kutty's incorporation of the vocabulary of Mohiniyattam and Bharatanatyam in the execution of Tagorean works. Students learnt the Classical Dance forms of Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam and Kathakali under the institute in thousands. Thankamani Kutty, the artistic director (and now an octogenarian) happily recollects how the dancing couple introduced the Classical Dance vocabulary to the dance dramas of Tagore. She links this to the inclusivity of the local people and says:

> The city gave me the opportunity to choreograph and conduct multiple dance dramas by Tagore. The proposal to teach and conduct them came from renowned Rabindra Sangeet artists and musicians of the city, namely Suchitra Mitra, Sumitra Sen, music training center- *Dakhsini,* were a few among them. Language was an issue in choreographing and in the beginning but *Guruji* (P. Govindan Kutty) guided me with the

> meanings. *Chitrangada* was first choreographed by me in three different dance styles of Bharatanatyam, Mohiniyattam and Kathakali. The Bengalis accepted all the forms of dance and they enjoyed it! (Interview, 13th of March 2020).

P. Govindan Kutty's senior most Kathakali student, Kaushik Chakraborty, an established dancer and theatre actor in Kolkata and graduate from Rabindra Bharati University in 1986, shared his personal preference for the reason of his enrollment under the Kathakali master (see figure 14). He claimed that the poetic language of Tagore found its expression through the language of Kathakali. In other words, artistic expression found its way through the medium of Kathakali dance technique, as *Bhava* is the main focus in Tagorean compositions (see figure 14). During the conversation he kept embodying various Tagorean songs with the *Hastas* and the words in the poetry found a way of interpretation in his artistic exposition.

Immediately the interview turned into a dance workshop session. The grammar and beauty of the execution of the literature in movements provided a beautiful leeway to a visual presentation which cannot be translated into written words (however, a few performance video links are provided in the Appendix A). Moreover, Chakraborty explained: "language is what I used the Kathakali technique for" but, according to him, *Vachik* (Sanskrit for "words") is mandatory for the implementation of his learned language through Kathakali.

We executed the dance technique in collaboration, using Tagore's poetic dramas such as *Karna Kunti Sambad* and *Biday Abhishap*, and this testified to the fact that the implementation of the dance technique (of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali) to communicate the *Bhava* received acclamations from the audience and the Bengali dance critics likewise (video clippings are

provided in the Appendix A, also see figures 16 and 17). His aim to learn the Keralian theatrical dance form stems from the urge to employ the communication skill learnt from the technique for his Bengali audience—in the local as well as the global context. During his teenage years as a male dancer, Kaushik had ample opportunities and popularity came easily, but he always felt the lack of technique in his dance presentation as he sighed and lamented "*onek shekha baki*" (Bengali for " yet, a lot to be learned!") (Interview, 13th February 2019).

The idea of employing Kathakali dance technique to choreograph poetic and literary works into dance-theatre with use of *hasta mudras* came to him from Kutty, who extensively used it in choreographing dance numbers for his Bengali audience. Kutty not only borrowed the movement materials and qualities, but he indeed was able to "deconstruct" the basics of Kathakali dance technique to create a neoclassical dance style, totally new and unique. This inspired the young mind of Kaushik who explained: "I was interested in the dance technique, and watching Guruji perform without traditional *aharyam*, I knew without the traditional Kathakali costume I can perform any character without much hinderance" (Interview, 13th February 2019)—Chakraborty mentioned that he felt very confident as an actor-dancer with the vocabulary of Kathakali dance technique, and believed that following *Guruji's* footsteps he will be able to portray multiple characters in acting even without the traditional costumes used in Kathakali for specific characters (Bengali: "*Angik tar opor amar* interest *ache, Gurujir* dress *chara acting dekhe mone hoyechilo ami je kono choritro korte pari*") (Interview, 13th February 2019).

The philosophical interpretations in the literary works of Tagore, a versatile poet whose poetic compositions have transcendental values, need the ability of the dancer to configure the ideas through movements. Tagore's idea to introduce dance forms like Mohiniyattam, Kathakali

and Manipuri in Viswa Bharathi, Shantiniketan was done with similar intention. When choreographed into dance numbers, these dance forms are best suited in their texture and movement quality to the melody of Tagorean compositions. Thus, eventually a 'hybrid' form of dance developed in Bengal which is popularly known as *Rabindrik Nritya*.

The wide range of cultural and social references in the dance presentations of recent choreographers, performing or adhering to *Rabindrik Nritya*, indicate that their curriculum never follows a strict traditional genre but rather creatively develops a hybrid approach to movement and staging in order to reach out to a wider audience (Burt, 2007,p.152). When bodies dance with grace, the focus is not to analyze the social and political structure of the dance profession but to showcase the meanings that come into play when men dance on stage or screen. Indian dance forms are theatrical in representation, and it is not difficult to evaluate the contribution of male dancers in contrast to their female counterparts, in Bengal. The dominance of female dancers and teachers in the fraternity has always been prominent and has been redefined in terms of glorifying the achievements of female artists to reclaim their feminine identity as a part of the feminist project.

But it is not difficult to assess the male contribution to the field of dance in Kolkata, simultaneously. Ramsay Burt rightfully claims that there is a key difference "between re-evaluating images of women and doing the same images of men" (2007,p.2). Thinking of accommodation, and/or reflecting back to how Kalamandalam Siddharth framed it, this is "not compromise but adjustments" (Interview, 5th September 2019). This is of political and epistemological relevance with regards to the "performativity" of the male body within the culture of Mohiniyattam, according to Siddharth (Interview, 5th September 2019). The focus here is on the

invincible role played by embodied memory, in transmitting, interpreting and generating socio-historical and cultural knowledge.

On similar grounds, as suggested by performance studies scholar Diana Taylor, it's important to acknowledge the socio-political, historical and philosophical implications of performed versus archival "acts of transfer" (2003). Specifically, Taylor predominantly reflects on ways of archiving and representing cultural forms which can constitute and transmit social knowledge (2003). Taylor creates a consolidated theoretical framework by bringing together key concepts of "performative" and "performativity," in relation to Beauvoir and Butler's social construction of identities. She proceeds to demonstrate the multiple ways of reading and emancipating "repertoire" and performance and its theatricality (2003, p.34).

Her argument regarding acts of transfer, agency and power, becomes a conceptual tool in communicating and constituting cultural traditions in context of the dance fraternity and the evolution of a hybrid dance form in Bengal. She has skillfully narrated the relation and the contradiction in embodied acts and performance, transmitting knowledge by raising key points about the potential of locally embodied knowledge to critique, inform, dialogue with and learn from the global trajectories. From this theoretical analysis, I position the creative process of Kolkata's dancer, choreographer and trainer Kohinoor Sen Barat as exemplary. Indeed, Barat's forte is to develop a movement vocabulary from the influence of Kathakali, Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam and assemble the local and global movement vocabulary and multimedia technology in his dance productions (see figure 18). He challenges the audience gaze with dance productions like *Devi Mahatto*, *Ashta Matrika* and *Mahisashura Mardini,* with a crew of all male

dancers who were dressed in female attire which was never revealed to the audience until the curtain call of these shows.

Rigorous workshops to train the male dancers in the nuances of the feminine movement vocabulary from Mohiniyattam, Kathakali and Bharatanatyam dance techniques helped the dancers get a cohesive understanding of the execution of the graceful movements with control and dignity. He employed these methods of nurturing the female attitude within the male dancer and vice versa. This was done through sharing movements and choreographies by means of teaching and exchanging movements between male and female bodies. His creative process of deconstruction of Indian Classical Dance forms has led the dance company to successfully stage many productions in Kolkata and around the world. Kolkata has witnessed pioneering dance and theatre productions launched by his dance company, *Shinjan Institute for Bharatanatyam and Creative Dance*, for the last thirty years.

With regard to the execution of gender binaries, in Sen Barat's creative journey, I situate his standpoint within the gender roles that are taken up by dancers in terms of performance, phenomenology and feminist criticism (Butler, 1988). His process deals with the conceptual presence of gender within society that functions as the primary element in the expected behavioural roles. Drawing upon Foucault's philosophical and psychoanalytic thought, Butler espouses a theory rooted in the concept of social agents that "constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all matter of symbolic social sign" (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Gender identity is constructed through social sanction and social taboo; it's an identity that is repeatedly constructed through time and this is what's challenged through the work of the choreographer Sen Barat. Gender itself, in its unstable temporality, is defined to be "an identity instituted through a stylized

repetition of acts," it's an ephemeral performance from which social constructs are formed (Ibid, p.519).

We are forced to participate in gender binaries because there exists an agency which has constructed the binary system as determinate. Butler asserts that gender is not based on an internal identity or self-definition, but rather on participatory, reflective notions of performances (1988). When Kolkata male dancers staged the *Mahisashura Mardini* critics claimed and published as a news in the national daily overcoming the gendered obstacles, members across dance groups in Kolkata came together to perform a piece that: "[a]lthough men did perform the roles of female characters in several Indian traditional styles, modern society has become increasingly closed to the idea of the fluidity of gender"(Hindustan Times on 23rd September 2017). Suitably, Kalamandalam Siddharth claims:

> When a performer performs a female piece, the person needs to believe in that character and vice versa when he/she performs a male piece. So it is again not the gender of that performer. It is all to do with the character he/she is portraying. So I did never feel any challenge as a Male Mohiniyattam Dancer as I am never the same me on stage. I try to enact the character I play. So I believe in that character from deep within (Interview, 5th September 2018).

Conclusion

At the end of conducting my research in Kolkata, in March 2020, I am excited by the new directions emerging with male Bengali dancers and choreographers. The remarks of young Mohiniyattam practitioner , Raktim Chanda, sums it up best when he said: "I try to choreograph

Tagorean music within the forte of Indian Classical genre & I would in future with no such compromise to any other genre" (Email communication 25th March 2020). For me, this confirms that there is a future for Bengali dancers who are incorporating the vocabulary of Indian Classical Dance forms in their creative process.

I believe in the fact that form and content cannot be divorced from each other because often form *is* content. This view has been consistently confirmed through the works of Kathakali master and *Guru* P. Govindan Kutty, got a reconfirmation from this young dancer once again as he continues the legacy of Kutty by focussing on the tools and vocabulary of Indian Classical Dances to generate a hybrid style choreographing Tagorean music. I wonder, is this comfort level of implementing the technique by avoiding *Aharyam* specifications a natural ability due to the fact of being a Bengali, or due to the fact that they live and perform in Kolkata within a cultural environment that feels aligned with their creative process? There are several layers and perspectives that can be unpacked and reference Raktim's creative process which are visible among the Bengal dance practitioners. And this leads to a new question: Will this attempt to choreograph and deconstruct Indian Classical Dance forms into a hybrid style always raise the eyebrows of dance practitioners outside Bengal, questioning their authenticity and ability to master different Indian Classical Dance forms?

A general remark, while not explicit, seems to preserve: that Bengali dancers pursuing any south Indian dance forms are not as *authentic* as their regional counterparts. And this is a narrative that I have regularly encountered, both during my fieldwork with Bengali participants and in my personal experience as a Mohiniyattam dancer and educator outside Bengal. Although, I do not agree with this regional outlook, questioning the validity of a practitioner who is ardently involved

in perfecting an embodied skill. Questions arise about not knowing south Indian languages, as the lack of this knowledge is considered a deterrent for expressing the nuances of the poetry in their languages. But we must remember that dance is the language of embodied communication which cannot be dependent on any specific regional language.

The embodied art form is learned and practiced as a medium of communication and interpretation of ideas and knowledge that can be shared by the artist with the audience even without spoken words. I do not agree with this segregated outlook; but I am also not able to shrug off the concern of misinterpreting and misusing the Indian Classical Dance vocabulary with sloppy techniques that do little justice to the rigor and the grace of the forms. These performances range from highly creative productions to less polished and even at times vulgar versions of Indian Classical Dance forms by mixing and mashing different world dance forms for commercialized presentation—on television or social media. Thus, these pertinent questions and discourses are not only with respect to Mohiniyattam and Kathakali, but are also relevant in terms of the form and content of all Indian Classical Dance forms. Because these dance forms are religious and/or spiritual in their form of expression, which is a marker of national identity, I wonder: how are the choreographers going to balance the connection and create a neoliberal context that future researchers can study and observe? Ultimately, I believe this will continue to be a debatable subject in the dance fraternity and in academic writing.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Gendering in Indian Classical Dance forms like Mohiniyattam is a constant issue in day-to-day life and male dancers are the victims. As soon as a male dancer portrays grace on the stage, he is immediately under scrutiny and is classified under the "queer" identity—whether he identifies as queer or not. Stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are part of the Indian psyche and a by-product of colonial history that has been manifesting in Indian Classical Dance forms since the reconstruction period of the 1930s. My research objective is not to limit this topic to dance but to generate an interdisciplinary approach; the aim is to bring awareness to the gendered implications in the professional dance world and encourage future generations by highlighting the performativity of gender in the context of the male Mohiniyattam participants with considerations from theatre, dance and gender studies.

To dance an elegant form like Mohiniyattam, gender cannot be a hindrance. There is no algorithm for creativity. An artist's versatility is their greatest asset. This dissertation, titled "Men in Mohiniyattam: An Ethnographic Study on Gender Binaries" is an observation of male dancers practicing the genre of Mohiniyattam. It brings forth the oral narratives of the male maneuvering of an otherwise female dominated genre. Kerala's societal construction of the ideal womanhood has created a gendered accessibility issue with the dance form of Mohiniyattam—excluding men from the practice. Since the 1930s, when revival and reconstruction of the genre was initiated in Kerala, the form has predominantly been practiced by women as teachers and students. Because the state of Kerala historically had a tradition of gender-assigned dance forms for men and women, Kathakali and Mohiniyattam became sites of gender bias where women and men always became

a “subaltern other” who have limited or no access to the forms because of their physiological specifications. It is this stereotypical performativity of gender which is undergoing a massive alteration at the present, and is my subject of study with focus on Mohiniyattam.

In this dissertation, the individual experiences of male dancers and choreographers suggest their identities as dancers are not separable from the experience of doing dance. The thoughts and observations of all the participating dancers in this research study, tells us that subjectivity is not something which resides in the words we use to describe the situations that we live in, but rather they *represent* ourselves. In the social sciences, subjectivity is as much a matter of ontology, as it is of epistemology; subjectivity is apparent when the dancers recall how they have experienced pleasure and happiness by their involvement with dancing. Furthermore, their experiences reveal the fact that dance is an embodied art form that has the power to transcend the limitations of a gender and enhance the relation between satisfaction and embodiment. It establishes a connection between the body and the mind through dedicated, disciplined practice. This phenomenological embodiment of dance is what I interpret as the subjective performativity, an embodied physical sensation.

The interviews conducted in this study present a strong argument for their positionality as male dancers within the socio-cultural environment in which they live. More particularly, the case studies present a contextual reference whereby they bring out multiple perspectives of doing and undoing dance which cannot be divorced from the socially constructed meaning of dance and dancing male bodies. They ask: Can male dancers practice and perform Mohiniyattam? Who decides that men cannot embody Mohiniyattam? And how can embodying a dance form have gendered implications?

In this regard, I particularly look to dancers who talk about empowerment through dancing. Some men practice dance as their hobby, as a passion that helps them to unwind from mental stress, while others pursue Mohiniyattam as their profession. For some male students, dance has become a site for venting emotional stress and a springboard from which to pursue and exercise their agency, confronting the social stigma towards male dancing bodies. The study also includes male dancers who do not transgress the boundaries created by society, and who had to withdraw from Mohiniyattam due to insufficient economic stability that professional dancers are challenged with and/or due to the fear of being associated with effeminacy.

My interest in this topic arose from personal interaction with the male Mohiniyattam dancers in the fraternity, along with my recognition of and concern about the gap in academic research on the dancing male bodies (specifically in Mohiniyattam). This research was undertaken across personal and academic platforms to bring forth the struggle and challenges that these men encounter in course of "becoming" a Mohiniyattam dancer. Thus, a concern that was triggered during the 1990s, was taken up as an academic research project in 2017; and with years of practice, observation and valuable inputs from male dancers, this endeavour has enriched my personal learning experience while conducting the research.

The geographical location for my fieldwork was not actually in Kerala, the land of Mohiniyattam, but in Kolkata, India, and Toronto, Canada. My intention was to focus on places and geographical locations which are difficult to apprehend as sites to generate discourse on male Mohiniyattam dancers. These locations and spaces are honing the artists at regional levels as well on global platforms. My focus with places like Kolkata and Toronto was to give a fresh perspective on the practice of the genre that has travelled beyond Kerala and is gaining in popularity. This

study provided a mapping, tracing the journey of how the practice has travelled out of the state of Kerala, the southernmost state of India, to the far eastern state of Bengal and finally across the long route to Toronto, Canada. The discussion is focussed on how the traditional and cultural practice over years has had significant influences on dancing male bodies, enabling them to acquire particular skills, which has enriched the dancer with the ability to present unique patterns and ephemeral movements. As such, these abilities have become a toolbox for the invention and reconstruction of artistic interpretations and choreographic works for many male dancers.

Also the discussion highlights these findings within the context of the development of dance as a field of study, drawing from resources in anthropology and ethnography. It is the representational value embedded within the practice of dance and thus the significance of moving bodies that has shifted the focus of social scientists to read, study and assess human behaviour with attention to dance. It is important to trace the evaluation of dance as a medium to study social and cultural activities as it will initiate future research and help deconstruct alternative representations constructed through the manifestations of individual case studies. To explore the evolving trend in the world of Mohiniyattam, a qualitative methodology was my preference because of its evolving nature which is not based on rigid beliefs that privilege hegemonic views of gender in attempt at being "objective," but rather it allows for deeper engagement with and my participants and the context of study; understanding is co-constructed according to the reality and knowledge "on the ground."

In terms of positionality the performative role oscillates between the dual identities of my etic and the emic position. As a result of being both an "insider" and an "outsider," at some points the dissertation is intensely personal and even when referring to and analyzing the research, the

narrative is often grounded in my personal interactions and reflections on the case studies. In this way, I expand the performativity of the research study, and its rubrics, with the interactive, socio-spatial discourse. The dialogic interdependence between the ethnographic research and secondary materials is mediated through interviews and video elicitation as well as participant observation and self-reflections; I utilized various ethnographic methods over different platforms (auto-ethnography, visual ethnography, Internet ethnography and arts-based research. I have attempted to justify the arguments through spoken words from the interviews and substantiated them with the written words in academia about the creation, preservation and performativity of cultural memory. The "acts of transfer" here are further enhanced by the choice of visual illustrations. "History and trajectories become visible through performance," and I make my way through their juxtapositions through "remapping" (Taylor, 2003, p. 278).

Because of the physical distance between the two geographic locations, interviews were mostly conducted through virtual meetings with the participants who are in India. Conducting online fieldwork presents a critical investigation of the ways in which representations of identities have shifted since the advent of digital communications and creative technologies. Critical studies have emerged pointing to the multifaceted nature of identity, with a number of different online resources that are archived and used in this study to explain how everyday people have a sense of themselves, their behaviors, desires, and representations through dancing. In the era of interactive, digital and networked media and communication, identity can be understood as even more complex, with digital users arguably playing a more extensive role in fashioning their own self-representations online, as well as making use of the capacity to co-create common and group

narratives of identity through interactivity and the proliferation of audio-visual, user-generated content online.

This makes accessible the complex representations of their artistic identity from the perspective of today's contemporary, digital media environment. This technological advancement helped me examine how digital media has added to the complexity of identity construction for male Mohiniyattam dancers. It takes readers through examples of online identity such as in interactive sites and social networking, and explores the implications of inter-cultural access that emerges from globalization and world-wide networking. Generating technological identities and observing and conversing with them within the virtual space perhaps will act as a guide to future researchers who intend to continue their ethnographic study under the current inaccessibility of the social and cultural environment as this becomes the “new normal” due to COVID-19.

The study of the historic evolution of the solo dance form of Mohiniyattam—performed by women in the state of Kerala—was supported with literary and ethno-historic evidence, gathered from the scholarly resources and auto-biographical inferences from dancers and teachers of Keralian dance forms, and this helped me trace the genre’s origin, developments and process of revival in the post-reconstruction period. As history recorded the specific malpractices convoluted the practice which made the revival and reconstruction process even more challenging compared to other contemporary reconstructive methods adopted by regional dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi or Odissi. This phenomenon has been studied and evaluated by reinstating the chronological time period of the *Devadasi* system, prevalent in the Indian Subcontinent from time immemorial.

The questions under consideration were: How has the commodification of the female body of *devadasis* creeped into the realm of auspiciousness of dance and dancers in temple premises, into the daily lives of the earthly consort of the temple deity. And why and how were these *devadasis* forced to become courtesans and even prostitutes in Moghul era? Due to foreign invasions, they were faced with a lack of financial support and royal patronage which became a primary reason for the change of their social status. Their degeneration from the respectable socio-economic status of *devadasis* to being social outcasts and prostitutes reflect the political instability and vulnerability of the society. Multiple foreign invasions, settlements and exploitation by colonial powers drained the uniqueness and distinction of the Indigenous traditions of the *devadasi* system. Within this bigger picture, Kerala is a southernmost state segregated by the hills; it is a secluded entity in history and was equally affected by these factors. Its reflections left a permanent imprint on the arts of the land.

To assess the process of any cultural production the relationship between the nation, race, class and gender need to be explored; the history and power dynamics are integral to the construction. In this context, dance scholar Pallabi Chakravorty asserts that “every cultural document contains within it a history of a contest of rulers and ruled, of leaders and led” (2001-2002, p.110). Thus, it is very important to understand the changing and altering positionality of the female performers from a historical perspective, in order to contextualize the female dominance in the dance industry. The decline of male dancers can be attributed to strong colonial influence and the “prudishness of Victorian gender ideologies” (Burt, 2007, p.13).

Indeed, these associated effeminacy with male dancers and saw it as a threat to patriarchal male dominance. Further, this attitude associated male dancers with homosexuality, a much later

by-product of the 20th century; this is a concern and stigma that men are struggling with, even today, in the 21st century. Accounting for this history allows the reader to situate the socio-cultural background to evaluate the current trend of emerging male Mohiniyattam dancers in the dance fraternity and understand how they are dancing to dissolve boundaries based on gender and sexuality.

The dissertation explored Mohiniyattam in the social and cultural context of Kerala, Kolkata and Toronto, and studied and observed the dominant characteristics that have contoured the genre over the years. Every practitioner is different from the core and so is the rendition of Mohiniyattam by a female or a male body. How can one argue and establish the Classical Dance form as an embodiment of femininity to be the sole criteria for embodying the form? Thus, my focus was on the process of "becoming" a Mohiniyattam dancer. As Ramsay Burt claims the "[r]epresentations of gender in the dance and theatre traditions of different parts of the world are each grounded in different, socially constructed ideas about the body" (2007, p.5).

Simon de Beauvoir's concept of the social construct of becoming woman and Judith Butler's performativity of gender and similar concept of becoming are the theoretical frameworks that were used to analyze the boundaries for different representations of genders in the Indian Classical Dance form. Male dancers often recount their experiences of quitting the dance form because of the social constructs that Butler assigns to gender performativity. And from within these frames, this dissertation is a study and confirmation of how the Mohiniyattam dance technique has the ability to project the human body as a site to generate, embody and become a visual representation of grace and *Lāsya*.

Further, this research addresses how the enforced concept of Mohiniyattam has the ability to transcend the popular understanding and strong association of the form either being an embodiment of enchantress or becoming the epitome of enchantment and luring sensuous *sringara bhava*. Thus, it showcases how Judith Butler's definition of becoming is strongly embedded in the concept of *ekahari abhinaya* which equates to "gender performativity" where, irrespective of being a physical woman or a man, the movements are executed with ease and beauty and the artist transcends the mundane limitations of the physical attributes of being a man or a woman. This posits the dancing body as a (performative) site and a space for the doing or undoing gender.

I have deliberately kept the discussion of costuming away from the study, as I assign it to the discretion of the dancer to choose between appropriating female attire to "become" a Mohiniyattam dancer or, to perform in male attire. My focus is on the making and "becoming" principle, in preparation of the body for the genre, and the focus of the mind—primarily the internal aspects of acquiring the skills to be a Mohiniyattam dancer. However, the society does not attach these principles to the individual bodies of the performers outside their performances, thus it assigns stereotypical ideologies and creates boundaries of entry and exit for the dancer.

The case studies in this research have taught me how to explore different avenues of a participant's socio-cultural background to generate a wealth of knowledge about the nuances and the real-world impact of traditional dance practices. In spite of stereotypical ideologies, the power play that arises from being a man or a woman affects the growth of an individual and their life in a conservative social setting—where social stigmas prevail. Nevertheless, my participant Rohit Tyagi superseded dominant pressures and is successful in reinforcing gender fluidity through the practice of Mohiniyattam. He has demonstrated the male maneuvering of Mohiniyattam through

gliding movements of the torso and gentle yet controlled gestures of his eyes and this has led to establishing power dynamics which are a confirmation of how gender binaries can be challenged. Appropriation, negation and transgression of hegemonic constructs does not make the male dancers effeminate or contradict the attitude of masculinity. They are, on the contrary, setting up their own rules and challenging the rigidity of hegemonic masculinity.

Another participant, Hari Vattappilli, is a male Mohiniyattam student who shifted away from the practice of dance, due to the hegemony and persuasion of the patriarchal social institutions that govern behavioral expectations for a boy, dictating ways of moving that appear "natural," "normal" and "appropriate for a man" in a Keralian society. Heterosexuality and homophobia led him to withdraw from the practice and performance of Mohiniyattam as a teenager. Now, at the age of fifty, he regrets his decision and attributes the fear of being related with the effeminate attitude of male dancers, as one of the primary reasons.

Within Keralian society, the practice and performance of Mohiniyattam provoked exclusivity, anxiety and a crisis within the social environment of my third participant Hari Vattappilli in the 1980s. But, after so many decades of the lived experiences of dancers like Vattappilli, male bodies are still under negotiation. Socially, the institutions of male dominance construct the gender ideologies and as a result not all men can practice Mohiniyattam easily. The connection between homosexuality and effeminacy in Indian society is undergoing an alteration, but as Edward Said would say, even though we have gained independence from colonial powers our thinking, talking and representation in terms of power and agency still sticks to us and is a residue of colonialization (1978).

Pedagogy and Spirituality

In terms of pedagogy, the study brings to attention that the mainstream dance tradition largely consists of female dominated repertoires in the dance schools of Mohiniyattam. This is a practice that is similar to the other Indian Classical Dance forms like Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kathak, and the male dancers in these respective genres have executed the female oriented dance items with extreme dexterity and grace. Participating members in this research showed keen interest in working with the resources available of an already existing structure and repertoire of Mohiniyattam, which for them is an important factor to enable them to do the practice that lay behind the development of the form, from past to present times.

"Dance is not an exclusively feminine activity, and most people would surely accept that the history of twentieth-century dance would have been poorer without the contribution of male dancers and choreographers" (Burt, 2007, p.4). Historical evidence in the West as well as in the East, makes me hopeful to see how future research and participation will create a broader spectrum for the male and female dancers alike in Mohiniyattam. This dissertation claims how the research participants have nullified the socio-cultural idea that "men don't dance" which is not far from the thought that "'real' men don't dance" and that "there must be something wrong with those who do" (Burt, 2007, p.85). "The idea that we live at the moment when a traditional male sex role is shifting is as drastically inadequate as the idea that a true, natural masculinity is now being recovered… [so] this global institutions and relationships requires a very different perspective" claims Connell (2002, p.255).

Without knowing which path this research study was going to take at the beginning, the attempt was to provide a picture of inclusivity as well as stories of "adjustments" within the socio-

cultural environment. The dissertation was made with an intention to present multiple shades of the experience of male dancers based in Toronto and Kolkata, pursuing Mohiniyattam. It is not to provide an answer to an age-old stigmatizing question of "why men should dance," but rather to establish a critical discourse within the genre to showcase the possibilities of gender binaries within the self-acclaimed statement of femininity in Mohiniyattam.

The attempt is to bring forward the view that men are dancing with grace and the self-controlled movements of *andolika* to redefine the possibilities underlying the traditional disciplinary form of Mohiniyattam. Should it be an analysis of exclusively male participation in *Mohiniyattam*? Or should it be an analysis of patriarchy- an institution that affects the inclusivity of men and women simultaneously in practice of *Mohiniyattam*? The thin line of demarcation between aesthetics and vulgarity in the presentation of Mohiniyattam by male dancers, in female attire or male attire, acts to question assumptions and show a fraternity of dancers where dancers are confronting and contrasting the role of sexed body and redefining masculinity.

Future Endeavours

Embodying the smooth and curvy movements of Mohiniyattam, executed through the control of the torso with sequential rising of the arms and sinking of the knees, has a sense of satisfaction to the mechanism. The unison achieved through the controlled yet smooth turns, reaching out sideways with rounded movements in gentle, yet heavy symmetrical motions, leads to a state of enchantment and generates a sense of relief as it becomes a vent for stress relief in a dancer. The continuous ebb and flow motion generated with circular sustained patterns of

movements involve a sense of continuity, generating an alteration between the sense of rushing and the repetitions, and this leaves you with a calming sensibility.

I look forward to future collaborative, interdisciplinary research to study the therapeutic effects that the practice of Mohiniyattam can have. Because it is a slow spaced, well-grounded form with spatial intent and in constant connection to the core and the center of the body, it can be used as a training medium to rehabilitate patients suffering from cognitive disabilities. Although I am not a trained physiotherapist, as a social researcher I could initiate research on the possibilities of using Mohiniyattam movement vocabulary in dance therapy and explore its impact on the human body and mind. This approach can generate new avenues for art-based research, while building from and directly leading to further understandings of human social interaction in relation to interactions with gender, culture, socio-economic status and the environment at large. During an era of increasing mental health issues in the society, dance can complement the research efforts of future investigators.

There is a growing sense of inclusivity among male choreographers to indulge in the deconstruction of movements from Indian Classical Dance forms to create new interpretations of the artistic gestures. Male dancers and choreographers in Bengal have nurtured and practiced a free flowing, self-created style of dance with the appropriation of various Indian Classical Dance vocabularies which have travelled to Bengal since the early 1900s. Travelling from southern India, various dance styles came to Bengal and these teachers settled and made Bengal their home. They shared their skills and techniques with locals which was very well received. Because Bengal didn't have a specific dance tradition unlike states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu or Orissa, Bengalis were highly receptive of various dance forms that thrived simultaneously in the state. This too can be

studied and researched as a future project to trace the course of development in the evolution of neo-classical dance forms in Bengal.

In his book *New Directions in the Indian Dance* records, dance critic and eminent scholar Sunil Kothari examines and celebrates, for the first time, exciting works that have strong influences and inspiration of traditional training in the various Indian Classical Dance forms of Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Manipuri, coupled with folk traditions from different parts of India (2003). Practitioners use the terms “contemporary” or “modern dance” to differentiate their efforts from the classical tradition. In this book, Kapila Vatsyayan reiterates the difficulty of attempting to "chalk out" any "linear graph" concerning developments, emphasizing that classical and contemporary are not mutually exclusive, and experimentation occurs across the board. According to Vatsyayan, what is lacking is a critical discourse within the Indian context which matches "the proliferation and eclecticism in performance" (2003, p.31). This leaves room for future research incorporating the trajectories and creating a historical analysis to trace the development of this neoclassical form—or as the practitioners call it—the “creative” or the “modern” style of dances in Bengal.

To conclude, the thematic structure of this research is a heterogeneous set of questions that are being asked, while not creating demarcations between “gay masculinity,” “white masculinity” and the “regional masculinity” of Keralian and Bengali men. This dissertation provides examples of how performance and performativity contain and reveal colonial histories, transfer traumatic memories and mobilize cultural identities across human bodies through centuries, in the local as well as global context. We know of choreographers questioning such stereotypical concepts in the post-colonial era, with the migration and relocation of practitioners from India, Pakistan,

Bangladesh to Europe, England and North America. Within the cultural environment of India, where *Nataraja*, the Lord of Dance is worshipped and the theory of cross dressing goes back to the puranic mythologies of *Maha Vishnu* adopting the female form of *Mohini*, how long can male dancers be stigmatized. Venkataraman, a dance critic from South India on similar thoughts claims in her article titled 'Men Break Gender Barrier in Bharatanatyam' published in the newspaper Asian Age that:

> Gender bias is a perception emerging from conditioned minds due to historical and cultural reasons. Having watched innumerable male dancers and observed the way the male body is able to adjust to the '*araimandi*' (demi plie), central stylistic concern of Bharatanatyam and how strong hand and leg stretches bring out the clean geometry of lines in this form, I have always felt that the male body is made to adapt to the demands of the dance technique more easily. While the male role sits somewhat uneasily on the female torso (unless completely hidden from view and covered as in the Kathakali *Stree Vesham*), the more neutral male body lends itself to both male and female roles. The interpretative part is a matter of individual skill irrespective of gender (2019).

This study have dealt with the pertinent questions: why are male dancers excluded from Mohiniyattam? *And* why have there been no prominent male *Mohiniyattam* performers? It suggested how, it was impossible for men to achieve artistic excellence in Mohiniyattam, institutionally. In spite of being a minority group of achievers, the research participants in this study use this as a vantage point to keep up with their determination. Though, it is never without fear, pain and scrutiny that we live in silence, all the time that the power of the pen is significant and can establish a new perspective. And where the cries of the artistic men cannot be heard, we

must each of us seek those words out, to read them, to learn from their challenges and examine the pertinence to our lives and arts. We have been socialized to fear more than our need to voice our thoughts. But the fact that I can speak these words, in an attempt to break the silence and bridge some of the distance society has created between the space shared by Mohiniyattam dancers, mobilizes us and hence so many silences have been broken.

The dissertation is a study of male dancers with the dual objective of altering the skeptical attitude towards male dancers in Mohiniyattam, and also improving the position of women dancers whose bodies have been assigned a disrespectful status and been commodified and objectified in the world of dance. It is to claim that the physiological differences of male bodies have never been celebrated as a glorious representation of Mohiniyattam embodiment.

Indeed, since the 1930s, the time of reconstruction of Mohiniyattam, female bodies have dominated the genre. The scholarship engaged with in this study mentions only a couple of names of *nattuvanars* and *gurus* who initiated Mohiniyattam lessons in Kerala Kalamandalam. Training was never allowed for male students on the premises of the deemed university, even after the genre claimed the status of being a Classical Dance form around the 1960s. Though male dancers were negligible in numbers, Mohiniyattam teachers nurtured their intense urge to learn and embody the form outside the institute premises. Impartiality to the male embodiment happened again during the 1990s when the participation of male dancers in Mohiniyattam was banned in Kerala. Reasoning against the perceived vulgarity and misinterpretation of some, deprived possibilities for other students who eventually shifted away to other dance forms to vent their urge to embody the components of *Lāsya* (a quality of movements).

But since those days struggle, to be a part of the genre and fill the void, the male dancing body has continued. By the 1990s there was a growing presence of male Mohiniyattam scholars, teachers and dancers within the dance fraternity. It is from this emerging trend that this scholarly study has mapped the personal histories of male dancers, simultaneously interrogating the gender binaries and norms in order to celebrate the embodiment of Mohiniyattam. Thus, as we will see, the void of male bodies in Mohiniyattam will be filled; and the presence of male dancers beside their female counterparts will be w for a visual treat for audiences, as the varying aspects of being male and female maneuvering of the form, will enrich the presentation all together.

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Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1. *Aramandalam* position in Mohiniyattam

(p.c. personal archive)

Figure 2. Rohit Tyagi with female peers on stage

(p.c. Harikishan S. Nair)

Figure 3.Rohit Tyagi in practice session

(p.c. Rohit Tyagi)

Figure 4.Hari Vattappilli with researcher in "*Kavyanjali"*

(p.c. personal archive)

Figure 5.Ramyani Roy in make-up room before Kathakali performance

(p.c. Ramyani Roy)

Figure 6.Thankamani Kutty performing Mohiniyattam in 1960

(p.c. downloaded from Google)

Figure 7.Male dancer from Kerala in female attire of Mohiniyattam

(p.c. Downloaded from Soorya Singapore Dance Festival, 2017)

Figure 8.Mohiniyattam exponent Jolly Mathew in male attire

(p.c. Downloaded from Facebook)

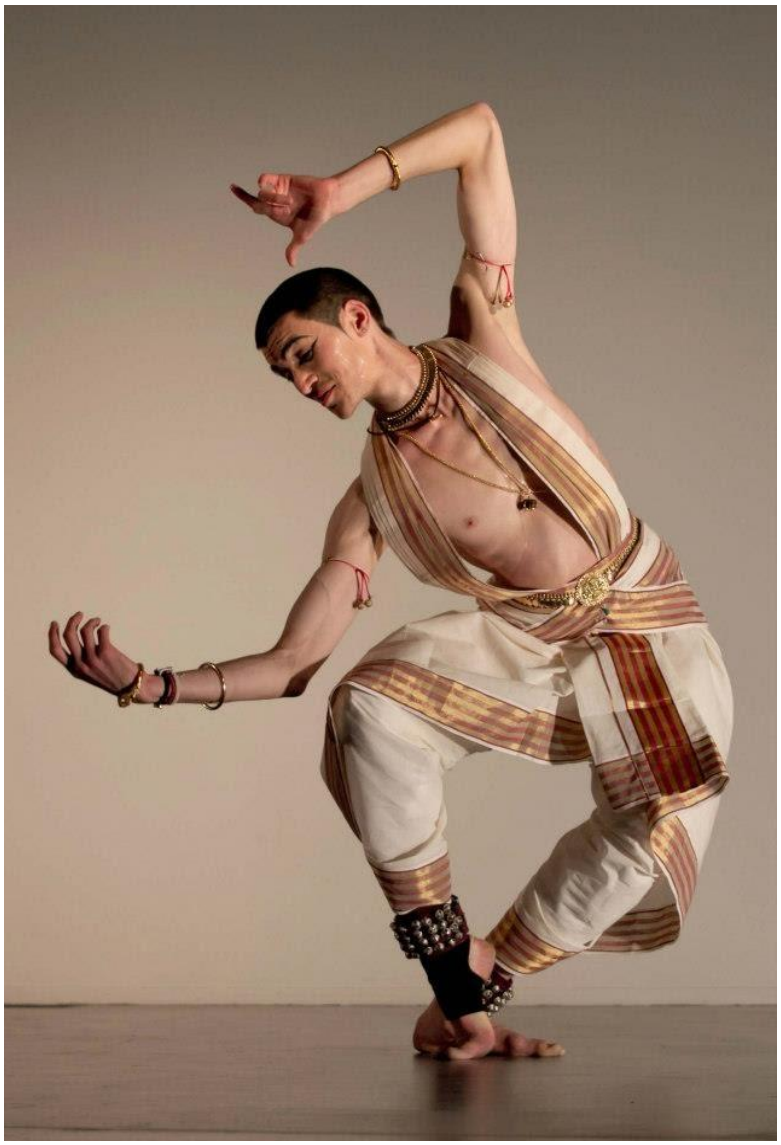

Figure 9. Thomas Sanga Vo Van Tao, Mohiniyattam exponent

(p.c. Downloaded from Google)

Figure 10.RLV Ramakrishna who attempted to commit suicide in Kerala

(p.c. Downloaded from Google)

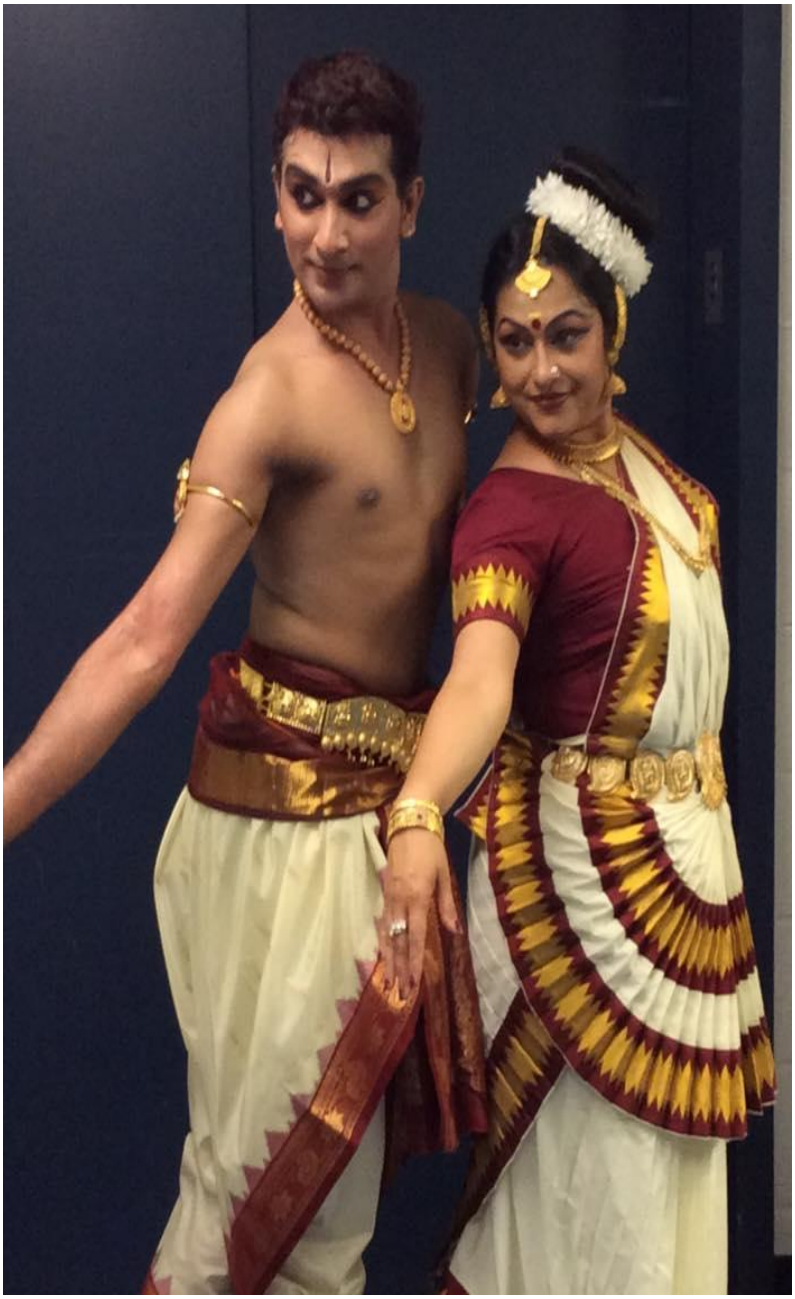

Figure 11.Researcher with Harikishan S. Nair in "Swaha"

(p.c. personal archive)

Figure 12.Rabindranath Tagore amidst dancers during a performance

(p.c. Downloaded from Google)

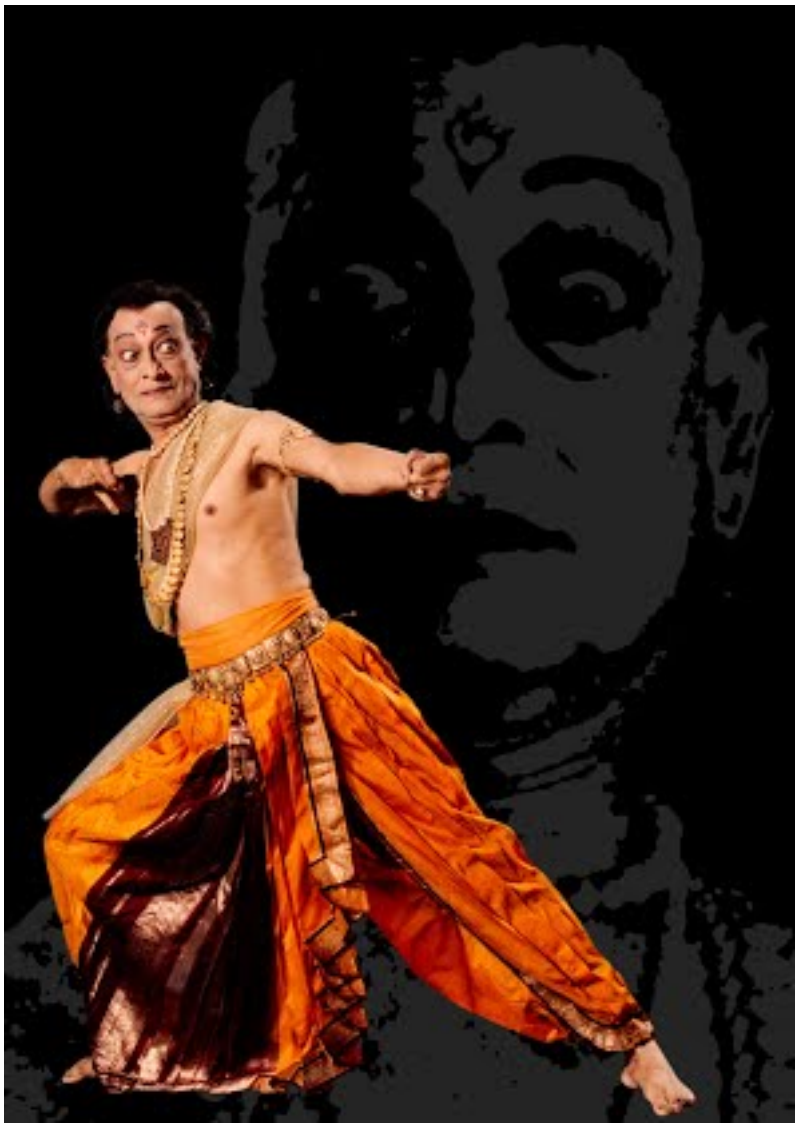

Figure 13.Kalamandalam P. Govindan Kutty as Arjun in Tagore's *Chitrangada*

(P.c. Downloaded from Google)

Figure 14.Kaushik Chakraborty performing Kathakali dance technique

(P.c. Downloaded from Facebook)

Figure 15.Kaushik with researcher in Tagore's *"Karno Kunti Sambad"*

(P.c. Personal archive)

Figure 16.Kaushik Chakraborty with researcher in Tagore's *"Biday Abhishap"*

(P.c. Personal archive)

আজকাল

কলকাতা ১৯ আষাঢ় ১৪০৮ বুধবার ৪ জুলাই ২০০১ শহর সংস্করণ ২.৫০ টাকা

সংস্কৃতি

রবীন্দ্রকাব্যের আধারে কথাকলি ভরতনাট্যম

সুতপা সেন: মহিষাসুরমর্দিনী করে ইতিমধ্যেই যথেষ্ট খ্যাতি পেয়েছেন ভরতনাট্যম শিল্পী সংযুক্তা বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়। সম্প্রতি নিজের সংস্থা 'সৌপর্ণিকম'-এর উদ্যোগে জনমঞ্চে আবার দুর্গাবেশে হাজির হয়ে দর্শকদের মুগ্ধ করলেন তিনি। স্তোত্রপাঠ, গান, ভাষ্যসহ বর্ণোজ্জ্বল এই নৃত্যাংশে দুর্গাস্তবে সংযুক্তার পরিবেশনে ছিল ভরতনাট্যম, মহিষাসুরের ভূমিকায় সৌপিক চক্রবর্তীর পরিবেশনে ছিল কথাকলি। পোশাক ছিল চরিত্রানুযায়ী। এই নৃত্যাংশে সংযুক্তা এবং সৌপিকের পরিবেশন মুগ্ধ করেছে দর্শকদের। আঙ্গিকের প্রতি নিষ্ঠ থেকেও পুরাণের এই বহু প্রচলিত আখ্যানকে তুলে এনেছেন দুই শিল্পী। বীররসের অভিনয়ে, ভরতনাট্যম ও কথাকলির মুদ্রায় দুই শিল্পীই ছিলেন সফল। তবে এদিন সংযুক্তা ও সৌপিকের সেরা নিবেদন ছিল রবীন্দ্রনাথের কাব্যনৃত্যনাট্য 'বিদায় অভিশাপ'। কচ ও দেবযানীর এই বিখ্যাত রবীন্দ্র আখ্যান শ্রোতাদের কাছে বহু পরিচিত। কিন্তু কোনও গানের প্রয়োগ ছাড়া, শুধু এই কাব্যকে আধার করে 'বিদায় অভিশাপ' পরিবেশন করে 'সৌপর্ণিকম' অবশ্যই নিজেদের পরিচয় উজ্জ্বল করেছে। সচরাচর উচ্চাঙ্গনৃত্য ছাড়া অন্যান্য নাচের ক্ষেত্রে গান ব্যবহার করা হয়। সেই সহজ পথ না ধরার জন্যে এঁরা সাধুবাদ পাবেন। ভাষ্যে সুকুমার ঘোষ এবং অলকানন্দা বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায় স্পষ্ট করেছেন রবীন্দ্রকবিতার কথা, কাহিনী ও ভাবকে। আবহ বলতে ছিল শুধু সিন্থেসাইজার, সেখানে সুব্রত মুখোপাধ্যায় সারাক্ষণই সফল। নৃত্যাংশে কচের ভূমিকায় সৌপিক এবং দেবযানীর ভূমিকায় সংযুক্তা চোখ এবং মন ভরিয়েছেন দর্শকদের। এখানেও ভরতনাট্যম ও কথাকলি ছিল সংযুক্তা ও সৌপিকের মাধ্যম। দুর্গা ও মহিষাসুরের বীররসকে মুছে এখানে কচ ও দেবযানীর প্রেম ও বিরহকে সুন্দরভাবে মূর্ত করেছেন দুই শিল্পী। আশা করা যায়, রবীন্দ্র-পরবর্তী কবিতাও নৃত্যাঙ্গে মূর্ত করে তোলার পরীক্ষায় থাকবেন সংযুক্তা। এদিন অনুষ্ঠানের প্রথম পর্বে আশ নেন সংস্থার ছাত্রছাত্রীরা। দীপা আর কৃষ্ণার কম্পোজিশনে ছিল মুনশিয়ানা। আরহে রাগতালঋদ্ধী দশাওতার 'বিশ্বরূপীস্তবে', সঙ্গে অভিতশ্রী বসুর নাচে সম্ভাবনার ছাপ স্পষ্ট। তোড়িয়া মঙ্গলমে শুভা জানা প্রশংসনীয়। কৃষ্ণস্তুতিতে অমৃতা বসুও আশা জাগিয়েছেন। সৌপর্ণিকম আরও সুগন্ধ বিতরণের প্রতিশ্রুতি রাখল এই সন্ধ্যায়।

Figure 17.Excerpt from *Aajkal* Newspaper

(P.c. Personal archive)

Figure 18.Kohinoor Sen Barat in creative style of dance

(p.c. Downloaded from Facebook)

Appendix B: YouTube Links

Ajitha Hare, Mohiniyattam Padam By Mohiniyattam Male Dancer Vishnu Babu, (2020). YouTube video, added by Nrith Yog.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CViZJ2aSsbA>
(Accessed on 3rd January 2021)

Anna Pavlova & Uday Shankar heritage Project, (2018) YouTube video, added by SoCha Abundant Art Gallery. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iIboLXIpOL8>
(Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Asthamatrika (2018) YouTube video, added by Tuhin Chatterjee.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtIEzS6jRUI>
(Accessed on 3rd January 2021)

Devi Mahatto (2018) YouTube video, added by Shinjan Institute of Bharatanatyam and Creative Dance. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wf0b4fik_c>
(Accessed on 3rd January 2021).

Dr RLV Ramakrishnan @ Thrippeppilly temple Chalakudy (2019) YouTube video, added by Rajeev Aravind. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgslAL0g9mM>
(Accessed on 3rd January 2021).

Dr RLV Ramakrishnan speaks on the male legacy in Mohiniyattam as part of the talk series (2020) YouTube video, added by by Moham. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtMT4j3Ugb0>
(Accessed on 3rd January 2021).

Dr. Thankamani Kutty's Interview, (2017) YouTube video, added by Kalacal1. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lO_fcoCGvwY>
(Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Geetopadesham (2018) YouTube video, added by Ashish Kumar Dutta.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QQl4GfdwYs>
(Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Guru Gobindan Kutty, (2019) YouTube video, added by Niladri Lahiri.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0c_fUjfTvs>
(Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Kalpana -Daybreak Dance, (2018) YouTube video, added by Tommydan333
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E0j1IvlwTNo>

(Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Kalpana – Dance, (2018) YouTube video, added by Tommydan333.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr Bpx7MaUhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr4-Bpx7MaU>
(Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Kalpana - Kathakali Inspirations, (2018) YouTube video, added by Tommydan333.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjuJsnk3PDY>
(Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Karno Kunti Sambad (2016), YouTube video, added by Sanjukta Banerjee.
Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gz-1Wm5_vQM
(Accessed on 3rd January 2021).

Mohiniyattam Through the Ages (2013) , YouTube video, added by Films Division.
Available at :<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZU2XsHKWdo>
(Accessed 27th November 2020).

Mor Beena, (2018), YouTube video, added by Kaushik Chakraborty.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bgc_4egeJ4>
(Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Pt. Chitresh Das on Kathak and Kathakali, (2010) YouTube video, added by Cchandam,
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cB8WnRQB8Eg>
(Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Pt. Ravi Shankar cherishes Pt. Uday Shankar (2010) YouTube video, added by Sobers Chatterjee. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7GceqHJsUc>
(Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Ranar (2020) YouTube video, added by Kohinoor Sen Barat.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bhbwMJ20RTg>
(Accessed on 3rd January 2021).

Ravan (2018) YouTube video, added by Shinjan Institute of Bharatanatyam and Creative Dance.Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvLT1NwHde8>
(Accessed on 3rd January 2021).

Shiv Darshan (2015) YouTube video, added by Swami OHM Himanshu Sri Divinesourcemmvv. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N--w3D1MmJ4>
(Accessed on 3rd January 2021).

Shyama (2016), YouTube video, added by Sanjukta Banerjee.
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odQKvz6P6-I>
(Accessed on 3rd January 2021).

Talk by Dr Kavya Krishna on Mohiniyattam from a Gender Studies perspective (2011), YouTube video added by Mythili, Moham. Available at :<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WG36gXARoqI> (Accessed 14th December 2020).

The Thinking Body (2017), YouTube video, added by Films Division of India. Available at :https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRCFexbNfvE (Accessed 17th March 2017).

Uday Shankar interviewed by Sombhu Mitra in English (2014) YouTube video, added by Abhimonyu Deb. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHq-uBio5vE (Accessed 3rd January 2021).

Appendix C: List of interviews of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali teachers and dancers

Bhattacharya, Arkadev……..…….…….(personal interview, 16th March 2020)

Chakraborty, Kaushik ……..…….....(online interview,13th February 2019)

..…….....(personal interview, 13thMarch 2020)

Gupta, Prabal …….…….……..……(Email 18th March 2019)

Ghosh, Priyadarshini …….…….....(online interview, 17th March 2020)

Kutty, Kalamandalam Thankamani …….……..…...….(personal interview,13th March 2020)

Nair, Harikishan. S….....(Email 27th March 2019)

…….…….....(personal interview, 9th December 2019)

Roy, Ramyani ……..…(personal interview, 15th March 2020)

Sarkar, Proloy……..(personal interview, 15th January 2021)

Siddharth, Kalamandalam …….……(Email 2nd April 2019)

……..(personal interview, 5th September 2018)

Sen Barat, Kohinoor ……..……...(personal online interview, 21st May 2019)

Vattappilli, Hari …….……..(personal interview, 16th February 2020)

Venkit, Kalamandalam V.R……...……...(personal interview, 11th March 2020)

Vo Van Tao, Sanga…….……..……..(Facebook Messenger, 17th January 2019)

Appendix D: List of interviews of Mohiniyattam and Kathakali of students

Baadkar, Nidhi ……...…(personal interview, 16th February 2020)

Chakraborty, Parikshit ……(personal interview, 16th March 2020)

Chanda, Raktim ……...…….(Email 25th March 2020)

Chowdhury, Biswanath ……...…(personal interview, 16th March 2020)

Das, Jeet ……..……(personal interview, 16th March 2020)

Debnath, Snehasish …….……(personal interview, 16th March 2020)

Devam, Shubatha ……...…...(Email 9th May 2020)

Dutta, Sourav ……..……(personal interview, 16th March 2020)

Ghosh, Indrani ……..……(Email, 3rd January 2021)

Kumar, Suhitha …….(Email 26th April 2020)

Shahel, Alif ……...…….(personal interview, 16th February 2020)

Tyagi, Rohit ……....(personal interview, 16th February 2020);(email 9th May 2020)

Appendix E: Questionnaires for Male Mohiniyattam Dancers and Students

Q1. What made you join dance lessons and not any other athletic subject like soccer, basketball, cricket or karate?

Q2. Did you join the dance class with the consent of your parents? How supportive was your parents and family members in your decision to pursue dance as a profession later in life?

Q3. Did you ever face questions from family and loved ones that why are you doing a feministic dance form adapting the feminine body attitude ? What justifications do you have to continue with the practice?

Q4. What was your first experience of dance class like? Who do you think is your role model in dance ? Why?

Q5. What kind of students do you think are interested to pursue and learn dance and especially-Mohiniyattam? Do you think it has a connection to any specific criteria like- gender, race, sex, culture?

Q6. We do not see a lot of men on stage in Mohiniyattam- I always wonder, why?-Is this something that you have also noticed or ever thought about?

Q7. What is instrumental for you in opting to learn a female dominated dance form, when you can get training in other masculine dance styles? Is there anything specific about watching or embodying Mohiniyattam that makes you feel empowered ? How is it a

stress reliever, does it bring mental satisfaction and a sense of fulfilment in embodying the artform? Can you please share your thoughts, feelings and experiences?

Q8. Did you face any kind of challenge in learning a feministic dance, from institutions, teachers with female dominated peer group?

Q9. As a person which option do you prefer-pedagogy and repertoire to suit your physicality or to adhere to the traditional format?

Q10. What do you prefer in regard to *Aharyam* (costume/make-up) – is it important to adopt the *stree vesham* (female attire of Mohiniyattam) to portray the dance form? If not , then what is your justification to perform in male attire?

Q11. Embodying the *lāsya* quality of movements in Mohiniyattam- What are your impressions as a man from the sexual as well as biological point of view? What is the most challenging aspect of the dance form: *Angikam* (External body movements) or *Swatvikam* (inner feelings)?

Q12.How do people react to male Mohiniyattam dancers in the society – as drag, gay or effeminate? How do you handle the societal stigma to continue with your practice?

Q13. How do you think male embodiment of Mohiniyattam can influence the audience gaze?

Q14. Can aesthetic and critical appreciation be affected by the current trend of increasing number of male Mohiniyattam dancers?

Q15. Can you sustain on dance and get economic support? If dance profession is unable to provide for your living and family income, how do you manage to maintain two jobs at a time -of being a bread earner and a dancer? How do you manage time for your dance practice? Shuttling between these two roles what gives you the strength and energy to continue

Q16. Do you have any future plans with the persuasion of the dance form or you think you might quit due to economic pressures?

Q 17. Do you think social taboo can thwart the ambitions of the male participants in Mohiniyattam?

Q18. What role can you play in spreading and nurturing the dance form? What will be your contribution to encourage more male dancers to traverse the path that made you feel empowered?

Appendix F: Questionnaires for Female Mohiniyattam Students

Q1. When did you join the dance lessons and why?

Q2. How was your decision to take dance as your profession perceived by the family ?

Q3. Did you ever face any challenge from peers and other social groups to learn and pursue dance ?

Q4. How do you perceive of male participation in Mohiniyattam?

Q5. How would you describe your experience of sharing space with the male students in your Mohiniyattam training sessions and later on stage?

Q6. How do you think male maneuvering of Mohiniyattam movements will impact your pre-conceived visualization of Mohiniyattam?

Q7. What is your experience of Mohiniyattam in terms of reconstruction of the female dominated dance form where there has been the void of male bodies?

Q8. How does the male body-physical aspect of being a man, problematize the stereotypical myth of Mohini from the *Aharyam* and the *Swatvikam* perspective?

Q9. Do you want the men to take female attire or do you want them in male attire to perform Mohiniyattam?

Q10. In Mohiniyattam rarely male-female partnerships are choreographed. If you get an opportunity to choreograph, how would you organise your conceptualization and choreographing?

Appendix G: Questionnaires for Mohiniyattam Teachers

Q1. How often are you approached by male students to learn Mohiniyattam?

Q2. What is your opinion of male dancers who are adopting the female attire to perform Mohiniyattam? Is it required or do you leave it to the choice of the dancer -to be a woman or to be not?

Q3. How would you enlarge the scope of the repertoire which is concentrating on the female body and mind?

Q4. In Mohiniyattam there is a distinct void of male body in the repertoire- do you feel it is the current trend of increasing number of male dancers that the classical dance form will get to experience the male manoeuvring of the form? Will it enrich the style? If so – then how?

Q5. Is there a power division in creation of art forms in Kerala based on gender?

Q6. Do you think the matriarchal social setup had its reflection in the dominance of a female body in the reconstructed Mohiniyattam, as a self-imposed feminity of Malayalee woman?

Glossary

- *Adavus*: The technical dance steps in south Indian Classical dance forms.
- *Agni Purana:* Ancient text celebrating God of Fire (*Agni*).
- *Aharyam:* One of the four components of Abhinaya or expressional dance. means representation through costumes, jewellery and make-up that a dancer uses to describe the external and visual dramatic interpretation.
- *Ammachi and Ammaveedu:* Women who remained single throughout their lives and were free to establish morganatic relationship with the royalty. They had children out of wedlocks, enjoyed a luxurious life, enjoyed social status. They were considered as consorts of Kings but were denied any royal status.
- *Amma Veedukal:* The house of the *Ammachis,* were also called as mother's home.
- *Andar Mahal:* Interior sections of the house was the primary abode of women where the young girls were trained for their future roles of being an ideal wife, and mother, and accept the head of the family, the man of the house.
- *Andolika:* The oscillating movement, the continuous flow of energy emanating from the center of the body of the dancer, used extensively in Mohiniyattam.
- *Aṅgahāra:* These are movements of major and minor limbs by combining a few *karaṇas* which are dancing postures in the oldest dramaturgical text of *Nāṭyaśāstra*.
- *Āṅgika Abhinaya:* One of the four components of *Abhinaya* or expressional dance. It means the actions executed through the body of the dancer.
- *Ananga Dev:* One without a body- (*An* meaning without and *anga* meaning body). He is also referred as *Kamadeva* or *Madana* is the Hindu God of love.

- *Aphans:* The younger brothers in matrilineal families of Kerala.
- *Arabhati Vritti:* Technique of warfare and martial arts as described in *Nāṭyaśāstra.*
- *Aramandala/araimandi:* The half-squatting position used in Bharatanatyam and Mohiniyattam.
- *Ati bhanga:* The gentle sway of the upper body from one side to another with grace and control as used in Mohiniyattam. The movement is thought to have been inspired by the swaying palm trees of Kerala.
- *Ati mandala:* Deep plie.
- A*san*: The Malayali word meaning teacher or a guide.
- *Bhadralok:* Gentleman in Bengali.
- *Bhadro Mohila:* Concept of a gentle woman in Bengali.
- *Bhagawata Mela:* Folk tradition of Tamil Nadu, is a dance-drama form of performance.
- *Bhavas:* Emotions and expressions.
- *Bhakti sringara:* Divine love and absorption of mind in the thoughts of *Maha Vishnu*.
- *Bhargava:* See *Parashuram.*
- *Brahmanda Purana:* One of the oldest *Purana* is a blend of many schools of Hindu philosophy.
- *Brahmin:* One of the categories in Hindu caste system. Generally their profession is priesthood and teachers in Hindu society.
- *Devadasis:* They were the hereditary dancers ranging from Devadasi to *Tawaif, Baiji* along with other temple workers and courtesans. (For further information see Soneji 2012, p.30).
- *Dasiyattam:* The dance performed by the *Devadasis* in the temple premises.
- *Devi:* Way to address any Goddess of Hindu pantheon.

- *Ekaharya or Ekaprayojya:* A single dancer enacts multiple characters as a mode of presentation.
- *Ekartha:* This is a continuous theme in dance presentation which interlinks one dance number with the other.
- *Etic and emic:* Terms meaning Insider and outsider in a society used in ethnographic research methods.
- *Gita:* The song used in dancing.
- *Gandharva :* The celestial singers and dancers, both male and female in Hinduism.
- *Ganesh:* Elephant-headed God worshiped in Hindu religion.
- *Ganesh Purana:* Ancient text glorifying Lord *Ganesha* of Hinduism.
- *Ghoshayathra:* A text written by Keralian poet, satirist and performer Kunjun Nambiar (1705-1770). He is credited for creating the form of Ottanthullal.
- *Hastas:* Hand gestures used in Indian Classical dance for technical dance as well as in expressional dance to narrate story and convey meanings. This is a tool for visual communication used by the dancer which has been intricately described in *Nāṭyaśāstra.*
- *Hasta mudra abhinaya :* Expressional dance by implementing hand gestures
- *Kama Sutra*: Vatsyayana's ancient text *Kama Sutra* is considered the foremost work on erotica and is believed to have been compiled "around the fourth century during the reign of the Gupta kings."
- *Kalaripayattu:* Martial artform designed for battlefield believed to have originated in the state of Kerala.
- *Kalidasa:* An ancient Sanskrit poet (4^{th}-5^{th} century CE). Major works include-*Meghadūta*, *Kumarāsambhava* and *Malavikagnimitra.*

- *Karanavan, the oldest male member in the Keralian matrilineal family system*
- *Kaisiki Vritti:* This is one among the four categories of *Vritti.* Beauty and grace are the characteristic features of this performance.
- *Kasavu:* Traditional Keralian wear which is golden colour border on white cotton cloth used by both men and women.
- *Karaṇas:* Coordinated dance movements executed by the major and minor limbs.
- *Kathasaritsagara:* This is a collection of Indian stories fairy tales, legends and folklores.
- *Krishna:* Eighth incarnation of *Maha Vishnu* in Hinduism.
- *Krithis:* It means creation. This is a format of musical composition in Carnatic tradition of music.
- *Klibatva :* The essence of hermaphroditism.
- *Kummi:* A folk dance performed only by women, in the state of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.
- *Kaikottikali:* A folk dance tradition performed exclusively by women in Kerala during festivals.
- *Lāsya:* Defined by Rele as delicate dance (Rele, 1992).
- *Lasyanga:* Bharata Muni uses the word lāsya in the context of *lasyanga*-s which are fully interpretative, and where the heroine who is in love expresses her state of mind and emotions. It was however not restricted by gendered denominations in *Nāṭyaśāstra*. They are twelve types mentioned in the text.
- *Lalit angahara :* Bharata Muni defines it as graceful, soft, delicate quality of movements.
- *Lalitlaya:* This is gentle and slow speed or tempo.
- *Madhura:* It means beautiful.

- *Maha Vishnu, Sri Padmanabham:* The Hindu deity worshipped in the *Padmanabhamswamy* temple located in Thiruvananthapuram in the state capital of Kerala.
- *Maharaja:* The great king.
- *Malavikagnimitra*: A Sanskrit play written by poet Kalidasa. It has an extensive exposition on music and acting.
- *Malayali:* The local residents of Kerala are addressed as *Malayali.* They a mixed ethnic group who speak the language *Malayalam.*
- *Marumakkathayam:* The matrilineal system of family in ancient Kerala.
- *Maya:* In Sanskrit it means illusion.
- *Mohanam:* The term means to entice or lure in Sanskrit.
- *Mohini :* The beautiful female form of Maha Vishnu, ultimate form of beauty who is known to have beguiled and tricked the demons to save and protect humanity.
- *Mundu:* A piece of cloth wrapped around the waist by men in South Indian states.
- *Nangiars*: They are the dancing girls, *devadasi* of Chokkur Temple)
- *Nangyarkuttu:* A traditional theatre art form of Kerala. It is allied to art of Kudiyattam, a Sanskrit drama tradition adhering to the ideals of *Nāṭyaśāstra*
- *Nambudris:* They are the Malayali Brahmin caste.
- *Nambudri hegemony:* The influence of their value system, material possession reflected in the marriage system and law of inheritance in ancient Kerala.
- *Naritva:* the essence of femininity
- *Nataraja:* Lord *Shiva* is addressed as Nataraja, meaning King(Raja) of dancers(Nata)
- *Nati or Nayika:* The solitary heroine or a solo female actor.
- *Nāṭya:* Theatrical components in Indian classical dance.

- *Nāṭyaśāstra:* The ancient dramaturgical text written by Bharatamuni which have been written not later than the 2nd Century A.D.
- *Nattuvanars*: One who teaches and conducts dancing.
- *Nartaki:* A solo female dancer.
- *Nayar:* Nayar also known as Nair are a specific caste living in Kerala. They are Hindus by religion who followed matrilineal family system with female as the heir to the family property.
- *Nritta:* Technical dance devoid of any story telling or narrative.
- *Nitya Sumangali:* In *devadasi* tradition when a girl is married to the deity, she never turns into a widow because she has a divine husband, she remains ever auspicious.
- *Padmanabham:* In Sanskrit *Padma* means lotus flower and *nabham* means belly button. Lord *Vishnu* is also addressed as *Padmanabham,* one who happens to have a lotus originating from his belly button.
- *Parvathi:* Consort of Lord Shiva, also called by Uma, Sati, Shakti. In Sanskrit the word means daughter of the mountains.
- *Parashurama:* Sixth incarnation of *Maha Vishnu* in Hinduism, also known as *Bhargava.*
- *Pandit:* A teacher and an authority of a specific subject.
- *Panthadi:* In Mohiniyattam a dance piece based on a metaphorical ball game which compares the bouncing ball to the changing shades of life
- *Prakriti:* The feminine elements of Nature.
- *Prthagartha :* Bharata muni defines this as an individual dance presentation which can stand separately as an independent dance number, as of reminiscent of today's Bharatanatyam or Mohiniyattam items like Varnam or Thillana.

- *Purdah:* Curtain, a traditional practice in Islam to safeguard, hide their women from outsiders.
- *Purana:* The term means ancient or old in Sanskrit.
- *Purusatva:* The essence of masculinity
- *Purush:* The masculine elements of Nature.
- *Purvaranga : The stage preliminaries before the commencement of a performance.*
- *Rabindrik Nritya*: A new style of dance envisioned by Rabindranath Tagore and used in choreographing Tagorean music and dance-dramas.
- *Rabindro Sangeet:* Music and songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore in Bengali language.
- *Rajatarangini:* Chronicles of the Kings of Kashmir, composed by the poet Kalidasa.
- *Rasa:* The emotions evoked in response to *Bhava* or expressions in dance.
- *Rasikas:* The audience members who experience the emotions and aesthetic pleasure while watching a dance or theatrical presentation.
- *Roshayanik Sangmisran:* In Bengali language meaning chemical reaction and combination generating a new component.
- *Sat-chit-Anand:* Sanskrit term meaning pure-consciousness-bliss. This is conceptualized in Hindu philosophy.
- *Sadhana:* This is a Sanskrit term meaning disciplined and vigorous practice under the tutelage of *Guru* within a specific school of dance training or *Sampradaya*. The duration of training undergone by a serious practitioner of Indian Classical dance ranges from seven to ten years.
- *Sambandhanam:* Marriage ties as practiced in the matrilineal society of Kerala.

- *Sampradaya :* Specific schools or styles of training.
- *Saraswati:* Goddess of learning in Hinduism.
- *Saree:* Worn by Indian women, is a 5 meter cloth, wrapped around the body in various ways, specific to different regions of India.
- *Sati:* Consort of Lord *Shiva* and daughter of King Daksha.
- *Shiva:* Also addressed as *Nataraja,* is the destroyer of evil in Hinduism.
- *Shiva Purana :* The text is glorifying the primordial being, Lord *Shiva* in creation.
- *Shakta:* A person who worships *Shakti*, consort of Lord *Shiva* in Hinduism.
- *Sringara Bhava:* Erotic expressions.
- *Stree Vesham:* This is a Sanskrit phrase which is a traditional practice in Kathakali where men appropriate a lady in costume and attitude to enact the character of a female on stage. the traditional practice in the dance theatre form of Kerala where female characters are portrayed by men and the female technical dance.
- *Sukumara-prayoga:* It is the graceful body movements used in dance, but they are not confined to feminine body. Rather it is believed to be performed by Devi Parvathi in response to Shiva's *Tāṇḍava*.
- *Swatvikam abhinaya:* Rele defines it as a psychophysical state of mind experienced by a dancer (Rele, 1992, p.12-13)
- *Tāṇḍava:* Dance movements which are stated to have been performed by Shiva for teaching Dance to humanity. The movement quality of *Tāṇḍava* was not meant exclusively for men nor was it only aggressive in quality as defined in *Natyashastra*.
- *Tandu :* Attendant of Lord Shiva in Hindu pantheon who was taught to dance.
- *Talaq*: A term used to break the marriage vows and confirm divorce in Islamic tradition.

- *Tripura Rahasya:* An ancient work in Sanskrit exploring the mysteries beyond the trinity- Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.
- *Tharavadu :* This is a joint family system existing in Kerala till 1940s with matrilineal system of female heirs.
- *Tevadichiyattam:* The dance performed by the girls in Kerala. The girls were called *Tevadichi* and *yattam* meaning dance.
- *Uddhata:* The Vigorous dance movements used in technical as well as expressional dance.
- *Ujjain*: An ancient city, current location in the state of Madhya Pradesh, India.
- *Vachik:* One of the four components of *Abhinaya*. *Vachik* means words- in form of poetry, songs or narration or dialogues used in expressing a story or a theme in Indian classical dance.
- *Vasanta:* Season of Spring.
- *Vivaha:* Marriage ceremony.
- *Vedic times:* The period in Indian history when the Vedic literature was composed (ca.1300-900 BCE). These texts formed the basis of Brahmanical ideology.