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RIVERSIDE

Performing Indian Dance in Malaysia

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Premalatha Thiagarajan

September 2012

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Priya Srinivasan, Chairperson
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The Dissertation of Premalatha Thiagarajan is approved:

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Performing Indian Dance in Malaysia

by

Premalatha Thiagarajan

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies
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Dr. Priya Srinivasan, Chairperson

“Performing Indian Dance” is an interdisciplinary project that reveals the dynamics of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in Malaysian Indian dance. I demonstrate that the emergence of prominent multi-ethnic male dancers in Malaysia is enabled by a unique configuration of “bumiputera” (“son of soil”) ethnic-based state discourse, cosmopolitanism (ability to move fluently across multiple spaces), Indian dance institutional structures, global capitalism, and gender mobility, which simultaneously overshadows the visibility of female dancers. I stress that the very conditions that enable the emergence of men dancers simultaneously affect women dancers and render them variously “invisible” on Malaysian stages.

I posit that the discourses of ethnicity, gender, cosmopolitanism, community, and family come together differently for men and women, causing them to negotiate gender and sexuality in different ways. This research trajectory explores the ability of dance practitioners, particularly male dancers, to perform gender and sexuality fluidly, along a spectrum and in a way not possible in everyday life due to the local regulatory structures.

Although the nation seeks ways to regulate marginalized gender and sexual identities, this dissertation demonstrates the ways in which male dancers claim agency through provocative choreographies onstage and the acts of embracing “deviant” gender and sexual practices offstage. This project identifies the policing of female sexuality in the increasingly Islamic state as the key to male artists’ hypervisibility. By examining gender relations and gendered division of labor, I argue in this dissertation that although female dancers may not always be visible as onstage performers, they assert power and authority through their backstage and offstage labor.

I draw on ethnographic research in dance institutions located at western Peninsula/r Malaysia to interrogate gender relations, sexual politics, ethnic inequalities, cosmopolitan practices, and transnational dancing bodies. The examination of Indian dance practice, through the intersection of local and global discourses, from the South-East Asian context, is aimed at contributing new insights to the field of dance studies.

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INTRODUCTION

PERFORMING INDIAN DANCE IN MALAYSIA

(May 2005)

During a telephone conversation, a male teacher of Indian classical dance forms told me, “You young dancers and scholars think you can do anything. As long as you are my student, you have to follow my instructions and perform where and how I tell you to. If you want to act as you wish, get the hell out of my school. And, when you write about me, make sure you know what you are writing!” He slammed the phone down, preventing me from defending myself.

(February 2007)

In an *Odissi* expressive dance piece that depicted the love play between deity, Krishna and his female partner, Radha, two male dancers held hands, embraced each other and performed intense sensual movement sequences and poses with their bodies in close contact. A female dance teacher and my close friend, who was sitting next to me, felt disgusted watching the dance piece. She whispered to me, “Huh! What are they trying to do? Look at the movements! *Krishnavum Radhavum ipadithan aduvangala?* (“would Krishna and Radha dance like this?”). Have we performed like this in *Bharata Natyam?*” The choreography surprised me to the extent that I could not disagree with my friend. Despite the “shushing” of audience members seated beside us, our whispering continued until the piece ended. Later, one of the male dancers asked me about the piece, “What do you think?” I was in a dilemma, unable to decide whether to say, “Oh, I liked it, very unusual choreography” or “I was not prepared for that, it was shocking!”

(July 2009)

Mark (pseudonym), a male student who had been diligently attending my dance classes, began training with an established male dance teacher in Malaysia (while I was in the United States pursuing my Ph.D.). When I returned home for summer break, I tried contacting Mark by phone, but my efforts were futile. He refused to answer my calls. His classmates told me that he did not care for my substitute teacher's style of teaching and he was getting special training at the new dance company. They informed me that Mark's new teacher provides two to three days of training per week to nurture new male dancers in an effort to enhance male dancing in the country.

I begin this dissertation by reflecting upon several contradictory, controversial, emotional, and challenging encounters with male artists of Indian classical dance in Malaysia. Each event described above, which arose out of different configurations of my relationship with male dancers, illuminates different gender politics as well as patriarchal power and privilege. I intend to examine these gender politics more closely in this dissertation.

As a dancer who has learned the Indian classical dance form, *Bharata Natyam* from primarily female dance *gurus* (teachers), I decided to learn *Odissi* (another form of Indian classical dance) from a prominent male dance practitioner eight years ago. My desire to learn from a male dancer arose because I was thrilled by the level of professionalism exhibited by male choreographers in the country. I was mesmerized with the quality of performances, unique choreographies, diversity of dancing bodies and themes, lighting design, stage craft, and technological usage in their dance productions.

My relationship with male dancers developed in different ways, as a student, a friend, a colleague, a scholar, and a *rasika* (connoisseur), and over the years, the interactions led to mixed emotions such as love-hate, desire-disgust and fascination-fear, which I explore through this research.

There is no dance conversation in Malaysia, formal or informal, that exists without referencing male dancers. The first few names that are usually uttered by people in any dance dialogues are the names of male dancers. Although many “star” dancers in India happen to be female artists, this is not the case in Malaysia, which is known for having manufactured prominent “star” male dancers, including Dr. Chandrabhanu, Ramli Ibrahim, Mavin Khoo, Umesh Shetty, Shankar Khandasamy, and Ajith Baskaran Dass among others. What is also unique about Malaysia is that Indian dance is performed by multi-ethnic dancers – Malays, Chinese and Indians, with “star” dancers being predominantly men. The “star” dancing is supported by women’s labor which often remains at the sidelines.

In this dissertation, I argue that a unique configuration of “bumiputera” (“sons of soil”) ethnic-based state discourse,¹ cosmopolitanism (ability to move fluently across multiple spaces), Indian dance institutional structures, global capitalism, and gender mobility gives rise to the phenomenon of male dancing in Malaysia, simultaneously overshadowing the visibility of female dancers. By tracing the development of male dancing in Malaysia from the 1950s to 2011, I stress that attention to male dancing bodies

¹ The Malay ethnic group is the majority group in Malaysia. “Bumiputera” (“son/s of soil”) is a category created by the government to privilege the Malays politically, economically, and socially.

allows us to see how these artists continue to resist and complicate narrow ethnic, gender, sexual, class, religious, and national categories, despite efforts by the pro-Islamic Malaysian state,² Indian community, and family to police the artistic movements of male dancers. I argue that the discourses on cosmopolitanism, ethnicity, gender, community, and family come together differently for men and women, causing them to negotiate gender and sexuality in different ways. In other words, the very conditions that enable the emergence of men dancers concurrently affect women dancers and render them variously “invisible” on Malaysian stages.

Male artists of Indian dance in Malaysia exist in a spectrum of sexuality variously situated between homosexual and heterosexual practices. As such, “coming out of the closet” is performed on Malaysian stages in various states of visibility. I argue that, although male dancers’ bodies are heavily policed by the disciplinary structures (state, community, and family), they are able to claim agency in the act of performing. Since Indian dance allows male and female dancers equal access to the exploration of both masculinity and femininity, male dancers boldly explore various forms of gender and sexualities on the stage, which are not always possible offstage. Since the stage is seen as purely aesthetic and not political, male dancers have been able to get away with their provocative artistic choices, but what is revealed in paying attention to the stage space is how male dancers negotiate gender and sexuality through Indian dance performances.

² Malaysia is a poly-ethnic secular country, but Islam is the dominant religion and recognized as the state religion of Malaysia. Although disputes concerning religious practices occasionally occur among various ethnic groups, the minority groups, the Chinese and Indians, are generally given the freedom to practice their respective religious beliefs.

I also demonstrate how gender is constantly reworking and reshaping itself by incorporating the artistic experiences and subjectivities of female dance practitioners. The policing of gender and sexuality is not limited to male dancers, but also applies to female dancers. The pro-Islamic Malaysian society exerts pressure on women and regulates all aspects of female sexuality. As a result, women are not always visible onstage. Despite the numerical predominance of women, it is a rare phenomenon to identify a female iconic or “star” performer in Malaysia. Women exist mostly on the margin or periphery as local dance *gurus*. However, an investigation of gendered hierarchy, division of labor, gender power, and gender visibility within the Malaysian Indian dance circle illuminates that women enact power offstage by performing various forms of labor. By performing a wide range of tasks - as cooks and food servers in the cafeterias of dance institutions, domestic householders involved in taking care of family, dance teachers, dance rehearsal coaches/assistants, costume designers, emcees “behind stage curtains,” backstage managers, and the organizers and coordinators of dance events - female dance practitioners find ways to earn cultural and economic capital. Furthermore, these forms of labor allow them ways of negotiating patriarchy enacted through the pro-Islamic state, community, and family.

I bring to the fore the disjuncture, ruptures, and challenges in Indian dance practice. In doing so, this dissertation reveals that the intensified global capitalism is turning the attention of men towards formal economy and away from arts. Furthermore, the constant pressures put on men and masculinity by the different regimes (state, community, and family) is presently threatening the growth of male dancing in Malaysia.

While substantial efforts have been made by Indian dance scholars to address the concerns of female dancers,³ a handful of scholars such as Anne Marie Gaston (1996), Janet O’Shea (2007), Royona Mitra (2009), Hari Krishnan (2009), Mohan Khokar and Ashish Khokar (2011), Anusha Kedhar (2011), and Priya Srinivasan (2003, 2012) have also critically analyzed dancing men in their respective works. I hope to enter the debate by offering a different glimpse of gendered practices along this research trajectory. While Indian dance allows men and women to explore masculinity and femininity, I investigate what different repercussions there are for men who perform femininity versus women who perform masculinity within the Malaysian Indian dance context. This dissertation pays attention to the discomfort that arises through the performance of femininity by male dancers, while the performance of masculinity by female dancers, who sometimes wear male attire, does not seem to “unsettle” the audience. I focus on duet performances and group dances to examine how dancers perform gender and sexuality in a spectrum. I analyze dance themes, gendering of bodies in performances (male and female group performances, all-male cast productions, and male-female duets and same-sex duets), the performers’ attires, roles in dance numbers, and body contacts between performers. In his study of western theatre dance, Ramsay Burt (1995) points out that for a long time there has been profound silence in the dance world on the subject of male dancers and

³ The works of Amrit Srinivasan (1983, 1984), Avanthi Meduri (1996), Ananya Chatterjea (2002), Kalpana Ram (2005), Janet O’Shea (1998, 2001, 2007), Pallabi Chakravorty (2009), Priya Srinivasan (2003, 2012), Ahalya Satkunaratanam (2009), and Anusha Kedhar (2011) have been specifically vital in foregrounding complex discourses surrounding female dancers, both in India and in the diaspora.

sexuality. Similarly, I would like to stress that male dancer's sexuality has not been explicitly examined in the works of Indian dance scholars. More precisely, this scholarly endeavor departs from the works of other Indian scholars by addressing the bodily enactment of sexual orientation by men ("closeting" and "coming out") from the Southeast Asian context, which has its own unique ethnic and religious particularities.

This research focuses on the dance schools located in the west Peninsula/r Malaysia, particularly in Kuala Lumpur (K.L.), the federal capital, and in the states - Selangor, Perak, and Johor. This study looks upon K.L. as the hub of performing arts, where most Indian dance events and productions are held. My informants or subjects of study have pointed out that an Indian dance production staged in K.L. attracts more private sponsorships, offers profitable revenue, brings in an appreciative multi-ethnic crowd, and garners more recognition for the artists. Artists have also stressed that they are able to stage full-length (full repertoire) Indian classical dance performances in well-equipped auditoriums in K.L., which are not as prevalent in other states. Therefore, K.L., the multicultural city, is the primary focus of my study. I invested more time pursuing fieldwork in K.L. while making brief field trips to other locations. The fieldwork for this study was carried out for seven months, between July 2011 and January 2012.

This dissertation predominantly draws on the archival and ethnographic material gathered from two main institutions of Indian classical dance in Malaysia: the Temple of Fine Arts (ToFA) and Sutra Dance Theatre. Both of these institutions are located in K.L. ToFA came into existence in 1981 and it stands as the largest cultural institution in the country managed by the Indians. Sutra, meanwhile, was established in 1983 by its artistic

director of Malay descent, Ramli Ibrahim. I have also met many practitioners of Indian dance from other dance companies and have incorporated their views and dance experiences into this work. Chapter One discusses the development of Indian dance practices in Malaysia by providing a detailed account of the various dance institutions and companies that are significant to this dissertation.

In the ensuing sections, I discuss the discourses of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and globalization through which I examine Indian dance practices and practitioners in Malaysia. By engaging with the scholarly debates, I articulate my intellectual intervention through these contributions. Firstly, I demonstrate how the “bumiputera” state discourse predominantly polices the dancing bodies of “bumiputera” and determines the unequal distribution of funding for the arts (Malay art forms versus non-Malay art forms). Secondly, I show that the “visual economy of race/ethnicity” operates through a complicated combination of physical differences and social affiliations in the multi-ethnic society in Malaysia. Thirdly, I illuminate the fluidity with which male and female dancers enact gender and sexuality in a spectrum, and fourthly, I posit the term “cosmopolitan masculinity” to denote the conditions that enable men to attain artistic mobility and travel disparate spaces, and prevent women from accessing this very flexibility. While I have isolated each discourse in the next section to tease out crucial research theories and models, I want to stress that the discourses converge in the chapters of this dissertation.

Ethnicity and Indian Dance Practices in Malaysia

Malaysian citizens consist of various ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others.⁴ The Malays represent the majority, while the Chinese and Indians are the minority ethnic groups in the country. While there have been Indian and Chinese influence in Malaya⁵ since the second and third century, the majority of Chinese and Indian immigrants arrived in the nineteenth century during the British colonial period. This wave of immigration is significant to this study because of the connection between immigrants and their cultural practices. Ultimately, the three primary ethnic groups - Malays, Chinese, and Indians - came together and formed a political alliance in the struggle for independence, which was attained in 1957. Since Malaysia's independence from Great Britain, the multi-ethnic country has favored the political rights of Malays due to their status as an "indigenous" group and their economic "backwardness" when compared to the Chinese and Indians. From the early 1970s, the pro-Malay government has been awarding special rights and privileges to improve the standard of living of the Malays. This move has created "the world's first affirmative-action system that is tied exclusively to ethnicity" (Ong, 1999: 218). The affirmative action policy gave rise to a new category, "bumiputera," which means "sons of soil," which allowed for more

⁴ According to the census 2010 released by the Department of Statistics Malaysia, the Malays and other indigenous groups ("bumiputera"/ "sons of soil") make up 67.4% , Chinese 24.6%, Indians 7.3%, and others 0.7% of the total population of 28.3 million people.
<http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1215&lang=en>

⁵ Malaya is also referred as Malay Peninsula or Malay Archipelago. Prior to 16 September 1963, the country was referred to as Malaya. On 16 September 1963, Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore united with the Federation of Malaya (eleven states of Malaya) to constitute the new Federation of Malaysia. In 1965, Singapore became an independent country.

benefits, claims, and rights to the “bumiputera” Malays compared to the non-Malays. The first chapter of this dissertation discusses more explicitly the coming of the Indians to Malaya, the social structure of the Indian immigrants based on “class, caste, and ethnicism” (Ampalavanar, 1972), and ethnic-based “governmentality” (Foucault, 1991)⁶ in Malaysia.

Arguing that ethnicity remains a most potent force in Malaysia, my work illuminates the way in which male and female dancers complicate the discourse on “bumiputera.” Michel Foucault’s (1979) concepts of “governmentality” and “biopower” are useful in describing the control of populations through (uniform and unequal) regulatory mechanisms. Taking these concepts further, Aihwa Ong (1999) explains that Asian states practice a system of “variegated citizenship” or “unequal biopolitical investments” (217) in which populations subjected to different regimes of value are afforded different kinds of rights, discipline, caring, and security. On the same note, Steve Fenton (1996) describes the ways in which politics in multi-ethnic societies vary in the manner and degree to which wealth and power are associated with a privileged ethnic elite/hegemonic cultural group. Linking “governmentality” to race, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1998), stress that the state is inherently racial and it is increasingly the predominant site of racial conflict through the interventionist policies of the state. Omi

⁶ Michel Foucault refers to “governmentality” as a means to deploy modern forms of (non-repressive) disciplinary power by the state, particularly in the bureaucratic realm as well as other forms of institutions that produce rules based on knowledge/power of a population (Ong, 1999: 265). Aihwa Ong utilizes Foucault’s terms, “governmentality” and “biopower” to argue that the ASEAN state makes unequal biopolitical investments in different subject populations by privileging some subjects, while neglecting others. Referring to Malaysia, Ong elaborates the way in which “ethnic-based governmentality” is employed on various ethnic groups (218). I am interested in furthering this discussion (“ethnic-based governmentality”) in my work.

and Winant emphasize that race becomes a political issue when state institutions are thought to structure and enforce a racially unjust social order. Even at its most oppressive, they assert, racial minorities were always able to “counter-pose their own cultural traditions and identity to the enforced ‘invisibility’ imposed by the majority society” (73).

Intervening in these scholarships, my work examines how the pro-Malay state exercises its power through the “bumiputera” discourse and how the discourse defines points of confrontation, conflict, struggle, and negotiation in relation to Indian dance practices in Malaysia. Although the state attempts to marginalize and control non-Malay art forms through its discriminatory policies, practitioners of Indian dance continue to resist, innovate, and extend the arts beyond the terms outlined by the government. A study on multi-ethnic dancers in the country foregrounds the complex relationship between the pro-Malay state policies and Indian dance. In doing this, my study aspires to contribute to the intersection of critical race/ethnic studies and critical dance studies by offering new insights into the ways in which the state and the performance stage are dual sites of ethnicized power struggles.

This research examines the policing of ethnicized dancing bodies and the disparity in government patronage. Since the state heavily polices the bodies of the Malays, I point to the different ploys that several Malay Muslim dancers have used to enable them to negotiate with the state. For example, Ramli Ibrahim, as a practicing Muslim in Malaysia, takes caution to never place any Hindu religious icons onstage or perform Hindu rituals associated with the Indian classical dances such as *namaskaram* (salutation) openly in public. Meanwhile, Dr. Chandrabhanu (Zameen Harun) physically

removed himself to Australia and renounced Islam. He became a Hindu to embrace Indian dance in its complex web of relations to Hindu religion and Indian culture. While the artistic movements of the Malays are regulated primarily by the state, I stress that the artistic movements of the Indians are monitored by the community and family. These forces exert more pressure on women, enabling the men to dominate the public performance space.

Even though the Malaysian government has not completely ignored Indian cultural practices, it has been highly selective and ambiguous in its support. Patronage for the Indian arts takes a central role in the investigation of state power and Indian dance practices. The government extensively propagates Malay dance forms by offering patronage among others to the performing arts groups of the Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL), Istana Budaya (IB), Kompleks Budaya Negara (KBN), and Petronas. However, such stable financial support is not available for practitioners of Indian dance forms. Dancers are either paid a certain indeterminate amount for their participation in state events⁷ or funded for projects on a “first come first served” basis by the Department of Culture and Arts under the Ministry of Information, Communication, and Culture. The performing artists of Indian dance have to compete with other ethnic dance practitioners for limited funds. Even if the companies of Indian dance qualify for project-based funding, the money only partially covers the cost of production. The lack of state support indeed complicates the effort to stage Indian dance works, but has not deterred the

⁷ Dance practitioners have pointed out that the amount paid for the events hosted by the state are hardly adequate to pay all the dancers who participate in the performances. They note that, at times, they are paid only small honorariums for their participation, creating an issue of how payment can be considerably quantified and compensated for dance performances.

development of Indian classical dances in Malaysia. I say this because dance artists overcome their financial limitation by “tactically” (de Certeau, 1984)⁸ planning their finances. They draw funds from personal savings and dance companies’ revenue, approach corporate arts sponsors, and receive support through global networking.

I am also interested in looking at how the “visual economies of race” operates in Malaysia’s multi-ethnic society. Robyn Wiegman (1995) demonstrates that the discourse of race depends on the configurations of vision and visibility. Patrick Johnson (2003) theorizes race - “living blackness” – as a material way of knowing. While these studies center on the American black-white racial binary and the physical basis of race (based on skin color and other physical attributes) as the visual marker of difference, I turn my attention to the works of Steve Fenton (1996) and Pong (1999) who demonstrate that the term "ethnicity" has a greater claim to sociological analysis than "race." Fenton states that "ethnicity" is primarily used in the contexts of cultural difference, which can be traced back to shared ancestry and common language, religion, or place of origin. Furthering this deliberation, Pong asserts that, in Malaysia, the differences in the visible physical attributes among Malays, Chinese, and Indians are relatively small. As such, it is the ethnic groups’ different cultures, particularly their language and religion, which have been the basis for conflicts. I stress that “visual economy” operates through a complex intersection of physical appearance and social affiliations in relation to Indian dance performances in the country. I argue that there is a potential for multi-ethnic dancing

⁸ de Certeau (1984) defines tactic as “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” (37). He states that the space of a tactic is the space of the other. He argues that tactic is an art of the weak, a maneuver within a certain territory of power. I adopt this conceptualization to link to the maneuver undertaken by the minority dance practitioners to enable them to sustain their artistic practices.

bodies in Malaysia to transcend ethnic boundaries if spectators are not familiar with the ethnicity of the dancers (particularly, when the production goes on tour abroad). Although the program note and emcee's introduction (discourses that surround the dancing body) indicate that the performers are multi-ethnic, the actually dancing bodies onstage have the ability to blur ethnic identities, making Indian dance performances produced by Malaysian dance companies uniquely "Malaysian."

My investigation of visual economy (way of seeing the body) also facilitates my framing of a discussion on the relationship between the dancing body, ethnicity, and capitalism. I particularly link this discussion to the emergence of prominent "star" male dancers (Ramli Ibrahim, Mavin Khoo, and Umesh Shetty). I utilize Eva Cherniavsky's theory of "incorporated embodiment"⁹ to query how certain ethnicized dancing bodies are able to create more performance opportunities and in the process, transform into commodity images. I investigate the ways in which the "bumiputera" discourse, economic prosperity, institutional support, and diverse artistic networking make the male dancers mentioned above more susceptible to commodification.

Theoretical Framework for Gender and Sexuality

In this section, I analyze a diverse range of literature on gender and sexuality to reveal my contribution to the field through dance studies. I highlight how the performance of gender and various sexual orientations allow for an interdisciplinary

⁹ According to Cherniavsky (2006), "incorporated embodiment" is a specific idea of the body as the "proper place of the subject" (xv). She claims that incorporation emerges as the privileged form of embodiment for a modern social and economic order based on mobility of labor. She contends that race signifies the body's improper relation to capital, where one body claims an "inalienable property of body" (84) while another raced body is made "alienable."

analysis. This analysis integrates dance studies, feminist theory, masculinity studies, queer theory, critical race/ethnic theory, and global studies.

The *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities* (2005)¹⁰ offers a crucial framework for examining the various configurations of gender identity, gender relations, and gender order. In this book, the authors move from the larger global and institutional articulations of masculinities to more intimate and personal expressions. Focusing on selected choreographers of Indian dance, I explore the various constructions of masculinities on and offstage by reading choreographies, through an observation of dance pedagogies as well as by studying how masculinities are organized and practiced within the context of gender relations (through the interactions between men as well as between men and women).

Discursive studies have shown that men are not permanently committed to a particular form of masculinity. Rather, they make situationally specific choices from a cultural repertoire of masculine behavior. As such, gender identity is plural, changing, and historically informed around dominant discourses and ideologies of masculinity. R.W. Connell (2005) argues that while different masculinities exist, each is associated with different positions of power. He has pointed out that, to understand how men become powerful, it is crucial to understand how the dominant discourses of masculinity connect with other forms of power around class, ethnicity, race, religion, culture, and nationhood. My study emphasizes the fluidity of gender performance in Indian dance by

¹⁰ I have drawn ideas and theories from the “Introduction” (R.W. Connell, Jeff Hearn, and Michael S. Kimmel), “Globalization, Imperialism and Masculinities” (R.W. Connell), “Class and Masculinity” (David Morgan), and “Men and Masculinities in Work, Organizations, and Management” (David L. Collinson and Jeff Hearn).

demonstrating that dancing men in Malaysia do not specifically fall into any particular categories of masculinities (hegemonic, complicit, or marginal) outlined in various western scholarships, but rather complicate those categorizations. I expand Connell's theorization of "masculinity and power" and Ramsay Burt's, (1995,2007)¹¹ "representations of gender" to illuminate the ways in which male dancers attain agency onstage to perform various forms of gender manifestations as well as "troubling" gender performances, in ways they are not able to do offstage. On a further note, I also emphasize that although male dancers complicate masculinity through their artistic endeavors, most of them ultimately aim at "justifying and naturalizing male power" (Arthur Brittan, 1989: 4)¹² due to intense gender policing.

In *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On and Off the Stage* (2001),¹³ Jane Desmond points out that with its linkage to sex, sexiness, and sexuality, dance provides a dense site for interrogating how sexualities are inscribed, learned, rendered, and continually re-signified through bodily actions. As an attempt to work against the grain, I have attempted to make the "invisible visible" (Desmond, 2001:3) in this dissertation by reading sexualities not only in dances, but also through visible markers of

¹¹ In this text, Burt examines a selection of crucial developments in the representation of masculinity in western theatre dance during the twentieth century.

¹² Brittan explicates through the ideology of "masculinism" that masculinity is subject to change but the justification and naturalization of male power does not easily change. Thus, he asserts, masculine ideology and masculinism remain relatively constant.

¹³ The essays by Susan Leigh Foster ("Closets Full of Dances"), Ramsay Burt ("Dissolving Pleasure") and Gay Morris ("What He Called Himself") in *Dancing Desires* as well as Jose Esteban Munoz's work, *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) are useful for understanding how gay men and lesbians have been written into or represented in the dance history and the ways in which "deviant" sexualities shape both dance product and meanings.

male dancers' bodies and their "personal histories."¹⁴ Since male artists of Indian dance in Malaysia represent straight as well as gay men (or a spectrum of sexuality), I examine gender in relation to sexuality by looking at homosexuality, homoeroticism, and queer viewpoints.

In line with this area of interest, I turn to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's influential volumes, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990). Sedgwick's theorization of the phrase "male homosocial desire,"¹⁵ which she utilizes as a strategy for making generalizations about and marking historical differences in the structure of men's relations with other men, is a very useful concept for my work. While Sedgwick examines homosociality in literary works, my work looks at the phenomenon of "homosocial bonding" among men by analyzing two all-male cast dance productions, one of which, I argue, contains strong homosexual/queer connotations. I unravel how different gender and sexual politics play out in these two productions.

I also draw on Sedgwick's conceptualizations of "closetedness" and "coming out" to examine the artistic creations of gay male dancers. Mark Broomfield's (2010) work on black male dancers in the U.S looks at the various stages of "coming out" and his work points out the shades of grey in who comes out, to what extent, and in what contexts.

¹⁴ *When Men Dance* (2009:6).

¹⁵ Sedgwick outlines "homosocial" as social bonds between persons of the same sex. She chooses the word desire to indicate the erotic emphasis. By studying the links between power relations and sexuality, she examines a range of relations from homosocial to homosexual bonds (1985: 5).

Besides Broomfield, various dance scholars,¹⁶ have also looked at “coming out” on the American or European performance stages. However, I intend to emphasize that “non-normative” gender practices and “deviant” sexualities in Malaysia have very different political and social ramifications when compared to such practices in western societal contexts and I wish to demonstrate my critical intervention in the scholarship on gender and sexuality through new ideas that emerge from my study. I discuss how multi-ethnic male dancers utilize Indian classical dances as means to explore multiple gender expressions and sexual orientations on and offstage. The stage offers them certain “flexibility,” since it is difficult to determine when exactly a dancer is making a gender statement and when he is “coming out” during an Indian classical dance performance. However, any act against the norm outside the performance space can make them the source of unease, prejudice, and suspicion.

I have referred to the writings of South-East Asian and South Asian scholars as well as Malaysian authors in framing discussions on gender and sexuality. Since what constitutes the category “transgender” and transgender practices vary in different cultural contexts, as I have mentioned earlier, I turn to Michael G. Peletz’s scholarly work, *Gender Pluralism* (2009). His scholarship on transgenderism and sexual politics in the twenty-first century in Malaysia offers a platform on which to build my work that focuses on transgender artists of Indian dance. In my dissertation, I bring to the fore the personal histories and artistic voices of gay men, effeminate men, transvestites, and transsexuals to

¹⁶ *Dancing Desires* (2001), *When Men Dance* (2009)

investigate the different states of “coming out” despite intensified efforts by the nation to silence marginalized identities.

Besides examining the literatures on transgender, I also turn my attention to “queer.” Since the term “queer” is not widely used in Malaysia, I initially contemplated whether or not to include this term in my study. However, *Body 2 Body* (2009), the first Malaysian queer anthology, which contains fiction and non-fiction stories about “queers” in Malaysia, turned out to be a very useful resource since it informed me of the efforts “queers” in Malaysia are taking to make their identities and voices known despite pressures of conformity. Ruth Vanita’s *Queering India* (2002), Arvind Narrain’s and Gautam Bhan’s edited collection *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (2005), and Brinda Bose’s *The Phobic and the Erotic* (2007) further equipped me with vital theoretical discourses to frame my writing on “queer” subjects in the Indian dance scene. Very few of the South Asian and South-East Asian regional works on transgender and queer sexuality discussed thus far focus on dance. My scholarship intends to complicate the discourses of gender as they intersect with sexuality by examining a range of gender (normative and non-normative) and sexuality (heterosexual, homosexual, and transexual) politics through the lens of dance studies.

The deliberation on representations of gender in the Indian dance scene in Malaysia necessitates a study of female dance practitioners and their status in making Indian dance since the day-to-day artistic interaction involves both men and women. Focusing on women’s dance experiences and subjectivities in the context of Indian dance practices, this dissertation analyzes gender relations, gendered hierarchy, power dynamics,

and relations of access within the Malaysian dance community. These analyses shed further light on the discussions of gender and sexuality primarily examined in this study. I analyze the roles assumed by female dance *gurus* in dance pedagogy and their relationship with male *gurus*. I employ “speech” and “silence” as discursive acts to theorize women’s agency. I draw on and extend the works of Gayatri Spivak (1988) and Kamala Visweswaran (1994) to argue by means of different case studies on women that “silence” can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering. Besides looking at “voicing,” I also examine the transparent and hidden labor of female dancers. Priya Srinivasan’s *Sweating Saris* (2012) opened up an avenue for me to consider the in(visible) laboring female bodies, which offer crucial insights into the enactment of power on and offstage. In this project, I utilize visibility both literally, to refer to onstage appearance and metaphorically, to refer to attention and recognition. I turn to Simpson and Lewis’s work on *Revealing and Concealing Gender* (2010) to foreground the politics of gender visibility. I argue that although being visible can be empowering for women, it can also be detrimental to their personal lives and artistic careers, which then allows us to see why women prefer to remain variously “invisible.”

Globalization: Transnational bodies and “Star” Cosmopolitans

This dissertation brings together the concepts of “star,” “transnational bodies,” and “cosmopolitanism.” I theorize the concept of stardom by referring to two influential works of Richard Dyer, *Stars* (1998) and *Heavenly Bodies* (2004). While Dyer’s scholarly discourses focus on film stars, my work develops the concept to speak to the “mobile” and popular dancers in Malaysia, to whom I refer as the “stars.” One of the

primary reasons that leads to their star status is, I posit, their ability to transcend spatial constraints - their “transnationality” and “cosmopolitan” statuses.

On that note, I have found Aihwa Ong’s text, *Flexible Citizenship* (1999), helpful for developing an understanding about the “cultural logics of transnationality” (1). Her discussion on how flexibility and mobility enable subjects to accumulate capital and social prestige has assisted me in framing arguments pertaining to the “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1973) gained by “star” dancers in Malaysia. I do not only discuss the privileges attained by transnational dancers in terms of name and fame, but I also address the challenges of transnationality, especially the specificities of how the state limits the dancers’ artistic choices. Ong focuses on “non-dance” subjects who hold multiple citizenships in her work, while I focus on dancers who maintain firm roots in Malaysia (most of them hold single citizenship-Malaysian citizenship), but move flexibly across space as cultural ambassadors. I echo Ong’s question by asking in this work, “What are the mechanisms of power that enable their (artistic) mobility?” (1999: 11) Querying if this mobility is gendered, I put forth the question, “Why are there more male “star” dancers than female “star” dancers in Malaysia?”

This dissertation links the terms “internationality” and “transnationality” to the discourse of “cosmopolitanism.” Cosmopolitanism has been widely argued as manifesting a complex tension between universality and nationality/particularity as well as elitism and egalitarianism. Bruce Robbins (1998)¹⁷ indicates that although

¹⁷ Robbins, Bruce. “Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism.” *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, pp. 1-19.

cosmopolitanism has appeared to claim universality by virtue of its independence, through its detachment from commitments and affiliations that constrain nation-bound lives, many scholarly voices now insist on national and transnational experiences that are plural, particular, and unprivileged. Scholars have largely coined various forms of cosmopolitanism such as vernacular cosmopolitanism (Bhabha), rooted cosmopolitanism (Hollinger, Cohen, Appiah), Asian cosmopolitanism (Ong, Schein), African cosmopolitanism (Appiah, Malcomson), particular cosmopolitanism (Souchoy, Kahn), working class cosmopolitanism (Werbner), and Islamic cosmopolitanism/women cosmopolitanism (Werbner, Rege, Stevens). Ulf Hannerz (1996) contends that cosmopolitanism has a special relationship to intellectualism, where the engagement with other cultures is based on the idea of intention rather than need (105). However, scholars such as James Clifford (“Travelling Cultures,” 1992) and Robbins (“Comparative Cosmopolitanism,” 1998) have argued for multiple cosmopolitanisms that stretch out to include people of all classes, including “servants and migrant workers” (Clifford, 1992). They have stressed that cosmopolitanism could rise through need or force as well as intention or choice. Jonathan Skinner (2007), who wrote about the globalization of salsa, points out that since cosmopolitans have “both a foot in and a foot out of their local milieu,” they are “dangerous creatures,” threatening because of their ability to think diversely (497).

Arguing that it is men, rather than women, who desire to become cosmopolitans and that most artists of Indian dance in Malaysia are “rooted cosmopolitans” (Appiah,

1998),¹⁸ I enter the dialogues through a particular as well as a gendered form of cosmopolitanism. I suggest that artists access cosmopolitanism through clear intentions, while placing “one foot” very firmly in Malaysia (“home” where they could fall back if their artistic ventures fail abroad). Adding to the scholarship by contributing a term I call, “cosmopolitan masculinity,” I posit that a male dancer’s cosmopolitanism constructs or enables a particular kind of masculinity. Cosmopolitan masculinity enhances the transnational mobility of some male dancers and enables them to become artistically flexible, thereby allowing them a way to escape oppressive local pressures. In other words, because of their mobility, artists such as Mavin Khoo and Ajith Baskaran Dass can perform certain provocative works on gender and sexuality overseas, which they cannot perform in Malaysia. This dissertation foregrounds that cosmopolitan masculinity is precisely the condition that enables men to attain artistic flexibility and travel widely (including to the countries of the global north) and that prevents most women dancers from this flexibility.

Methodology

This dissertation, which focuses on Indian dance in Malaysia, reveals that the local artists’ experiences, subjectivities, and perspectives have not been given due attention previously in scholarly studies. My M.A. thesis on the historical development of *Bharata Natyam* in Malaysia, which was submitted to the University of Malaya in 2007,

¹⁸ Arguing against the perceptions that cosmopolitanism must be parasitic, Kwame A. Appiah (1998) points out that “everyone is a rooted cosmopolitan, attached to a home of his or her own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of the other, different, places that are home to other, different, people”(91). Even though Appiah does not provide readers with much sense of what this rooted cosmopolitanism might look like, I find his theorization of cosmopolitanism to be useful.

allowed for the inclusion of the voices of local artists and created ample scope for further investigation. Utilizing different theoretical frameworks and writing methods, I decided to expand the one chapter discussion on male dancers in my M.A. thesis into a full dissertation subject of inquiry considering the scholarly potential it carried. In line with this area of interest, I chose to consider male dancers who were involved in various genres of Indian dance and not just a single form, *Bharata Natyam*. To this end, the methodologies that I utilize for this research include ethnography, choreographic analysis, and archival research.

As a female dance practitioner who was born and brought up in Malaysia, I believe that I possess a privileged insider perspective. I had my initial training in *Bharata Natyam* at the Padmini Dance Group in the early 1980s under the sisters, Geeta and Girija. I furthered my dance training in *Bharata Natyam* at the reputable institution, the Temple of Fine Arts (ToFA) in 1990 and staged my solo debut performance, *arangetram*, in 1994. While studying dance at ToFA, I actively participated and performed in various group dance productions. Between 1999 and 2000, I pursued an advance training in *Bharata Natyam* and *nattuvangam* (art of reciting rhythmic syllables while playing the cymbals) under Suriakala (the International Dance Director of ToFA) in Chennai, India, after which, I established my own dance company, Premalayaa Performing Arts, in K.L. While managing my own dance company, I went on to learn *Odissi* under the renowned dance *guru*, Ramli Ibrahim, at the Sutra Dance Theatre for three years (2004-2007). A strong passion for dance led me to the scholarly path, and I completed my Masters degree in dance at the University of Malaya. My identity as a dance scholar allowed for wide

interaction with dance artists within the Indian dance circle in Malaysia. This networking with dance artists broadened when I went back to Malaysia last year to conduct my fieldwork, which I would like to refer to as “homework.”¹⁹ I held mostly an “insider” status at the research sites, which created an “intimate” (Kedhar, 2011) relationship between my subjects of study and myself. For me, the “field” and “home” are dependent terms and I concur with scholars, Kamala Visweswaran (1994) and Priya Srinivasan (2012), that the lines between fieldwork and homework are not always distinct.

In my writing, I have addressed the ways in which my body is already implicated in the “field/home” site. The narrative in this dissertation has grown out of my dual identities as a dance scholar and dance practitioner who is interested in the history, cultural practices, identity, gender, political economy, performances, and dance pedagogies. The scholarly and artistic interactions that I developed over the years with various artists (men and women) aided me in framing the chapters and the discussions for each section in this dissertation. Moreover, my “multiple identities/selves,” (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Visweswaran, 1994; Srinivasan, 2012)²⁰ as a TAMILIAN, a Malaysian-Indian, a female dancer/*guru*, and currently a doctoral candidate studying in the U.S., which each presents a different identity politics, have enabled me to have a better grip on issues concerning gender relations, power, and access. I must admit that these multiple selves have made me assume simultaneous “insider” and “outsider” statuses (Srinivasan, 2012).

¹⁹ Visweswaran, Kamala. *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1994, pp.101-104. In the sub-section, “Homework, Not Fieldwork,” Visweswaran discusses the politics of identifying with a particular site as “home” or “field.”

²⁰ Abu-Lughod (1990) discusses how the multiplicity of the self creates different ethnographies that explore what it means to be a woman under different conditions (27). Visweswaran acknowledges hyphenated identities in her work by positing the term, “hyphenated ethnography” (1994:127).

Although I held an “insider” status as a Malaysian dancer, the complications, difficulties, and intricacies of being a female dancer writing and researching male dancers also situated me as an “outsider.” I have tried to address how these positionalities have shaped my ethnographic writing, particularly how the dichotomy enables and disables access to certain information.

This dissertation regards dance ethnography as a profound method of dance studies for writing about dance and as means for entering my field. Ethnography, as one of the qualitative approaches to studying the social world, has attained much focus in the works of scholars across disciplines including dance scholars. Dance and ethnography have come together as a way of exploring a range of power relations that circulate in dance performance. On that note, I employ different ethnographic methods, such as feminist ethnography, auto-ethnography, oral history, and gossip networks.

As a female ethnographer who intends to write about “star” and “non-star” male dancers as well as female artists in Malaysia, I turn to feminist ethnography and auto-ethnography²¹ as a methodological tool to approach my study. One of the important aspects is that critical ethnography writing through the field of “feminist ethnography” emphasizes autobiography in its reflexivity to consider the aspects of “self.” As such, the feminist researcher takes on an active participant role in the research process, while offering “greater respect and power to subjects of study” (Stacey, 1988:22). I make the presence of my body and voice visible in each chapter by assuming multiple

²¹ Feminist ethnographers such as Judith Stacey (1999), Kamala Visweswaran (1994), Lila Abu Lughod (1990, 1998), Marta Savigliano (1995, 2003), and Priya Srinivasan (2012) are some of the scholars who have emphasized the importance of inserting the “self” into ethnographies shattering the still pervading myths of so-called objective anthropology.

positionalities (Srinivasan, 2012) as a dancer, a dance *guru*, a “wall-flowering” (Savigliano, 2003) observer, an ethnographer, a spectator, a confidante, and a friend.

This dissertation does not solely focus on male dancers, but also privileges the interpretations and experiences of female dancers. As such, I am interested in dance ethnography which is also “feminist” in its approach. Visweswaran (1994) proposes that a women-centered ethnographic approach could foreground women’s relationship with women, rather than strictly examining women’s relationship with men. By focusing on these relationships, Visweswaran states, feminist ethnography could concentrate on power differentials among women. I undertake a different “feminist” approach in this study. I highlight my position as a female researcher in close interaction with other female dance practitioners, with whom I have developed a long-term artistic relationship. I demonstrate the way in which my experiential knowledge and onsite ethnographies enable me to focus on the conflict of interest and distribution of power among women who assume different artistic roles in various Indian dance settings in Malaysia. Geiger (1990) points out that feminist methodology may be able to change the ways women’s lives are interpreted, appreciated, and understood through narratives which are “partial, perspectival and self-conscious” (180). In this work, I gather multiple “partial truths” (180) from female artists to make visible their perspectives, highlighting their struggles in and contribution to the making of Indian dance in Malaysia.

Cindy Garcia's ethnographic analysis of salsa in Los Angeles reveals a study on female "homosociality" (203) among Latina women. The female alliances allow Garcia to consider the hierarchies, identity, power struggle, and gendered mobility in the

patriarchal nightclub economy. In this dissertation, I compare the roles and duties of women with the tasks assumed by male artists in different institutional settings to identify the gendered division of labor, power struggle, and artistic mobility. I pursue this inquiry by entering into dance spaces dominated by women. I want to stress here that discussion with women, by means of oral history, not only offered first-hand information about their experiences but largely yielded information about male dance artists, a phenomenon that reverses Garcia's work, in which she points out that she attained useful information about women through men.

The verbal accounts gathered from practitioners of Indian dance through oral history have been extremely fundamental in writing this dissertation. T. Patel (2005),²² who utilized oral history in her social work research on "transracial adoption," states the following:

As a methodological approach, oral (hi)story interviews seek to access the social constructed reflective about an individual's life. That is not only accounts of their life experiences, but also *how* and *why* they lived their life in the way that they have, and the *thoughts* and *ideas* that have guided their everyday *behavior* and *interaction* with others. (338) (extracted from Leavy, 2011: 10)

Due to the lack of scholarly discourses that discuss Indian dance in Malaysia, an oral history framework presented an effective method of acquiring in-depth knowledge about thoughts, ideas, and actions from my subjects of study. Considering the way dance artists, especially female dance practitioners, responded to this study through their enthusiasm to have their voices heard reminded me that oral history could be a "scholarly and activist

²² Patel, T. "The usefulness of oral life (hi)story to understand and empower: the case of trans racial adoption." *Qualitative Social Work*. 4, 2005, pp. 327-345. (Extracted from Leavy, Patricia. *Oral History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

enterprise contributing to people's empowerment" (Armitage and Gluck, 1998). I employ oral history as a way of linking dance artists' individual experiences, memories of events, beliefs, opinions, and perspectives to overarching social, cultural, political, economical, and global phenomena. Furthermore, oral history has been instrumental in generating new theories for my study whenever certain western theories could not adequately support my findings.

On a further note, whenever I could not retrieve certain information from dancers, especially from the "star" male dancers, I turned to multiple/alternate bodily "archive stories" (Arondekar, 2009:2) which presented new epistemological knowledge about the iconic dancers. I spoke with the women who were closely acquainted with the performers (e.g., mothers of the "stars," teachers, collaborators, students, friends, dance producers and organizers) as well as the male dancers who performed with the "stars" to attain crucial information for this study.

I also utilize gossip as a strategy to gather information for my research. Roger Lancaster (1992) explains that gossip is "strategic," a form of discourse through which one attempts to gain privileged access to information, secrets or material sources (74). Adopting Lancaster's methodology of gossip, Anusha Kedhar (2011) points out that some of the information about intimate details on the lives of the South Asian dancers in the U.K. came to her through hearsay and gossip. Quoting Lancaster, Kedhar says that gossip is not only intimate, but also practical since it "facilitates and enhances building of networks, relationships and friendships and acts as social lubricant" (33). I have found gossip effective especially in gathering information about "sensitive" and "controversial"

issues surrounding the sexuality of male dancers in Malaysia. Gossip about who is homosexual and who is not; who and why a male dancer cross-dressed; and which person went for a sex reassignment surgery and why, were among the conversations that circulated "silently" and found their way into my writing. While I am aware of Lancaster's assertion that gossip could turn ethnographic fieldwork into eavesdropping, snooping, and spying, putting the researcher/ethnographer at risk, he points out that, it is the "very model for a reflexive, dialogical and critical anthropology" (73-74).

Susan Foster's *Reading Dancing* (1986) and Sally Banes' *Dancing Women* (1998) offer choreographic analysis as a methodological tool for interpreting dance choreographies. I draw on these works, in which they lay out key elements for interpreting and analyzing dance for its meaning, to analyze dances and dancers in the Indian dance milieu in Malaysia. I analyze Indian dance productions using DVDs and online video clips. For productions of which I could not obtain recordings, I relied on my memory to recall details about the dance works. I acknowledge the limitations of the memory archive, thus, I have made attempts to include as many details as possible by cross-checking certain information with the choreographers and with the artists who have seen the productions.

This project also addresses issues of spectatorship. Taking into account the multi-ethnic audience members who attend Indian dance performances, I argue that spectatorship is circumscribed by an intersectional discourse of ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. I turn to Susan Manning's framework of spectatorship²³ where she

²³ Manning, Susan. *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

discusses how cross-constituent (cross-viewing) spectatorship influences the way in which dances are perceived. Through a study on spectatorship, moments of discord and agreement between a dancer's intention and audience's perception are illuminated. Addressing spectatorial dynamics and the dancing body, Ann Cooper Albright (1997) points out that the “double moment of dancing in front of an audience is one in which a dancer negotiates between objectivity and subjectivity-between seeing and being seen, experiencing and being experienced, moving and being moved” (3), producing an interesting shift of representational codes that drives us to reconsider the experience of the dancing body in a performance. My work is also strongly influenced by spectatorship that draws on non-western methods of viewing where subject-object binaries do not exist in the same way (Meduri, 1992; Coorlawala, 1996; O’Shea, 1997; Srinivasan, 1997; Chakravorthy, 2004). The choreographies analyzed in this dissertation, through my lens and through the lens of diverse spectators and the artists, allow me to examine how Indian dances produced by male dancers perform notions of cultural identity, including representations of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

Fieldwork opened up ample opportunities to meet and interact with the event organizers, dance practitioners, and dance enthusiasts. Dancers were keen to participate in my study and embraced my desire and effort to write about Indian dance in Malaysia. Some of them requested that their identities and voices be acknowledged in this study. While my interaction with them and my multiple identities have enriched this ethnography, I am acutely aware of my intrusion and intervention into the systems of relationship. I write about my dance *gurus*, my classmates, and my friends and I worry

about how my critical ethnography would be perceived by them. Although I see them as my partial “collaborators,” this research product is ultimately mine since it is structured according to my research purposes, carries my interpretations, and is registered in an ethnographer’s voice.

For a long time, I wrestled with myself about how to write a central topic on male dancers, particularly “star” dancers in Malaysia. Even though I tried to stay away from this subject, I became increasingly obsessed with the topic. Finally, I decided to give in and this dissertation stands as a testimony to this scholarly endeavor. As I write each chapter, I have avoided being evaluative or judgmental about the dancers. I position myself in relation to my subject of study in different ways, through sympathetic alliance, with ambivalence, and through a critical relation to men. In the process of writing this dissertation, I passed through an array of emotional dilemmas, contemplating the risk of probing and revealing too much information about my informants, wondering where to draw a line between what could be exposed and what should be concealed. Nevertheless, I have tried to produce a balanced and an objective ethnographic writing. In order to protect my informants’ identities, I have used pseudonyms where necessary.

This dissertation does not claim to have represented all dance artists, a venture beyond the capacity of this scholarly work. Although I have interviewed many artists for this research, this ethnography is “partial and biased” in the sense that it could not incorporate all the materials or include everyone who has made enormous contribution to the Indian dance scene in Malaysia.

Dissertation Overview

I attempt to seek answers to several guiding questions, such as, “What does the examination of male and female artists of Indian dance in Malaysia tell us about gender relations, sexual politics, ethnic inequalities, cosmopolitan practices, and transnational dancing bodies?”, “To what extent do Indian dance practitioners defy economic, social, religious, and political limitations placed on minority dance forms?”, “What contradictions, tensions, and obstacles are posed for dancers/dance *gurus* in Malaysia?”, “How do artists perform within a spectrum of gender and sexuality?” and “How do female dance practitioners claim agency, power, and access in a dance scene that is significantly influenced by male dancers?” To this end, the chapters structurally focus on three groups of dance practitioners: “star” male dancers, “non-star” male dancers, and female dancers. In each chapter, I investigate different sets of issues related to the dancers.

In Chapter One, “Performing Gender and Bumiputera,” I provide a historical background of Indian dance in Malaysia. This chapter is divided into two sections: Firstly, I trace the coming of Indians to Malaya and the development of Indian arts and culture. I do this by incorporating nuanced description of Indian migration, classes of labor, composition of ethno-linguistic groups, Tamil cultural revivalism, and the emergence of *Bharata Natyam* in Malaya. By tracing the artistic development of pioneer dance masters, V.K. Sivadas and Gopal Shetty, and various prominent multi-ethnic male dancers who emerged after them, I illustrate the ways in which male dancing bodies dominated the public performance space from the moment Indian classical dance made its entry into Malaya. This investigation offers an opportunity to look into how gender and sexual

politics play out differently in the decades between the 1950s and 1980s and from the 1980s onwards. Secondly, this chapter focuses on the relationship between Malay hegemonic Malaysian state and Indian dance. I bring to the fore issues pertaining to ethnicity, citizenship, and state patronage. I stress that the “bumiputera” discourse is the root of the discussion of privilege. Although, through its preferential policies, the discourse favors the Malay group’s cultural practices and neglects the art forms of Indians, I argue that male and female artists of Indian dance defy political, economic, and social limitations placed upon them to make Indian dance a thriving art form in Malaysia. Influenced by the methodology of creative writing utilized by Marta Savigliano (2003)²⁴ and Priya Srinivasan (2009),²⁵ I “choreograph history” by using my own body to travel back and forth in time, in a way claiming agency for my “writing” body. I utilize an *Odissi* dance rehearsal, which I observed at the Sutra House, as a useful device to move through time and space. I do not intend to present a linear history; therefore, my historical account is fragmented, but purposeful and punctuated with interruptions that are created by my body.

Chapter Two, “Star Male Dancers” focuses on three “star” dancers in Malaysia: Ramli Ibrahim, Mavin Khoo, and Umesh Shetty. I examine the “star” qualities of the three dancers, who come from different ethnic backgrounds, by means of their Indian dance productions. My discussion foregrounds not only the enabling strategies, but also

²⁴ Savigliano, Marta. *Angora Matta: Fatal Acts of North-South Translation*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003.

²⁵ Srinivasan, Priya. “A ‘Material’ist Reading of the Bharata Natyam Dancing Body: The Possibility of the ‘Unruly Spectator,’” in *Worlding Dance*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster. London, Palgrave. 2009, pp. 53-75.

the silences, tensions, and contradictions that surround each person's "star" image. A closer examination of the means of production enables me to demonstrate how the labors of various individuals (particularly women) who are implicitly and explicitly involved in the production process contribute to the construction of the "star" image. This chapter posits the notion of "cosmopolitan masculinity" to characterize the flexibility and artistic mobility of "star" male dancers who possess the capability to transcend national boundaries. I demonstrate that different regimes - state, society, dance institution, and family - simultaneously act as forces that enable a dancer to rise to stardom, while regulating the body of the dancer. Through ethnographic and choreographic analysis, I explicate how gender and sexuality are variously negotiated onstage by straight and gay men and how, ultimately, the enforcement of patriarchy is crucial for male dancers to emerge as "stars" in a heavily policed state such as Malaysia.

Chapter Three, "Male Dancers Questioning Masculinity," is framed to focus on "non-star" male dancers (who exist in a spectrum of sexuality) who challenge masculinity and heteronormativity through onstage productions and offstage identities. I present three case studies that closely examine a cross-gendered Indian classical dance recital, the life of a transsexual artist, and a homoerotic performance. On the one hand, this chapter elucidates attempts by the disciplinary regimes such as the state, community, and family to discipline the male dancers' non-normative gender/sexual behaviors; on the other hand, it illuminates the resistance of certain male bodies to comply with normative gender regulations. I assert that, although the nation seeks ways to silence and police marginalized gender and sexual identities, "queer" male dancers claim agency through

their provocative choreographies onstage and their act of embracing “deviant” gender and sexual practices offstage.

Chapter Four, which render visible women’s artistic voice and their labor, explores gender relations between male and female dance artists. In doing so, this chapter grapples with the concerns of gendered division of labor, inequality, hierarchy, and power. I conduct a multifaceted analysis of women who assume various roles as dance teachers, public performers, and producers of Indian dance works. Presenting the ethnographies of women at different dance sites, I tailor my study to focus on the dance *gurus* of ToFA, two principal female performers who emerged from Sutra, and a freelance female *Bharata Natyam* dance practitioner who produces Indian dance recitals in Malaysia. In each study, I examine the relationship between female dance practitioners and male dancer/choreographer/artistic director(s) with whom they interact. I show how differently women negotiate gender and sexuality on and offstage. My general contention is that, although female dancers may not always be visible as onstage performers, they claim power and authority through their backstage and offstage labor.

“Performing Indian Dance in Malaysia” is an interdisciplinary project that reveals the dynamics of gender and sexuality in Malaysian Indian dance. It is about the ability to perform gender and sexuality fluidly, along a spectrum, and in a way not possible in everyday life because of the unique configuration of the pro-Islamic state, and the pressures from the community and the family institution. This research trajectory, which focuses on the phenomenon that men dominate public performance spaces and women inhabit private, less-visible spaces as dance *gurus*, examines the forces that contribute to

gender power, gender visibility, and gendered division of labor in the Indian dance scene. I argue that, while local and global mechanisms privilege male dancers, enhancing their artistic mobility, these mechanisms also tend to regulate their artistic choices and their bodies, causing men to move away from the Indian dance profession. Hence, this dissertation ends with a provocative thought about the future of male dancing in Malaysia, asking whether this phenomenon will soon be historical or will transform and make way for female dancers to become more visible.

CHAPTER 1

PERFORMING BUMIPUTERA AND GENDER

I park my car outside Sutra House at Persiaran Titiwangsa and look at my watch. (Excellent, I am on time!) As I get out of the car, I hear the music of the melodious Rageshri *raga* from the dance studio. I walk through an open gate towards the dance studio. Upon seeing me, the artistic director, Ramli Ibrahim, says, “Hi Prema, I thought you were coming yesterday. Never mind, come in, we just began our rehearsal. I am not sure how long the rehearsal will take. Lots of polishing to do with the coordination; it is so bad! We are leaving to India next week for our week-long *Odissi* dance tour.” I look at Ibrahim in astonishment. His receptivity blows me away; it is unlike our previous unpleasant encounters. I thank him and sit at one corner of the dance studio to observe the dance rehearsal.

After some time, I cannot contain the urge to move with the *Odissi* dance music. My body becomes restless. I tap my right palm on my thigh. My shoulders and ribcage move sideways to the rhythm ta, ta, dhi kit ta; dhi kit ta; dhi kit ta....Closing my eyes, I visualize myself dancing to the tune of “Pallavi.” Overcome by a sudden realization and guilt that I am not doing what I am supposed to do, I quickly take out my note pad.

I study the ethnic and gender composition of the dancers at the studio. There are two male dancers and eight female dancers. Multi-ethnic dancers constitute the group and about seventy percent of the dancers are of Indian descent. Since I do not know most of the Indian dancers, I ask a senior female Sutra dancer who sits beside me. Sharala points

out to the dancers and says, “that is Neela Nair, Gopika Reddy, Kanchana Bala, Jyotsna Bag,...”(In my mind, “Malayalee, Telugu, Tamilian, North Indian,...”)

As Sharala mentioned the names, my mind drifted away. The “unruly spectator” (Srinivasan, 2012) within me disrupted my visual and aural focus. I moved back and forth in time. The ethnic embodiment of the Sutra dancers offered me a lens to turn to the past. It brought to mind the history of Indian migration and Indian sub-ethnic politics. Realizing how much present cultural practices are informed by past history, I stress that present Indian dance praxis in Malaysia cannot be discussed without understanding the history of Indian immigration, social structure and identity, cultural revivalism, and citizenship. The history I present in this chapter is fragmented in order to advance my intention to illustrate how Indian cultural revivalism, the state “bumiputera” discourse, and gender discourse play essential roles in shaping Indian dance in Malaysia.

Indian Immigration to Malaya

Over the past two millennia or more, foreign influences from both the east and west have shaped the culture of Malaysia. The influences reached the Malay Peninsula from various regions: the Middle and near East, South Asia, East Asia, and from within South-East Asia. There were two waves of contact between Malaya and India. The first wave was before the nineteenth century. According to Malaysian history scholars, George Netto (1961) and Kernial Singh Sandhu (1969), there have been Indians and Indian influence in Malaya since the beginning of the Christian era. There was primarily an influx of people and subsidiarily an exchange of goods, bringing closer the economies and cultures of both lands. During that period, the movement of people was insignificant.

India and Malaya lay across the sea routes connecting the two extreme ends of trade and played an important role in trade by virtue of their geographic locations. The dependence on seasonal monsoons produced signs of Indian settlement in places used as entrepôts of trade. The Cholas and Pallavas of Southern India had a major share in the trade with Malaya.²⁶ The earliest evidence of Indian presence and influence in Malaya was found in southern Kedah, in the form of fragmentary inscriptions in Indian script of the fourth and fifth centuries as well as shrines with statues identical to the Pallava style of South India. The Indian traders and settlements were believed to have left “cultural imprints and influenced the cultures of societies around them,”²⁷ even though expansion of Islam over the Malay Peninsula in the late fifteenth century ended one thousand years of Hindu cultural influence.

The second wave of contact came in the wake of the arrival of large communities of people into the Malay Peninsula during the British colonial period in the nineteenth century. Sandhu (1969) clarifies that although immigration dates from the foundation of Penang in 1786, it only became significant in the latter half of the nineteenth century, following the establishment of British ruling in India and the consolidation of British power in Malaya. While the traders who arrived in Malaya in the first wave of contact

²⁶ Sandhu, 1973.

²⁷ Indian cultural influence spread into Malayan states and affected the political and social institutions through the direct agency of Indian traders and settlements. Hindu concepts of kingship and Hindu administrative institutions and ceremonies became deeply embedded in the Malayan courts. Hindu ideas and forms of worship spread widely. Besides, the influence of the Sanskrit language made a great mark and the Hindu literatures such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and the Panchatantra entered the Malay literature.

were made of Buddhist and upper caste elite Hindu predecessors, the latter-day immigrants were comprised of lower class and middle class migrants with a small fragment of upper class Indians.

The immigrants who arrived from India during the British colonial period fell into two main categories: the involuntary/coerced immigrants and the voluntary/free immigrants. Within these categories, immigrants were divided into labor and non-labor groups. Some assisted labor immigrants came to Malaya under the indentured contracts²⁸ while others came in without any contracts.²⁹

The British required cheap, docile, and reliable manpower to work in the lucrative plantation industries of rubber, sugar, and coffee as well as to build railway tracks and roads. The uneducated and poor low caste South Indians who fitted well as laborers in these industries were brought to Malaya as involuntary labor immigrants (indentured labors). In addition, the voluntary labor immigrants came to Malaya to work as boatmen, factory workers, domestic servants, and laundrymen.

²⁸ Under the Indentured contract or agreement, a prospective employer of labor placed an order with the recruiting agent based in India for the supply of a stipulated number of laborers. These laborers, on signing contract, were 'indentured' to the employer for the period of five years. The system was abolished in Malaya in 1910 when dissatisfaction towards the system increased in the House of Commons due to high mortality rates prevailing among the indentured laborers. Having examined the situation, the Colonial office saw no justification for the continuance of indentured recruitment and issued instructions that it should cease. Sandhu, Kernial Singh. *Indians in Malaya: Some Aspects of Their Immigration and Settlement (1786-1957)*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp. 75-86.

²⁹ The laborers who came in through the so-called "free or independent" systems of labor recruitment were either recruited by *Kanganis* or came in as non-recruited laborers. The *Kangani*, as an employee of the estate, returns to his village in India to recruit his friends, family members, and relatives. Under the *Kangani* system, Malayan employers paid the *Kangani* the passage and expenses to and from India plus commission for each laborer recruited. These laborers were not required to enter contracts but were nevertheless expected to repay the cost of their importation to the employer, usually from their wages.

The colonial rulers further required Indian immigrants to take up clerical and administrative posts in government services. Thus, they enabled the entry of non-labor involuntary immigrants. These immigrants were brought in chiefly from Ceylon to take up clerical posts, especially in the plantations and estates.

The voluntary non-labor immigration constituted about “35 per cent of the total migration stream from 1786 to 1957” (Sandhu, 1969). The English educated South Indian ethno-linguistic groups of Tamils, Malayalees, Telugus, and Ceylon Tamils were employed by British as white-collar workers in professional and clerical occupations as well as blue-collar workers employed in agricultural, constructional, and manufacturing sectors. Highlighting this composition further, Muzafar Desmond Tate (2008) points out that, while all the main ethno-linguistic groups of the Indian sub-continent were represented in the Malay Peninsula, about 87 per cent of the total population in Malaya came from South India and of these, over 90 per cent were Tamils. The non-labor immigrant groups brought with them their own traditions of performing arts and made great impact to the cultural movements and cultural revivalism in Malaya.

“Neela!” A loud voice brings my attention back to the *Odissi* dance piece that is being rehearsed. I am not sure who yelled the name. The final formation of “Pallavi” appears disorganized and the dancers are told to repeat the concluding dance phrase. In the closing, Neela Nair, Gopika Reddy, Kanchana Bala, Jyotsna Bag, and Uma Kulasingam come together and strike a group pose. Watching them perform “unity in diversity” reminds me of how far Indians in Malaysia have progressed politically and

socially from the state of being a fragmented Indian community. I am sure the Nairs, Reddys, and Singams did not demonstrate this unity during the colonial period.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Indian settlers in the peninsula were transient migrants, fragmented and isolated from one another. They were not united. Although all Indians in Malaya viewed India as culturally and spiritually superior, their main concern was not centered on India as a nation, but on each Indian group's own village or region from which the individual group came. Each sub-group represented an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991), constructing its allegiance through strategies of imagination. The Indians established numerous associations through which each individual group built its own in-group identity and interest. Elaborating on the lack of a single structural block in 1935, M.N. Nair observed:

Indians are fond of forming numerous associations wherever they go. In Malaya, there are various associations. There is no cohesion and unity between these various associations, and there is no single association competent to speak on behalf of the Indian public. (1937: 3)

Rajeswari Ampalavanar (1969), who studied 1920-41 as a significant phase in the evolution of Indian society in Malaya, puts forth that a clear social structure emerged in this period based on class, caste, and ethnicity. She argues that these identities influenced not only their social relationships, but also economic and political affiliations in the community. Ampalavanar and Tate (2008) distinguish major class groups as follows: first, the elite group, which consists of professionals, high government officials, and senior executives in leading private firms; second, the upper, English-educated middle class group which is comprised of government servants; third, the lower, vernacular-educated middle class group which includes merchants, school teachers, journalists, and

smallholders; and fourth, laborers in government services such as medical services, railways, docks, and the municipalities of large towns, and private employees working in local estates. (Ampalavanar, 1969:210; Tate, 2008:25)

In addition to the divisions based on occupation and wealth, there were also divisions based on caste differences and ethnic differences. The pervasiveness of caste convictions is seen in organizations such as the Maruthuvar Sangam, Vellala Associations, and the Adi Dravida Associations. These caste organizations provided social service to their respective caste members.

Ampalavanar (1972) argues that ethnic distinctions remained the most prevalent social divisions among Indians in Malaya. This could be seen in the occupational structure and organizational structure as well as in the attitude of the different ethnic groups on education, religion, arts, and culture. The major ethnic groups which included South Indian Tamils, Ceylon Tamils, Malayalees, Telugus, Punjabis, Sindhis, and Gujaratis were confined to distinct geographical and residential localizations throughout west Peninsula Malaya.

Saying “Hi,” someone taps me on my left shoulder. “Do you remember me? I am Shukla’s sister.” I realize that the students are now taking a short water break after rehearsing the exhaustive “Pallavi” dance number. I reply, “Oh, yes, I noticed you earlier. How is your sister?” Jyotsna Bag updates that her elder sister has completed her studies overseas and is back in Malaysia. Shukla is a seasoned Sutra dancer. I know Shukla and the Bag family very well. Both of her parents are medical doctors. I turn to a girl who stands beside Jyotsna, Uma Kulasingam and commend her for her *abinaya*, telling her

“Good job!” Shyly, she replies with a heavy Ceylonese Tamil slang, “Nandri aka. (Thanks sister). Master used to scold me a lot. I wasn’t interested at first, but amma has been my greatest encouragement. She is a Tamil school teacher. She was a dancer herself many years back, but discontinued dancing after marriage.” Uma’s Ceylonese grandparents and parents have been ardent supporters of Indian dance. From the short conversation and my observation, I gather that most of the dancers at the Sutra’s studio come from urban middle class Indian families who have been historically known as the preservers of Indian art.

The middle class Indians emerged as a result of rapid economic changes in British Malaya, which created more administrative job opportunities and which offered increased English education in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Malaya.³⁰ While the elite³¹ maintained little contact with the rest of the Indian society, the upper and lower middle class Indians took an effort to reach out to their community. Their participation revolved around ethnic and religious-cultural associations. The middle class Indian parents who enjoyed a better standard of living in Malaya were able to send their children to obtain English education. They believed that education not only secured employment, but also came to represent a worthy embodiment of values such as responsibility, self-esteem, pride, and confidence. This led the middle class Indians to acquire professional qualifications in many fields, including the field of arts through education. Elaborating on

³⁰ Ampalavanar, Rajeswari. “Class, Caste and Ethnicism among Urban Indians in Malaya 1920-1941.” *Nusantara* (2) 1972, pp. 209-236.

³¹ Social mobility was low and this class tended to be an exclusive one, confined to certain families with long established traditions of wealth, high qualifications, and social pre-eminence. (Ampalavanar, 1972:211)

the community further, Joseph Minattur (1965) explains that the educated white-collar job holders were more prone to revive Indian culture in Malaysia.

They (middle class Indians) wanted their children to acquire what is locally known as ‘English education’ because it was advantageous to acquire it from the point of view of prospects of life, but they wanted the children to learn mother tongue too, the language of the Indian region from where they came. *They taught their daughters Indian dancing and music.* They even organized classes where lessons in hata yoga were given. This was not to derive any spiritual benefit but to maintain physical health. (97) (emphasis mine)

“Kanchana, nee enna seire? (What are you doing?) Enge un position? (Where is your position?) How did you end up there? Concentration illaiya? (Don’t you have concentration?) Tiruppi sei! (Do it again!)” Guna stares sternly at Kanchana. Controlling her tears, Kanchana Bala moves a few steps to her right, landing on her original dance spot. Although Guna scolds Kanchana in predominantly Tamil language, the others quickly move to take their previous positions and get ready to rehearse the “messed up” segment again. They do not require an English translation. They rehearse the final part of the “Pallavi” several times. Even though the dance *guru*, Ibrahim, does not speak Tamil since he is a Malay and *Odissi* is a dance form presented with lyrics in Sanskrit and Oriya languages, it is not surprising to witness the way in which Tamil language makes its presence in that multi-ethnic dance rehearsal space - thanks to Tamil Cultural Revivalism!

The middle class Indian group was also the main driving force in reviving the Tamil culture, which took place after 1945, in Malaya (Arasaratnam, 1970). The Tamil cultural revivalism, under the influence of the Dravidian Progressive Movement (DMK) in South India, gathered force in the immediate post-second World War years in Malaya.

It emerged as an important movement that emphasized and instilled the Dravidian³² element in Indian culture. In the socio-religious sphere, the movement aimed at cleansing society of superstition and at eradicating irrelevant customs and beliefs. The Tamil cultural revivalism movement made initiatives to go against the excessive use of Sanskritization in religion and society. It also emphasized the usage of Tamil language and Tamil literature in Malaya. The middle class Malayan Indians, especially the majority of Tamilians (South Indian Tamils and Ceylon Tamils), felt that, through the knowledge of Tamil language, their children could learn about Tamil culture, tradition, and religion. They also realized that the ability to speak and write one's language meant the preservation of one's ethnic culture.

On the political front, Tamil language was used as a tool by non-Brahmin castes to counter the power and prestige of the Brahmins in South India. Tamilians formed many associations to deliver these messages. Some of these ideas seeped into Malaya even before 1945, and social reform associations such as the Tamil Reform Association and the Malayan Tamil Pannai³³ were formed to promote Tamil culture. (Arasaratnam, 1970)

³² Dravidian is the name given to a linguistically related group of people in Southern India (Tamil and Telugu). They are said to be the first original settlers of ancient India. The group is mainly composed of the Tamil, and more isolated highland tribes such as the *Ghats* and the *Todas*. The Dravidians were a very advanced culture. Extensive excavations indicate that the Dravidian culture was well established by about 2500 B.C., and more recent studies revealed that it covered nearly all of the Lower Indus Valley. The Indus Valley civilization was an empire that contained hundreds of cities, some of which had populations of thirty to forty thousand. The cities were centers for high civilization. The movement aimed to go forward to seek a wider unity and the annihilation of caste and to strengthen the Tamil or Dravidian identity by promoting the Tamil language and culture.

³³ See Arasaratnam, Sinnappah. *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore*. London: Oxford University Press, 1970, p.128.

As part of Tamil cultural revivalism, Malayan Indians established *sabhas* and *sangams*.³⁴ They developed intensive cultural and religious contacts with India, which resulted in a steady flow of religious and social leaders, visitors, and artists to Malaya. The cultural revivalist movement created deep awareness on the importance and the need to protect the Indian culture, language, religion or various art forms among the middle class Indians. Such arts and cultural practices provided a way for the Indian immigrants to maintain their social identity in the diaspora, as pointed out by dance scholar Janet O'Shea (2007). I further stress that the process of learning and presenting Indian art forms allowed for the "reiteration of their (Indian immigrants') homeland's culture in diaspora" (O'Shea, 2007:3).

The Ceylon Tamils, particularly, played a profound role in initiating and preserving fine arts, such as music, dance, and drama in Malaya. Since the Ceylon Tamils acquired higher educational and stronger social background, they "displayed greater enthusiasm than the South Indian Tamils in the learning of classical music and dance" (Ramasamy 1988: 140). The thirst for cultural activity among the Ceylon Tamils was propelled by increased material prosperity and the search of their own identity.

The Ceylon Tamils, who mostly resided in the urban areas due to their economic prosperity, were patrons to the Hindu temples, among others, the popular Kandasamy Temple and the Pudu Pillayar Temple in Kuala Lumpur (K.L.). Those temples fervently organized religious activities such as religious classes and religious text recitals. The

³⁴ *Sabhas* and *sangams* are private voluntary arts and cultural organizations. They have cropped up all over the country since the 1920s.

Ceylon Tamils considered the learning of Tamil language a necessity. Hence, most parents sent their children for Tamil classes in the evenings. They also had the privilege to organize Indian arts programs since they enjoyed the advantage of good leadership and patronage at various religious and cultural sites.

Describing the extent to which the urban Indian communities were the most vocal preservers of the classical Indian culture, Sinnappah Arasaratnam (1965) comments,

Classical Indian music and dancing find ardent patrons in them. Societies such as the Sangitha Abhivirthi Sabha (Society for the Promotion of Music) are active in maintaining and cultivating an interest in the *carnatic* school of Indian music and *Bharata Natyam*. In the larger towns, there are private schools as well as individual teaching offering instruction in these arts. Quite frequently, visits are entertained from well-known Indian artists who never failed to draw large crowds to their public performances. Efforts to foster Indian drama and lighter forms of music are widespread throughout the Indian community. (103)

The Ceylonese Tamils formed the Selangor Ceylon Tamil Association (SCTA)³⁵ in 1900. This association had the largest membership and was very active in organizing social, cultural, religious, economic, and sporting activities. SCTA conducted lessons in music and drama. It became a common practice for SCTA to stage plays during the early years of the nineteenth century. The play *Harichandra* was staged in 1906, followed by *Thamayanthi* and *Kandyan King*³⁶ in 1915. The Indians have witnessed a growth of bodies fostering arts and culture since the 1920s. As the number of students who enrolled for Indian dance and music classes began to increase, SCTA became instrumental in

³⁵ The Ceylon Tamils felt the necessity for organizing themselves into associations to cater to the needs of their community members, therefore associations such as the SCTA was formed. Ramasamy, Rajakrishnan. *Sojourners to Citizens: Sri Lankan Tamils in Malaysia (1885-1965)*. Kuala Lumpur: Sri Veera Trading, 1988, p.146.

³⁶ The plays *Harichandra*, *Thamayanthi*, and *Kandyan King* were named after characters from the *puranas*. *Puranas* are religious works which glorify the Hindu deities through mythological stories.

establishing subsidiary associations such as the Selangor Ceylon Saivites Association for religious activities, the Tamilian Physical Culture Association for sports, and the Sangeetha Abhivirthi Sabha (the music *sabha*) for promoting Indian classical dance, classical music, and drama.

The Sangeetha Abhivirthi Sabha, which was established in June 1923, began classes in *carnatic* music and drama. In February 1927, it succeeded in staging the first drama, *Pathuka Pattapishekam*, which was followed by many other plays based on religious and cultural themes. The success of the stage plays led to the formation of the Chums Dramatic Society in the same year. This organization focused most of its effort on drama, while the Sangeetha Sabha devoted itself to the teaching of dance and music. After the Second World War, the Chums Dramatic Society was renamed Kalavirthi Sangam as an effort to broaden its Indian cultural activities.

After the war, the Sangeetha Sabha continued to play an effective role in promoting Indian classical music and dance. The Sabha committee invited music doyens³⁷ from South India to teach at its space. The occasional visits by musical troupes from South India created enthusiasm for classical music. The Sabha staged music performances during Hindu festivals, particularly the grandly celebrated Navarathiri festivals.³⁸ Membership was opened to anyone who wished to learn music irrespective of class and ethnicity. Students' enrollment increased significantly. Progressively, the sabha

³⁷ Music experts who were invited to teach at the sabha included T. Ponnusamy Iyengar (violinist), S. Ramalingam Iyer (violinist), K. Nadesa Pillai (flutist), and S. Harihara Iyer (harmonica). *Tamil Nesan Merdeka Souvenir*. 1957, p.108.

³⁸ Navarathiri festival is devoted to the worship of the Hindu goddess, Durga, in various forms. It is observed for nine days in the Tamil month of *Purattasi* (September to October).

spread its wings to other towns and states such as Seremban and Perak. This cultural body is still active in preserving and promoting music and dance in Malaysia.

Following the footsteps of the Ceylon Tamils who established the Chums Amateur Dramatic Society, other sub-Indian groups formed the Malaya Suguna Vilasa Samaj and the Sri Ganesananda Dramatic Troupe in the 1930s. Ampalavanar (1969) notes that the cultural and ideological content of the plays staged by these organizations held interesting implications for cultural enthusiasm in the Indian society. Although the Indian audience initially appreciated Sanskrit plays such as *Ratnavali* and Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, the focus soon changed and the organizations began staging plays by Tamil poets, Bharathi Dasan and Bharathi, with special emphasis on the cultural heritage of the Tamils. Soon enough, new Tamil plays replaced Sanskrit plays on the stage. Another association known as the Young Men's Indian Association of K.L. also took special interest in spreading the arts among Indians. It engaged music teachers to provide free lessons to its members' children.

In all the cultural accounts thus far, there has only been one significant record about Indian classical dancing. Although Ampalavanar (1969) states that classical dancing was avid, she only mentions the Malaya Suguna Vilasa Samaj and how it patronized dance by staging dance performances presented by artists from India. More specifically, she notes that the famous Indian dancer, Menaka and her troupe made their debut to the Malaysian audience in April 1935.

Since archives on dance activities before 1950 are unavailable or vaguely mentioned in writings, I surmise here that Indian dancing was limited to the performances

staged by visiting artists from India during cultural festivals and sabha functions. If classes were held at all, they could have been taught by visiting artists on a temporary basis or through informal dance training from mothers to their daughters. Rajakrishnan Ramasamy (1988) has specifically written about the emphasis given by middle class Indian parents, both in India and Malaya, in providing music and dance education to their daughters. He explains that besides being a trend, it was meant to perpetuate cultural traditions and identity in the community and to enhance marriage arrangements for their daughters. Ramasamy further stresses that, within the Indian community, a knowledge of the fine arts serves as a “good pastime for young men and was considered as an asset for women” (1988:140).

Another Sutra senior dancer, Tan Mei Mei, murmurs something into my right ear. Startled, I turn and look at her, unable to decide how to respond. I have no idea how long she has been sitting next to me. Hiding my embarrassment, I ask softly, “So, you are not going on this tour? You are not dancing with them?” She replies, “No, we just came back from New York last month. I could not take leave from my work for this trip. I am here to sort out the costumes for the dancers. But, see, Michelle is going; she has become a full-time dancer at Sutra now.” My gaze now fixes upon Michelle and gradually moves from one dancer to the other. I notice the diversity of the dance group: Indigenous Malay, Malaysian Chinese, and Malaysian Indians. UMNO-MCA-MIC Alliance brought independence to Malaya, but what about these multi-ethnic dancing bodies? What are they signifying? Indian-ness? Malaysian-ness? What is Malaysian-ness? Or, what does it

mean to be a Malaysian? Is this performance a model of One-Malaysia? How far is this unity propaganda a reality outside the performance space?

Malayan/Malaysian Indian Identity and Citizenship

The Japanese Occupation in Malaya (1940-5) as well as the powerful social and political reform movements in India started to influence the Indian residents in the Malay Peninsula. A growing awareness slowly dawned amongst these Indians of the limitations of their position as aliens in a foreign land, to which, nevertheless, a growing number of Indians had become permanently attached. There grew a desire among the Indians to develop their own identity, the Malayan Indian identity. Tate (2008) illuminates that the term Malayan/Malaysian Indian has been adopted for references to the Indian community after 1946 when its members were first eligible to become Malaysian citizens. Tate argues that the coherence of the Malaysian Indian is not based on ethnicity or religion, but on their “Indian-ness,” a cultural affinity that provides them with their common identity.

The absence of an identity was also pointed out by “visiting Indian officials or leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru” (Rajoo, 1975) since the pre-World War II era. Following this, the educated Indians formed the Central Indian Association of Malaya (CIAM),³⁹ the first political body claiming to represent the Indians in 1936. After World War II, the Indian politics entered a new phase. The old CIAM leadership dispersed when

³⁹ CIAM was a conservative, middle class organization that depended primarily on support from the commerce and merchant associations in the Peninsula. Tate (2008) iterates that it could hardly be described as representative of the Indian community. It faced a severe handicap in its efforts to achieve its goal of uniting the Indians, let alone in its attempt to forge a Malayan identity because of the communalism and sectarianism in the local Indian society.

its leaders died and others returned to India. Nehru, who was nominated by the Indian National Congress in India to organize defense and relief committees in Malaya, urged the local Indian leaders to respond to the need for a broad-based organization during his visit to Malaya in March 1946. Furthermore, there was a great need for Indians to address the issues of citizenship and representation plaguing the community at that time. These factors led to the formation of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in August 1946. The first president was John Thivy. As a formal representative of the Indian community in the country, MIC moved closer to the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) and Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) Alliance by the end of 1953. UMNO and MCA were the main representative bodies for the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups respectively. Becoming a full member of the Alliance, its third constituent party, MIC, was promised proportional representation in future elections as efforts were being taken towards self-government. Meanwhile, the leadership of MIC was Tamilized with dominant positions held by the Tamils in the organization after 1954 in line with the aspirations of the Tamil revivalism movement. Such leadership garnered better support for the organization from the Tamil masses. The UMNO-MCA-MIC Alliance went on to win elections in 1955. Malaya attained its *merdeka* (independence) on August 31, 1957. Malaya united with Sabah, Sarawak, and Singapore on 16 September, 1963, and was named Malaysia. However, less than two years later in 1965, Singapore moved out from the Federation.

Citizenship was the most apparent gain brought by independence to all Indians. This issue had been sensitive to not only the Indians, but also to all other ethnic groups since it was raised with the publication in late 1945 of the details of the Malayan Union

scheme during British colonialism. The scheme suggested offering for the first time a common citizenship (*jus soli*) for all those who reside in British Malaya. This proposed scheme would have given citizenship to everyone born in the country before the Malayan Union came into being if the Malays did not reject the scheme. The Federation of Malaya Agreement that replaced the Malayan Union constitution in 1948 also denied eligibility for citizenship to the non-Malays. In 1952, the issue was raised again against the backdrop of local elections. The rules were revised and “contained concessions that made about 60 percent of the Malayan Indian community eligible for citizenship, including almost a quarter of a million who were now entitled to it automatically” (Tate, 2008:108). According to the new Malayan constitution that came into effect with the achievement of Independence in 1957, all those born in the country on and after *merdeka* (independence) day automatically became citizens by law. However, acquiring citizenship also led to drawbacks. Tun Mohamad Suffian, former Lord President of the Malaysian Judiciary, pointed out as follows:

The bargain that was struck between the representatives of the major communities was that in return for the relaxation of the conditions for the granting of non-Malays of citizenship, the rights and privileges of the Malays as the indigenous people of the country were to be written into the constitution. (Quoted from Tate, 2008:108)

Although Malaysia did not pursue an outright assimilationist policy, the majority Malays, nonetheless, pressed on the construction of a national culture founded on their culture. The unequal relation between the Malays and other ethnic groups became evident through the 1957 constitution. This was not the situation during the colonial period when no one ethnic group’s culture gained superiority and there was no conception of a

common national culture. The colonial power practiced “divide and rule” policy and was essentially non-interventionist in the cultural development of the colony, allowing each ethnic group the freedom to practice their culture in the colonial space.⁴⁰ But, this had not been the case since independence.

“Kali, Tara, Bhubaneswari, Sodasi, Matangi... bless thy humble devotee...,” goes the script with Ibrahim’s voice-over for the *abinaya* dance piece, “Dasamahavidya,” that follows the “Pallavi.” Ibrahim forms the *mudras* (hand gestures) denoting the universal female energy, Shakti. Then, he turns to one of his Indian female dancers and snaps at her, “You are not bringing out the bakti (devotion), beg to the Mother!” While watching this scene, I wonder how Ibrahim, a Bumiputera Malay, is getting away with performing Indian dance in this pro-Islamic country. Only recently, the Islamic bodies criticized yoga as a threat to its dominant religion, Islam and called for the banning of yoga practices among Muslims.⁴¹ How far have the Islamic authorities allowed Ibrahim to perform Indian dance? Don’t they send “spies” anymore to harass him? What does it mean for a Bumiputera, from the dominant/privileged ethnic group to embrace a minority dance form? What is at stake for the Muslim dancer?

⁴⁰ Also see V.Suryanarayan’s *Indians in Malaysia: The Neglected Minority* (1975), where he points out that the communal tensions were mainly due to Sino-Malay rivalry and the role of the Indians was only peripheral. He states that the tensions were direct consequences of the cultural segregation of the three ethnicities. (35)

⁴¹ In November 2008, one of Malaysia’s leading Islamic bodies, the Malaysian National Fatwa Council, issued a fatwa or edict banning Muslims from practicing yoga, on the grounds that yoga contains elements of Hinduism such as chanting and worshipping. It argued that yoga could erode the faith of Muslims, causing them to deviate from Islam. Although the ruling is not legally binding, Muslims in Malaysia abide by the edicts issued by the Islamic body. Following local and worldwide protests, Malaysia’s former Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi reversed the outright ban, announcing that Muslims could continue yoga practices, but should abstain from chanting.

Pro-Bumiputera Policies and Indian Dance

In the post-independence Malaysia, question arose about how to construct a national culture advancing Malay superiority/dominance (*Ketuanan Melayu*) without alienating the non-Malay communities and violating their rights to practice and propagate their cultures as affirmed in the constitution. Lee Hock Guan (2000) emphasizes that the ambivalence surrounding the inclusion and exclusion of the non-Malays' cultures constitutes the key predicament in the construction of the modern Malaysian nation.

The Malaysian cultural landscape was a ferociously contested space in the 1960s. The Malays and non-Malays held opposing viewpoints concerning issues such as culture, religion, and language. On the one hand, the Malays strongly supported the dominant and privileged position of Malay culture and expected the state to promote Malay culture and the official status of the Malay language, but on the other, the Indians, and particularly “the Chinese,” (Guan, 2000) vigorously and tirelessly advocated the equality of status for every culture in the multi-ethnic society (secular nation).

The heated cultural debate reached its climax through the May 13, 1969 ethnic riots.⁴² The Malaysian government declared a state of emergency and suspended the parliament until 1971. Following the riots, the pro-Malay state decided to proceed more aggressively to reconstitute the public cultural landscape. As a result, the government

⁴² The desire by UMNO to assert Malay supremacy in Malaya and Singapore heightened the racial tensions between the Malays and Chinese. The Sino-Malay communal riots that began in K.L. and Selangor on May 13, 1969 spilled over to Singapore. The violence was triggered by the Malayan General Election that had been characterized by intense ethnic campaigning in which Malays expressed frustration over their economic backwardness, while Chinese denounced political and cultural inequalities. Many people were injured and killed in the riots. The riots brought Malayan politics to a temporary halt.

came up with an affirmative action policy marked specifically by the New Economy Policy (NEP) favoring the Malays.

The ruling state political party, the Barisan National coalition (earlier referred as Alliance), launched the NEP to tackle the economic disjuncture between the Malays and the immigrant Chinese and Indians. The two-pronged policy, which was conceived to eradicate poverty regardless of race and to eliminate racialized economic stratification (Mohamed, 1998), gave preferential treatment to the majority ethnic group. A new category “bumiputera” was created to refer to the beneficiaries of the NEP. The construction of “bumiputera,” which means “sons of soil,” entitled the Malays to favorable treatment as the original inhabitants of the land. The construction was seen as a solution to the Malay subject’s economic “backwardness” (as compared to other ethnic groups).⁴³ The idea of “catching up with non-Malays” was the cornerstone of the state “bumiputera” policy.

“Bumiputera” refers not only to the Muslim Malays on the Peninsula, but also includes the indigenous peoples of East Malaysia - Sabah and Sarawak. The Chinese and Indians, who are excluded from this category, are known as the “non-bumiputera.” The preferential policies under the Malay hegemonic state marginalize the “non-bumiputera”

⁴³ Though many Chinese and Indians were imported during the colonial period as laborers to work in tin mining and rubber productions, they attained economic prosperity after independence. The former formed a substantial part of the commercial and capitalist class in Malaysia and the largest part of the local bourgeois, and the latter diversified into business, trading, and professional sectors. Mohamed argues in his book, *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), that although Malays were politically superior, they were weakened by the natural abundance and faced serious problems competing economically with the immigrant communities whom he points out as toughened by the hardy environment of their home countries.

by strategically altering the structure of socio-economic opportunities for each ethnic group.

The first explicit formulation of a national culture policy in Malaysia only made its appearance in August 1971. The guidelines emerging from this Congress recommended a national culture developed around three prime principles:

- a. the national culture of Malaysia must be based on the culture of the people indigenous to the region;
- b. elements from other cultures which are suitable and reasonable may be incorporated into the national culture; and
- c. Islam will be an important element in the national culture.

(Tan Sooi Beng, 1989/90:138)

The government implemented the newly defined national culture policy during the 1970s mainly through the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports. The policy amplified the symbolic presence of the Malay culture and Islam in the public space. It was, thus, a model of how the Malaysian state exercised control over the activities of the diverse ethnic groups. Since the 1980s, pressures from the resurgence of Islam among the Malays pushed the state to introduce more measures to enhance the “Islamicization” of the society.⁴⁴ In line with this, the state allocated funds and established institutions for the

⁴⁴ Islamic fundamentalism, which began to take root in Malaysia in the early 1970s (Shamsul, 1994), had its greatest influence on Malaysian life in the 1980s. There were increasing calls from the fundamentalist groups for the institution of an Islamic state. In response, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad’s government launched its own Islamic programs, including the development of Islamic universities and Islamic banks. Subsequently, the expansion of Islamic mosques, Islamic institutions, Islamic outfits, and government-supported Islamic programs in 1980 threatened the non-Muslim Malaysians, and they began to worry about their culture within an increasingly Islamic Malay state.

purpose of researching, reviving, training, and performing traditional Malay art forms, “altering them where necessary to fit current ideological and religious sensibilities” (Carstens, 1999:20).

According to Tan (1989/90;1992), the only non-Malay art form subsidized by the government was a Western-style orchestra. All other non-Malay cultural activities depended heavily on patronages from the private corporations. Furthermore, the government policed the cultural activities of the non-Malays by making it compulsory for them to acquire government permits for their public performances. The only explicit move undertaken by the government to incorporate non-Malay cultures into the Malaysian national culture is to recognize Chinese New Year and Deepavali as Malaysian national holidays.⁴⁵

Even as the pro-Malay policy regime discriminates against non-Malay cultural practices by depriving them from having equal access to state funding, policing, and curbing the cultural activities of other groups through various restrictions, a complete control of the arts has not taken place. The shortfalls of the existing policies, bodies, and guidelines, Tan (1992) asserts, have provided leeway for individuals and groups to resist and challenge the state’s attempts to control them. More specifically, the bodies of “bumiputera” dancers (Malays) and “non-bumiputera” dancers (Indians and Chinese) are all governed by the pro-Islamic state and society. Michel Foucault (1979) points out that the power exercised on the body is “conceived not as a property, but as a strategy, that its effects of domination are attributed to dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, and functionings,

⁴⁵ Tan, 1989/1990; Carstens, 1999.

that one should decipher in it a network of relations, constantly in tension”(26). “Bumiputera” dancers, such as Ibrahim, are particularly scrutinized and policed by the government to ensure that they do not deviate from the Islamic faith by embracing non-Malay dance forms. Meanwhile, “non-bumiputera” dancers, such as Guna, face constraints due to lack of support in the predominantly Malay society. Michel de Certeau (1984) suggests “ways of operating” to resist and manipulate the disciplining mechanisms and “conform to them only in order to evade them” (xiv). Similarly, both groups try to escape from the constraints of the disciplining Malaysian state, at times, by crossing national borders to earn name and fame outside the “home.” Here, I turn to the biographies of two prominent “bumiputera” male artists of Indian dance in Malaysia: Ibrahim and Zameen Harun (Dr. Chandrabhanu), men of Malay-Muslim origin, who have chosen to devote their lives for Indian dance. They have pursued their passion for the Indian art by taking different routes as part of their strategies to navigate pressures from the state.

Zameen Harun, born to a Burmese - Bengali father and a Malay Muslim mother, is a “bumiputera.” Chandrabhanu was the name given to Zameen Harun by his *Odissi guru*, Bijoy Kumar Senapati, in 1974. A trip to Wisconsin in the United States as an exchange student at the age of eighteen changed Chandrabhanu’s way of thinking. When he returned to Malaysia, he became unruly, too vocal, and he struggled to adapt himself to the Malay culture. He held contradictory points of view about everything that happened around him. He was resistant to the regulations which he found restricting his freedom of action and speech. The orthodox Malays constantly queried his “Malay-ness,”

which led him into a severe identity crisis. After the ethnic riot in 1969, he pointed out that he could not stay in the seemingly “racist” country. At this point, he decided to move to Australia where he pursued his undergraduate studies in Social Anthropology and his doctoral studies in the same field in Melbourne. While he continued to maintain residency in Melbourne, he never renounced his Malaysian citizenship. It allowed him to travel rather easily to Malaysia for his doctoral research as well as for Indian dance performances, and lecture-demonstrations.

Chandrabhanu was the first male dancer from Malaysia who went on to pursue professional Indian classical dance training in India,⁴⁶ and he was also the first dancer to present a full *Bharata Natyam margam* (repertoire) public performance in Malaysia in 1975. When I asked him about how the state and the Muslim public received his performance, he said that his performance was fully sold-out and received good reviews from the local critics such as Krishen Jit and Syed Alwi. As a holder of dual citizenship (Malaysia and Australia), he stressed that, throughout his dancing career in Malaysia, he had not faced any problems with the state government. He reasoned that it could have been because “people always see him as an Australian” (personal correspondence, 2012). His statement was not convincing. I wondered if Chandrabhanu concealed any important information concerning his relationship with the state. On the other hand, I also wondered

⁴⁶ Following his *Bharata Natyam* training locally at Usha-Prema Dance School until 1973, he pursued professional training in *Bharata Natyam* at Bharata Choodamani Academy of Fine Arts, Chennai, India under the personal tutelage of *guru* Adyar K. Lakshman (Lakshman had his dance and music training in Kalakshetra). He also underwent *Odissi* training at Orissa under the personal tutelage of Bijoy Senapati. Prior to his Indian classical dance training, Chandrabhanu learned classical Malay dance forms such as Gendang Terinai, and Joget Gamelan in Malaysia.

about the ambiguity within the policing of “bumiputera” bodies, particularly about why certain bodies were subject to scrutiny, while others were not.

Chandrabhanu inspired Ramli Ibrahim to learn Indian classical dance while the latter was pursuing his engineering degree in Australia. At that time, Ibrahim was already trained in ballet and modern dance technique in Australia. He was dancing and touring professionally with the Sydney Dance Company. Ibrahim received his *Bharata Natyam* training under the same *guru* as Chandrabhanu, Adyar K. Lakshman. Ibrahim’s attraction towards *Odissi* prompted him to learn from Gajendra Kumar Panda, a disciple of the reputable *Odissi* master, *guru* Debaprasad Das, and later, he became the direct disciple of Debaprasad Das. Although Chandrabhanu started performing *Odissi* before Ibrahim, Ibrahim was the first artist to introduce *Odissi* to Malaysian audience in the early 1980s. This dance form took the Malaysian audience by storm. It attained instant fame among the multi-ethnic audience in Malaysia for two main reasons: firstly, it was performed by a non-Indian dancer and secondly, the dance form was new and carried a “fresh outlook.”

Ibrahim declared in an online interview with Nartaki.com⁴⁷ that he used to perform *Bharata Natyam* in Australia under the Hindu name, Ramachandra. When he returned to Malaysia, he had to use his original name, Ramli Ibrahim, to establish his original ethnic identity. Ibrahim asserted that, unlike Chandrabhanu, he faced huge problems with the Islamic groups in the country. He was regularly called on by religious

⁴⁷ See <http://www.narthaki.com/info/intervw/intrvw15.html>

officials for interrogations. His performances were attended by uninvited “guests.”⁴⁸ Analyzing both cases, it can be argued that Chandrabhanu could not have renounced Islam and performed Indian dance under an Indian or a Hindu identity. As a Malaysian resident, the state would not have tolerated such a move. As a “murtad,”⁴⁹ he would have been prone to severe state disciplining. However, maintaining “home” away from home in a “white” country enabled him to fend off the sectarian pressures, which ultimately Ibrahim could not avoid. While Ibrahim appeared to have submitted to certain restrictions imposed by the pro-Islamic state (he never places Hindu religious icons on the stage or performs Hindu rituals associated with Indian classical dances in the public), he skillfully strategized his artistic visions despite state scrutiny to move with a certain level of fluidity and rise as one of the foremost Indian arts promoters in Malaysia.⁵⁰

In the *abinaya* pieces, “Dasamahavidya” and “Ardhanareshvara,” Ibrahim and Guna, two primary Sutra male dancers, take on central roles. Their already visible bodies become hypervisible. In “Dasamahavidya,” there are numerous instances during which Guna’s presence stands out among the rest of the dancers as he performs dance steps vastly differing from his female counterparts. Throughout this dance, each female dancer

⁴⁸ Ibrahim went through an ordeal in 1996 when he was interrogated, grilled, and photographed by officials from the Islamic Centre. Zieman (2000), in his article, “Staying True to His Calling,” quoted Ibrahim as follows: “I was the number one candidate of apostasy. I was to be sent to the centre of rehabilitation. I was made to explain the mystical, aesthetic, and spiritual experience I went through.” Zieman wrote that some “naïve Malays” lashed out at Ibrahim and branded him as *sesat* (lost) and *murtad* (apostate), and because of this, one of his performances in Kajang in 1984 was cancelled. After three years of trying to justify that he was not an apostate, Ibrahim gave up and continued to get on with his life. Ibrahim also pointed out that he continued to get awkward stares and mysterious calls from some who wanted to know whether he had turned Hindu.

⁴⁹ *Murtad* is a person who leaves the religion (apostasy) and conspires against it.

⁵⁰ Chapter Two examines how Ibrahim presents his Indian dance works despite pressures from the government.

in the cast takes turns to portray the different manifestations of Goddess Shakti, while Guna assumes various roles as humble devotee and demon. At one point, the female dancers, led by a leading dancer as Shakti, chase Guna (the demon) around the rehearsal space, push him down to the floor, kick him repeatedly, pull his hair, squeeze his body between their legs, and kill “the demon” with the trident. Poor guy Guna, what a dramatic depiction of the killing of Mahishasura (the demon)!

Ibrahim assumes the role of Shiva, partnering one his Indian female students, who poses as Shakti in “Ardhanareshvara.” The choreography contains sensual moments of embraces, depicting the divine union between the male and female energy. Sporadically, Ibrahim and Guna occupy center stage surrounded by female dancers in diagonal lines and in the shapes of circles and squares. In the concluding segment, Ibrahim and his female partner come together and pose as Shiva and Shakti with their arms crisscrossed on each other’s waist. Ibrahim’s right leg and his partner’s left leg are lifted up with the soles of their feet touching each other. The gap in-between both their lifted legs allows Guna to enter and gesture as *nandi* (bull), the primary *vahana* (vehicle) of Shiva.

At this juncture, my vision blurred. I did not see Ibrahim and his partner, but Sivadas and his spouse Vatsala in a duet dance, “Shiva-Parvathi” and then, the image changed to Gopal Shetty-Radha. Psychically, I travelled several decades back, transported through the decades starting from 2012 through 2000 ... 1990s ... 1980s ... 1970s ... 1960s ... 1955 ... 1954 ... 1953. Stop! Play!

Gender Politics: Male Dancing in Malaysia

A group of Malayalees gather at the Chettiar Hall in K.L. to celebrate the annual Onam Festival.⁵¹ It is an occasion that all Indians who originate from Kerala look forward to each year. Everyone gets to participate in some form of cultural activities that day. Some women put on a finishing touch to the grand *kolam* they have tirelessly designed on the floor since early morning. They then lit the traditional brass lamps around the beautiful peacock *kolam*. Children are extremely joyful and delighted to participate in games. Little Vatsala is busy participating in various games and happily collecting trophies. She is the big winner. The blasting sound of Malayalam music can be heard from the hall. Men and women continue to take on the stage to render devotional as well as famous old and new Malayalam movie songs. Then, a group of women, dressed in typical Kerala style, ascend the stage. They wear gold-bordered traditional two-piece cloth called *mundu* and *neriyathu* (*mundu* is a one-piece cloth draped on the lower part of the body while *neriyathu* is worn over a blouse). They tie their hair beautifully in a bun. The fragrant jasmine flowers around the bun further enhance the charm of the dancers. They perform *Kaikottikali* or *Thiruvathirakali*, an extremely popular folk dance form. In perfect coordination, ten women move in circles, clapping their hands upwards and downwards in unison and in accordance to the rhythm of the song they sing. There is also much anticipation in the crowd that day, especially G.P. Kurup. Kurup has invited a local artist to perform an Indian classical dance piece. While Kurup and the Malayalee audience wait anxiously for the dancer, a good-looking young man in his thirties walks into the hall wearing a silk sari pant costume (male costume) and ankle bells. He walks up to the stage and presents a traditional *Bharata Natyam* expressive dance piece, “Ananda Tandavam.” Enraptured by the versatile dancer, art lovers become fond of him. The performer gains extraordinary attention from then on.

This is the opening tale⁵² of how V.K. Sivadas⁵³ transformed from a fortune-seeking migrant to Malaya, clerking at the government office, to commanding dancer/choreographer on the public stage in Malaya/Malaysia. Krishen Jit writes that “Sivadas might well have opened the curtain on the tradition of solo male Indian classical

⁵¹ *Onam* is the largest festival in the Indian state of Kerala and is grandly celebrated by Malayalee Hindus all over the world.

⁵² This tale is partially factual (based on information gathered from informants) and partially fictional.

⁵³ Sivadas received his dance training from three prominent male dance *gurus* in India, *Bharata Natyam* from the cymbalist/*nattuvanar*, Palanisamy Pillai of Rabindranath Tagore Academy, *Kathakali* from Gopinath of Nataniketan of Madras, and advance *Bharata Natyam* training from Kutraalam Ganesha Pillai in Madras.

dancing in post-1945 Malaysia” (Hansa, 1988: 32). Sivadas’ debut performance in K.L. in August 1953 left a huge impact among the Malayalee audience. His performance particularly impressed Kurup, a professor at the Serdang Agricultural College and a notable theatre practitioner. Kurup is Vatsala’s father. Upon seeing Sivadas’ performance, Kurup endlessly persuaded Sivadas to teach *Bharata Natyam* to his ten-year-old daughter, Vatsala. Sivadas, who first refused to teach on the grounds that he wanted to focus on earning a living through a government job, agreed after Kurup’s repeated persuasions and requests. Vatsala aka, as she is fondly known today, recalls that her father made all the arrangements to facilitate the process of teaching.

Master (Sivadas) didn’t want to teach but Accha (father) forced him. Accha was very active in the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC); he supported lots of Indians in the Serdang area. He was very active in promoting Indian cultural activities. He built an Indian Community Hall in Serdang. Master conducted his classes here. I wasn’t keen to learn at first, but then I liked it. Since Accha was a great flutist and could compose music, he helped Master develop new compositions for his dance choreographies. Several other Indian parents were very helpful too. They helped by sponsoring ornaments and costumes for our shows. (personal correspondence, 2012)

Vatsala was placed under the dance stewardship of Sivadas. She became his first student. Sivadas’ performances were unique because he attempted to create productions that appealed to people from all ethnic groups. He incorporated universal themes and dance narratives that reflected the lifestyles of Malaysians. His productions, such as the *Eagle and Snake*, *Fisherman’s Comedy*, and *The Hunter and His Wife*, were popular dance works. While maintaining the main dance movement vocabulary, *Bharata Natyam*, he incorporated other resourceful vocabularies, such as *Kathakali* and South Indian folk dances, to make his choreographies more “exciting.” He also presented many short

dance-dramas which were based on mythological stories of Hindu Gods and their consorts. His main dance-dramas were *Shiva-Parvati*, *Lakshmi-Narayana*, *Dakshayagam*, *Muruga*, *Ramayana*, and *Vishvamitra and Menaka*.⁵⁴ Sivadas partnered Vatsala in most of their dance productions. Local performing arts magazine, *Hansa*, proclaims that the couple's performances created "cultural history" in Malaysia. (20).

While Sivadas-Vatsala's dance partnership was hailed onstage, the heterosexual partnering almost ended Vatsala's dancing career offstage. She discloses that her "duets with her master" in public performances became a serious issue among her relatives. In an effort to put a stop to the rumors and gossip, Kurup came up with two options: either Sivadas should agree to marry Kurup's daughter, who was only fifteen at that time, or Vatsala must stop dancing. Sivadas chose the first option. The teacher and his primary student were joined in marriage in 1957.

Following the matrimonial union, the originally known Sivadas dance troupe was renamed Sivadas-Vatsala Dance Troupe. Classes were conducted in major towns of Malaysia, and student population continued to rise. This troupe was considered as one of the oldest Indian dance groups in Malaysia that provided training in *Bharata Natyam*, *Kathakali*, and South Indian folk dances.

The Sivadas-Vatsala troupe was featured in all state functions and Indian cultural programs. Attached to the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports since the 1950s, Sivadas was a performing artist on the national and international scene until he retired

⁵⁴*Shiva-Parvati*, *Lakshmi-Narayana*, *Dakshayagam*, and *Muruga* are productions focusing on Hindu Gods, and their consorts, while, *Vishvamitra*, and *Menaka* are characters from Hindu mythology.

from the government service in 1979. For the Ministry of Culture, he choreographed dances of Malaysian origin, in which he blended Indian dances and Malay folk dance forms. Besides Malaysia, he performed extensively in Thailand, Philippines, Australia, Japan, and London. For his contribution towards the development of Indian dance in Malaysia, Sivadas has been awarded numerous titles and recognition⁵⁵ since 1963.

“Where-ever Indian classical dance gained attention, whether at state banquets or cultural festivals, the presence of either Sivadas or Gopal was ubiquitous.” (Jit, 1988: 32)

One year after Sivadas’ grand debut performance in K.L., Gopal Shetty⁵⁶ arrived in Malaysia. In 1954, he took a world dance tour contract and left Bombay, but little did he realize that he would not continue with the rest of his troupe on their tour after landing in Malaysia. Something kept him back. He found a job as an insurance agent and continued performing dance in Malaysia. He was made a committee member of the Federation Arts Council. As a council member, he received numerous invitations to perform before several visiting dignitaries such as the Duke of Edinburgh, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, and tabla maestro, Zakir Hussein. His dazzling performances captivated the Indian audience.

⁵⁵ One of the titles bestowed upon him was “Natyakalaratnam” (a title given for excelling in dance), awarded by the Pure Life Society, K.L. The Sangeetalayam Association,⁵⁵ which was set up in 1976 to promote music and dance, awarded Sivadas the title, “Naty Kalai Arasu,” in 1981. The Malayan Film Unit in one of its first documentaries on Indian dances had filmed the Sivadas-Vatsala Troupe.

⁵⁶ Gopal Shetty received his dance training from Mr. K.K. Shetty (student of Uday Shankar), and mastered the *Manipuri* and Indian folk dances. Gopal Shetty also learned *Kathakali* and *Bharata Natyam* with Karunakaran Paniker and Chandrashekara Pillai in Madras (Chennai). Prior to entering the Malaysian dance scene in 1954, he directed dance sequences in four films in Bombay (Mumbai).

Shetty's ideas and choreographies were similar to Uday Shankar's compositions since Shetty's *guru*, K.K. Shetty, was a student of the legendary dance maestro, Shankar. Shetty's landmark choreographies included *The Peacock Dance*, *Jeevan Jyoti*, *The Artist's Dream*, *Ramayana*, and *The Bangara: a folk dance of Punjab*. In these creative works, he employed dance vocabularies drawn from various Indian dance genres such as classical forms - *Bharata Natyam* and *Kathakali* and north Indian folk dances.

In a similar trend as Sivadas, Shetty married his first dance student, Radha Saravanamuthu, a few years after the commencement of dance classes. He conducted classes at the Sangeeta Abhivirithi Sabha in K.L. and in several other states. As I have discussed earlier, the sabha only conducted drama and music classes prior to the arrival of the two male dance *gurus*. Vatsala re-emphasized this point by adding, "the Ceylonese did not prefer dancing, particularly taught by men." I posit that Sivadas' and Shetty's appearances in the dance scene and their popularities aided in elevating the status of Indian dancing among Indians and Malaysians as a whole. Even though Indians were politically the minority and the marginalized ethnic group, the reputation attained by both the dance teachers inversely signaled the aesthetic visibility of the minority dance forms even at that time.

The Malaysian Television broadcasting, which began in 1963, added glow to the already attained fame of the two male artistic directors. Sivadas' Troupe and Shetty's school were featured regularly on Television Malaysia. Vatsala Sivadas, Radha Shetty,

and Malar Gunaratnam⁵⁷ expressed that it was a great honor to appear in the “black and white” TV programs at that time. Both groups presented classical, semi-classical, folk, and hybrid Malaysian dances. Shetty choreographed and produced two dance programs entitled *Dayana* and *Serbanika*. The twelve-series *Dayana*, which featured a combination of different genres of Malaysian dances, was aired on TV for two years.

Sivadas and Gopal Shetty played imperative roles in creating awareness for Indian arts and culture in Malaysia. In this process, the pioneer masters struggled tremendously. While Tan Sooi Beng (1992) asserts that the government did not offer any encouragement or financial support to the Chinese to promote their culture, Sivadas’ and Shetty’s artistic journeys signified a different scenario. They were constantly invited to perform in the state sponsored programs, to choreograph dances for the Ministry of Culture and the National Cultural Complex (KBN), and to produce series of dance programs which were aired on the national television. Over the years, Sivadas and Shetty developed a good rapport with the Malay state officials. Though Indian dance was never recognized as part of the national culture, the artistic labor of these versatile men was seen as invaluable in staging state cultural events. Both Indian male artists were lending their craftsmanship to the making of Malaysian dances. While these opportunities may sound very promising, I also want to stress that the Indian dance choreographers were mobilized not for the staging of Indian dance per se, but because the two men were artistically creative in producing hybrid works, blending different ethnic dances. Their

⁵⁷ Gunaratnam is one of Sivadas’ early students and primary dancers. She joined his dance classes after Vatsala.

“flexible bodily practices” (Kedhar, 2011:7)⁵⁸ caught the attention of the state, public, and media. But even then, these Indian men were not afforded the same privileges as the Malay dance practitioners. They were only offered small honorariums for their artistic ventures and not major funds.

Ta, ta, ta, ta; Ta, ta, ta, ta; Thei that dhin dhinna; Thaka That dhin dhinna...the music for the final item in the *Vision of Forever* repertoire, “Moksha,” catches my attention. My body swings along with the music: 1,2,3,4; diagonal front right, back to the center; diagonal back left, center. Oh, how many times have we rehearsed and performed this piece in the past! Since this is a routine item in every *Odissi* program, the rehearsal ends smoothly. The participating female dancers follow Tan Mei Mei to collect their costumes for the tour. Ibrahim and Guna continue to re-rehearse an important section of “Pallavi.” It is supposed to be “their” segment together. Both men pull each other’s hands with their bodies undulating and with a great force, they fall on the floor. They roll towards the center of the stage, roll on top of each other’s bodies, and gradually move to a kneeling position with heads facing each other. They join both their palms together, slowly lifting their arms up and end the flowing sequence with improvised *Odissi* sculpturesque poses. The close physical interactions between the men gesture a sexual overtone, which historically, *Odissi* revivalists in India had attempted to eliminate. Even though the vigor in the movements and their center positioning within the choreography make patriarchal power visible, the intimate bodily contact and sensuality within the

⁵⁸ Kedhar points out the ways in which transnational South Asian dancers in London have developed an array of flexible bodily practices to navigate the tensions between capitalism and the nation state, race and citizenship, migration and multiculturalism (2011: 7).

dance form seem to complicate masculinity. Wandering away, I ponder how this dance reconstruction is different from Sivadas' and Gopal Shetty's dance choreographies and those who came in the 1980s along with Ibrahim and Guna such as Sri Anandan, Chandramohan, Sri Ganeson...

Male dancing gained further momentum in the 1980s, a landmark decade in the development of *Bharata Natyam*, as it marked the increased entrance of male dancers, including non-Indian male dancers, into the public performance arena. Many male dance artists cited the South Indian cinema as one of the primary factors that enticed them to dance. The Telugu movie, *Saagara Sangaman*, released in 1983 and dubbed into Tamil as *Salangai Oli* with celebrated film artist, Kamal Haasan, in the leading role as a multi-talented dancer, was a super-hit movie in Malaysia. The idea about "dancing like a man," or "masculine dancer"⁵⁹ was projected through the movie. It inspired several men⁶⁰ who were interested in becoming dancers. This decade witnessed the departure of male dancers for Indian classical dance training and entrance of professionally trained male dancers into the public performance scene in Malaysia.

Male dancers who emerged in the 1980s differed from their predecessors. Some of the prominent dancers were gay men, unlike the heterosexual pioneer dance masters. Connell (2005), in his seminal text, *Masculinities*, articulates that "gayness in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic

⁵⁹ Kamal Haasan had a moustache when he danced in this movie (unlike male dancers who shave their moustaches). His movements reflected the *tandava* or masculine element denoted by the high lifting of legs and high jumps followed by landing on the floor with both knees.

⁶⁰ Santiago Samathanam, Shankar Kandasamy, Dennis Shambumani, and Guna pointed out the undeniable influence of Indian movies in shaping their dance careers.

masculinity” (78). Having said this, he concurs that these categories of masculinities are not fixed, but configurations of practices derived from certain cultural contexts in a changing structure of relationships. Since the western gender order is not applicable to the Malaysian cultural context and masculinity varies through its intersection with ethnicity, class, and sexuality, this study focuses on the enactment of a multiplicity of masculinities.

Besides Dr. Chandrabhanu and Ibrahim, who received formal training in India and performed professionally in Malaysia in the early 1980s, male dancers of Indian descent left Malaysia for professional dance training in South India. Guna, Dennis Shambumani, Sri Anandan, Chandramohan, and Natarajan Muniandy depart one after the other to pursue training under Adyar K. Lakshman. Mavin Khoo and Ajith Baskaran Dass, who initially received training in Ibrahim’s dance institution, Sutra Dance Theatre, also made similar journeys a decade later. In the meantime, the Temple of Fine Arts, which came into existence in 1981, produced a group of male dancers trained by the dance directors, Sivadas and Gopal Shetty. Out of the many, two dancers who have carved a name for themselves in the Indian dance arena are Shankar Kandasamy and Umesh Shetty.

The generation of dancers who entered the dance scene in the 1980s was mostly well-educated. As such, they were able to take the Indian dance form to a higher level. Commenting on this, Rubin Khoo writes the following in his article, “Green, Green Grass of home,”:

Chandrabhanu belongs to the generation of dancers who unconventionally sought to make a career out of dancing. Together with others such as Datin Azanin

Ahmad, Ramli Ibrahim, Marion D' Cruz, they broke boundaries for many young dancers of today. Their generation was also unique in that they were educated and thus were able to add another dimension to the art form. (Rubin quotes Chandrabhanu). Chandra says, "(I) don't think I would dance the way I do if I hadn't undergone all the social theory. Our gurus, they were there in the mould of their art form. They were farmers, but dancing was their life and soul...our generation was the educated generation, we were able to write theses. We were able to take the essence of their lives and intellectualize it. Our objective was to make this heritage art live but in a different context." (*Star Two*, 2003)

I hear a sniffing sound. Oh, my God! It is Ibrahim's dog, Gundu, standing right in front of me. A few dancers come to rescue me as I scream. What a shock that gave me! In one corner of the studio, Ibrahim gathers all his dancers and gives instruction: "The second day after we arrive in Bhubaneswar is a very important day, the press conference day. Sivarajah (the lighting and set designer) and I will be attending the press conference. I need two female dancers to come with us. The rest of you will follow Guna. Guna, make sure you check if the performance space is open in the day. You will all rehearse the full repertoire." Ibrahim and Guna brief the dancers of their travelling schedule and tour itinerary. Once it's over, I meet Ibrahim and thank him for granting me permission to watch the rehearsal. "I hope it was useful for your research," he says. Guna, who stands next to us, exclaims, "Hei Prema, you, the Temple of Fine Arts girl, right? You danced *Odissi* here. Then where did you go? You disappeared!" Ibrahim interjects and tells him that I am currently pursuing Ph.D. in the U.S.A. Ibrahim then leaves us to check on the dancers. Guna and I continue talking. I use the opportunity to ask him about his *Bharata Natyam* dance school. He points out that he now teaches *Bharata Natyam* at Sutra by saying, "It's difficult to manage a school single-handedly if you are always performing. Sutra not only focuses on *Odissi*, but also *Bharata Natyam*, offering another space for

learning *Bharata Natyam* besides Temple of Fine Arts and countless other dance institutions.”

This conversation highlights two primary institutions of Indian dance in Malaysia: the Temple of Fine Arts (ToFA) and Sutra Dance Theatre. Both institutions operate under different artistic missions. The former emphasizes spirituality in arts, while the latter promotes dance as an aesthetic form, an entertainment, and a professional art form.

Dance pioneers Sivadas and Shetty, who conducted classes separately, were brought together to perform at the University of Malaya’s Experimental Theatre in K.L. by a spiritual *guru* from India, Swami Shantanand Saraswathi (fondly known as Swamiji). Swamiji came to Malaysia in 1971 and attracted fervent devotees, including Sivadas and Shetty, who attended the *satsangs* conducted by Swamiji. The *guru* not only groomed spirituality, but was a “true artist to the core” (Gunaratnam, 2012). Swamiji encouraged both dance masters to collaborate and present dance productions together. The performance in K.L. strengthened the relationship between Sivadas, Shetty, and Swamiji.

Swamiji mooted the idea of establishing a Sanctuary for the Indian Arts to Shetty while visiting Perth, Australia. Upon clear deliberation and planning, ToFA was inaugurated in 1981. ToFA International has been in the forefront in creating awareness and appreciation for Indian classical dance in the country. The nine ToFA centers located in K.L., Penang, Johor Bahru, Malacca, Singapore, Perth, Chennai, Coimbatore, and New Jersey, operate with the abiding principle of using the arts as the vehicle for creative and spiritual discovery. Over the years, ToFA’s productions, many of which are cross-cultural projects, have created much enthusiasm and admiration among multi-ethnic spectators for

Indian dance in Malaysia. With numerous well-credited dance productions under its banner, the institution continues to be one of the strong Indian culture and art promoters in the country.

Another dance institution that has earned reputation locally as well as internationally is Sutra Dance Theatre. Ramli Ibrahim made his debut *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi* dance performances upon his return from Australia. Following the full-house productions, he went on to set up Sutra in 1983. Over the past twenty-nine years, Sutra has spearheaded and staged many *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi* dance production series both locally and abroad. It has initiated collaborations between dance companies and hosted many dance productions under its banner. Indian art critic, Leela Venkataram profiles Ibrahim as following: “His creativity transcends national, religious, and ethnic boundaries as he is passionate about making Indian classical dance part of the total Malaysian experience.”⁶¹

ToFA and Sutra are patriarchal institutions primarily administered by men. Neither organizations is financially supported by the government. Malar Gunaratnam, who is one of the current dance directors at ToFA, recalls that members of a Ceylonese Tamil family, who were the ardent devotees of Swamiji, offered their old bungalow house to Swamiji and the dance masters (Sivadas and Shetty) and allowed them to use it. Due to the popularity of the institution and its service to the community, the premise and the land were sold to ToFA several years later. The institution is financially managed through donations from the public, fee collections, revenue from performances, and

⁶¹ *The Hindu*, 2004.

revenues from other subsidiary establishments such as Annalakshmi Restaurant and Lavanya Arts Boutique. Sutra's artistic director, meanwhile, affirms that his company has not been supported by the state since it was set up. This is because the state was against the idea of a "bumiputera" performing and teaching Indian classical dance. Pointing out that it has taken many years of hard work to bring Sutra to its current status, Ibrahim asserts, "Now, no one can ignore us as we have achieved recognition in Malaysia and abroad" (Nartaki online, 2001). While this is the predicament of two leading Indian dance institutions in the country, we could approximately guess the state of other Indian dance institutions in the country.

Male dance artists who entered the Indian dance scene were predominantly trained in the Kalakshetra style⁶² since most of them went to the same *Bharata Natyam* dance *guru* in India. Although Sivadas and Shetty were training under different lineage,⁶³ the Kalakshetra bani (style) gained predominance with the inception of ToFA and it shaped the training of *Bharata Natyam* at the institution. Most male dance practitioners reinforced masculinity through dance performances and dance trainings.

Male performers who learned *Bharata Natyam* directly from the *guru*, Adyar Lakshman, presented almost the same dance numbers at the initial stages of their dance performances. They, then, gradually added new choreographies to their repertoires, while

⁶² The Kalakshetra *bani* developed through the dancers who were trained at Kalakshetra, the dance school established by Rukmini Devi in 1936 at Adyar, a little outside Madras city. Kalakshetra stands as a prestigious institution for training students in *Bharata Natyam*. Many dancers in Malaysia have had training in this style.

⁶³ Sivadas studied *Bharata Natyam* under K.Ganeshan in Kuttralam (South India), and Shetty learned *Bharata Natyam* with Karunakaran Paniker and Chandrashekara Pillai in Madras.

retaining some of their *guru*'s masterpieces. Performing men were also conscious about the dances they presented. Their presentation focused largely on hypermasculine male god, Shiva, dance pieces that expressed *bakti* (devotion) rather than *sringara* (love/eroticism), exhaustive rhythmic dance motifs that consumed more stamina and energy, and dance choreographies that utilized a wide usage of space. Their performances were strongly influenced by their training at Kalakshetra, which created "specific aesthetic niches for male students" (Krishnan, 2009:384).⁶⁴

I have watched the rhythmic *tandava* item, "Nandi Chol," presented on Malaysian stages regularly. Several years back, when I asked a male dance *guru* to choreograph a challenging dance number to be presented as the opening dance for my concert, he suggested that I perform this same item, "Nandi Chol." He reasoned, "Amma, this is a popular item, people will not get bored. This is Lakshman sir's masterpiece!" Men also favored dance pieces that depicted hyper-masculine icon of the Hindu God, Lord Shiva, particularly, "Swami Nan Unthan Adimai," "Natanam Adinar," and "Bho Shambo." Besides, "Partha Sarathi" and "Simhasanastithe," choreographies that praised Lord Vishnu and the powerful Goddess Shakti, also framed part of a common repertoire. These dance choreographies were further enriched by complicated and exhaustive rhythmic phrases/patterns called *jatis*. A very experienced female dance teacher recounted her experience conducting *nattuvangam* for a well-known male dancer. She said, "You won't

⁶⁴ Krishnan persuasively argues that the transformation of the *devadasi* dance into *Bharata Natyam* in the early twentieth century involved a restructuring of gender roles and expectations and focused on devotional, narrative, and non-erotic repertoire. In line with this, Rukmini Devi Arundale who founded Kalakshetra created dance pedagogy for her male students, characterized by athletic movements and choreographies of dance-dramas that borrowed linear narrative form from male-dominated performance traditions such as *Kathakali* from Kerala.

believe, I was so nervous playing cymbals during Saran's (pseudonym) dance performance, too many rhythmic calculations. I was heavily perspiring onstage, imagine, in the fully air-conditioned auditorium!"

ToFA's dance pedagogy induced increased dichotomization of masculinity and femininity. When I was a student at ToFA in the early 1990s, I was instructed to learn and practice "Swamiye Alaithodiva," a *shringara* (love emotion) dance piece, while my class-mate, a male student, was instructed to learn "Swami Nan Unthan Adimai," a *shringara-bakti* (love devotion) piece, which was considerably less erotic than the former. ToFA dance *guru*, Shankar Kandasamy, always stresses the phrase "dance like a man" when he teaches male dance students. Last year, a prominent male dancer/*guru*, who was invited by ToFA as an examiner for the students' repertoire exam, observed this matter and pointed out to me, "students should be allowed to explore and express their feelings freely, *bhava* (expression) should not be dictated. What is wrong if male dancers are a little 'soft' with their emotions? When I pointed out my view, several male teachers in the room (studio) gave me disapproving glances."

ToFA and Sutra also embarked on projects that promoted male dancers. In 2009, ToFA re-choreographed the expressive dance piece, "DasaAvatharam – the Ten Reincarnations of Lord Vishnu." It was presented by a cast of ten male dance students of the institution. This item was originally performed as a solo by male and female dancers or in groups that contained both male and female dancers. Additionally, Sutra launched into pilot projects that featured male dancers. The concept of promoting "purusha" (men) was reworked in stages. *Boys in Bharata Natyam*, staged in 1993 with three boys, was

reworked and resulted in a successful series of full-length, all-male cast productions which came into being in the 1990s. The series were named *The Divine Encounters*. The male cast Sutra-produced works will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

Male dancers who entered the Malaysian Indian dance scene since the 1980s included an increasing number of gay men. As such, the themes of dance productions, movement choreographies, and casting decisions began to shift. While I have shown that efforts to empower men and enforce masculinity through dance training and productions were given attention, there also emerged attempts to challenge and defy masculinity, thus giving rise to the enactment of gender and sexuality in a spectrum.

Before I leave Sutra, I look around to see if I can locate any senior Sutra dancers whom I know. I intend to catch up with the latest gossip in town. At that moment, Mei Mei and Michelle Chang walk out to the gate. Among other things, Mei Mei and Michelle say, “We learn so much here. It is not just about performing, but all other aspects - managing costumes, emceeing, preparing our own performance scripts, rearranging dances, teaching, and stage management.” Mei Mei: “I am Indira Manickam’s student, but somehow I gave up *Bharata Natyam* and I fell in love with *Odissi*.” Michelle: “Here we wear many hats. I get to be a “star” dancer, something that you don’t get everywhere and also administrator, trainer...” This dialogue continues to replay in my mind as I drive back home. Sooner, I hear not only the voices of these dancers, but a mixture of submissive and authoritative voices of women performers and *gurus* in Malaysia, including my own voice.

Women in Indian Dance

Before the arrival of Sivadas and Gopal Shetty, five sisters known as the “Thiruchendur Sisters” conducted dance and music lessons in K.L. Malar Gunaratnam, who was briefly trained by one of the sisters in the early 1950s, points out that the sisters conducted their classes in their home at Sentul. According to Gunaratnam, the sisters were not interested in performing publicly and so they were not widely known in the local Indian arts circle. They stopped conducting classes by the late 1950s.

There were no other female dancers known to have taught or performed Indian dances in the decade of 1950s except for the female dancers who were part of Sivadas’ and Shetty’s dance troupes. These female dancers were primarily performers. They partnered male dancers (or spouses in Vatsala’s and Radha’s case) and performed in groups led by men. Although they assumed positions as substitute teachers assisting the male *gurus*, female dancers in the two troupes did not assume positions of power, such as artistic directors, producers, and choreographers. The gendered division of labor (men as *gurus*-choreographers and women as dancers), empowered men by placing them in the limelight.

In the 1960s and 1970s, female artists began to set up dance institutions. Usha-Prema Dance School, Padmini Dance Group, and Tanjai Kamalaa-Indira (TKI) Dance Academy came into existence. Here again, the former two schools ceased operation after several years but the latter thrived and emerged as another leading Indian classical dance institution in the country. TKI was administered by female dance teachers, Kamalaa and Indira.

During the three decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, a complete *Bharata Natyam margam* was not publicly presented by any dance schools. Sivadas' and Shetty's schools staged short (twenty or thirty minutes) dance-dramas, variety dance shows, and occasionally presented rhythmic dance items, such as *Jatiswaram* and *Tillana*. Hence, they could not be considered as "purists" or strong advocates of *Bharata Natyam*. However, the schools that emerged from the 1960s focused primarily on promoting *Bharata Natyam* as a serious form.

Usha-Prema Dance School and Padmini Dance Group were more inclined towards the Vazhuvoor Ramaiya Pillai's style. This style is considered to be more sensuous with the presence of rich *sringara* (love) element compared to the Kalakshetra style. These schools taught *Bharata Natyam* but focused on "filmic" dancing. When I began my dance training at the Padmini dance school in the late 1970s, I learned dances choreographed to film songs.⁶⁵ I learned *adavus* (codified rhythmic footwork) in a random order, a pedagogical system which was not similar to the clearly structured *adavu* training system influenced by the Kalakshetra institution. The transnational dance artist, Dr. Chandrabhanu, who pursued his initial dance training with Prema at the Usha-Prema Dance School between 1957 and 1973, sheds more light to this scenario by saying,

⁶⁵ Malayaja, and her daughters, Geeta and Girija, taught dance songs from the Tamil films popularized by famous actresses of the 1950s/1960s such as Kamala Lakshman, Padmini, and her sisters Lalitha, and Ragini as well as Vyjayantimala. These actresses were trained in Indian classical dances. Malayaja, a relative of Padmini, named her dance school after the dancer-actress.

Pure classical dancing was not well received. As such, teachers teach classical and film dances. For instance, when the famous actress/dancer, Vyjayantimala Bali, came to Malaysia after the release of the Hindi movie, *Sangam*, in the late 1960s, she presented a pure classical dance recital at Merdeka Stadium in Kuala Lumpur. I did not attend the performance but I heard it caused riots; people threw Pepsi bottles. I think people wanted to see film dancing since she was an actress.

(personal correspondence, 2012)

Kamalaa and Indira sisters returned to Malaysia after their training in Tanjavur, South India and opened their school, TKI, in 1966. This is the oldest *Bharata Natyam* dance institution in Malaysia.⁶⁶ They introduced the Tanjavur *bani*. Since the sisters also learned dance from a *devadasi*,⁶⁷ they blended both Tanjavur and *devadasi* styles. TKI style is sensuous and erotically evocative through “coquettish” glances and the movements of hips and chests. Dancers’ silent miming of songs through the movement of their lips explicitly differentiates this school’s *bani* from all other *banis*, namely Kalakshetra *bani* which is regarded as theatrical.

Born into a family of South Indian Tamils, Kamalaa and Indira have always emphasized the usage of Tamil language in their productions and the propagation of Tamil culture and arts. Such an approach has not only attracted predominantly Tamil female dancers to her school, but has also caught the attention of the Tamil print media and the Malaysian Indian politicians. Over the years, TKI has garnered support not from the state but from these politicians. This is evident through the presence and patronages made by Malaysian Indian ministers, senators, and MIC members during the school’s

⁶⁶ Sivadas-Vatsala dance troupe could have emerged as the oldest Indian dance group if it did not form an alliance with Swamiji and Gopal Shetty and formed ToFA.

⁶⁷ Literally, a “female servant of God.” It is the name given to the hereditary temple dancers in India. These women were married to the deities and not to human men. They lived in matriarchal households and were courtesans.

productions. TKI is particularly known for dance-dramas that are presented in Tamil language. It claims to be the “pioneer in Bharathanatyam and classical dance drama.”⁶⁸

Besides Kamalaa and Indira, the inauguration of ToFA gave rise to a string of capable and dedicated female dance teachers. ToFA’s core *Bharata Natyam* dance teachers, such as the dance directors, Vatsala Sivadas, Radha Shetty, and Malar Gunaratnam as well as the senior dance teachers, Shyamala Narayanan and Vasuki Sivanesan, have been instrumental in producing dance graduates and younger generation of dance *gurus* such as me. Though these women *gurus* are not always visible as performers onstage, nevertheless, their roles as trainers, nurturers, assistant choreographers, make-up artists, and costume designers are undeniably powerful.

Female dance *gurus* outside ToFA have shown greater dynamism by assuming positions of authority such as leaders of cultural organization, event organizers, and dance producers. Indira Manikam, the principal of TKI, formed the Malaysia Bharatanatya Association in 2008, the first of such initiatives in Malaysia. It is an umbrella body that supports all *Bharata Natyam* dance institutions in the country. The back-up support which she receives from her husband and various Indian politicians in the country has enabled her to rise to the influential position. Meanwhile, Usha, a former teacher of ToFA, who left the institution due to internal conflicts, formed her own dance institution, Laasya Arts. The artistic mobility she gained after leaving ToFA led her to assume the position of the Head of Arts and Culture in the Malaysian Hindu Sangam.

⁶⁸ This was stated on the cover page of TKI’s Sri Ayappan Swamy Dance-Drama (June 2011) program book.

Meena Kumaree, trained by Krishnakumari, the first female dancer in Malaysia to have graduated from Kalakshetra, is a highly sought after freelance dance producer. She produces *Bharata Natyam* performances for Ajith Dass and Natarajan Muniandy. I must stress at this juncture that women who run their own dance schools are ultimately the producers of their own performances. However, for professional male performing artists to outsource and hire a female producer is a rare phenomenon in Malaysia. Despite the lack of Malaysian state support for Indian art forms and the lack of artistic mobility held by men, these women claim agency by assuming various positions of power.

Malaysia has manufactured many female artists of Indian classical dances, but not many continued to be visible as onstage performers. Female performers discontinue dance practice after staging mini recitals, *salangai poojas*,⁶⁹ or after their debut solo performance, *arangetrams*, or in most cases, after marriage. Some female dancers “retire” from the stage and become dance *gurus* as a result of familial restrictions and commitments. One of the very few Indian dance institutions that has created a platform for women to perform professionally is Sutra. It has groomed several principal “star” female dancers who have become household names since the 1980s under the artistic direction of Ibrahim, such as Geeta Shankaran Lam, Radhimalar Govindarajoo, and January Low. The popularity attained as Sutra principal dancers have enabled some

⁶⁹ It is also called as *gejjai-puja* (Gaston, 2005:313). It means ritual worship of ankle bells. This ceremony is held after a dancer has completed *adavu* (dance step) training and has mastered the first non-expressive dance piece from the repertoire, *alarippu*. The *salangai pooja/puja*, which was initially conducted as a small ceremony at the *guru*'s house or temple, has today manifested as a public recital performed by groups of students at the auditoriums. The rationale behind such recital is that “it constitutes an intermediate stage” (314) and allows a dancer to gain confidence and experience before he/she prepares for a taxing full repertoire of formal *arangetram*. However, not all teachers in Malaysia present their students in mini-recitals.

women to achieve recognition locally, develop international affiliations, pursue collaborative projects, and attain temporary artistic residencies abroad. However, I argue that the general predicament is that female dancers in Malaysia do not always remain visible as public performers as men due to the policing of gender and sexuality by the state, community, and family.

Conclusion

This historical chapter has shown that the “bumiputera” discourse takes on a central stage in the discussion of Indian dance in Malaysia since ethnic groups are unequally governed based on the divisions created by this discourse. The economic restructuring along ethnic lines has led to preferential policies that marginalize non-Malay art forms. Even though practitioners of Indian dance meet various challenges in terms of lack of arts funding and being intensely policed by the state (particularly “bumiputeras” who perform Indian dance), they deploy various strategies to make Indian dance a thriving practice in the country. Since women’s sexuality is regulated by the Indian society through a scrutiny of dance partnerships (e.g. Sivadas-Vatsala) and women’s appearance in public performances coupled with the dependence of women on men to choreograph and secure performance opportunities, I argue that men dominate the Malaysian stages and the media from the moment Indian classical dances become perceptible in Malaysia. Men emerge as hypervisible, innovative, and artistically mobile public performers. This chapter, which has non-linearly traced the development of Indian dance from the 1950s, paves the way for the following three chapters to build on and complicate the discourses of ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

CHAPTER 2

“STAR” MALE DANCERS IN MALAYSIA

“Ramli is a creator and a visionary in the arts who sees unity within the diversity of all.”

Narthaki.com

“Orissi has an overt sensuality that Mr Ibrahim, with his long wavy hair, bare chest and intensity, captured without effort.”

New York Times

“Mavin Khoo is one of the most sculpturally exact of dancers, making exquisite musical and visual contrasts out of glittering velocity and meditative slowness.”

The Guardian

"A sexual ambiguity pervades whenever Khoo is on...."

The Independent, U.K

“Umesh Shetty’s East and West dance disposition which he has successfully blended plus his total enjoyment of dance has always led the audience to enjoy his performances.”

Online Review ⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Please see http://www.redorbit.com/news/health/117601/he_is_the_dance/ for more details.

The quotations above epitomize the discussion on “star” persona within Indian dance circle in Malaysia. The quotes, extracted from performance notes and reviews, form one of the primary tools through which star image is constructed. Such quotes reflect the artist’s glorified image and boost his status locally and abroad, instantly enabling him to gain fame and name where ever he performs.

I am interested in the conditions or possibilities that lead to the emergence of “star” male dancers/choreographers in Malaysia because it is a rare phenomenon since Indian classical dances, such as *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi*, in India and elsewhere in the world is primarily a female form. I draw on these three choreographers – Ramli Ibrahim, Mavin Khoo, and Umesh Shetty – and examine the way in which the “star” status is created and enforced through gendered performance. Their achievements have been well-documented and are publicly available in the form of You-Tube clips, online links, public interviews, write-ups, and video documentaries. I have tailored my study to tap into their successes, not for the purpose of glorifying them, but to discuss the enabling conditions and strategies as well as gaps, silences, and contradictions that surround their “star” image. To demonstrate my argument that in Malaysia, it is the unique configuration of ethnicity, masculinity, sexuality, and cosmopolitanism that allows these “stars” to emerge, I examine the intersection between their dancing bodies and the discourses of gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity, citizenship, and globalism. Since the “star” dancers chosen here exist in a spectrum of sexuality (situated between homosexual and heterosexual practices), I investigate how these dancers negotiate gender and sexuality on and offstage.

In line with my area of interest, I have chosen male dancers who come from different ethnic backgrounds: Malay, Chinese-Indian, and Indian.

I focus on Ibrahim's all-male cast in the Bharata Natyam production, *The Divine Encounters with Sri Krishna* and his renowned Odissi production *Spellbound*, Khoo's solo recital *Devi: In Absolution*, and Shetty's *AlaRIPpu - Inside Out*. I investigate the means of production that speak to the creation of "stars" in Malaysia. I analyze each production from various dimensions such as their ethnic background, dance training, patronage, performance space, choreographic strategy, media coverage, and performance tours. Such multi-faceted analysis offers an avenue to study the tactics deployed by these dancers in attaining "star" status as well as lends to our understanding about the form of masculinity constructed by "star" dancers.

I use choreographic analysis to read dances onstage as well as ethnographic and archival accounts to read dancing bodies offstage. To speak about "star" dancers, I utilize Anjali Arondekar's "reading subject as a trace" (2009:3). She reads spectacularized forms of sexuality within colonial archives as archival trace. Arondekar states that since sexuality remains invisible or lost in the archive and eludes scholar's attempt at discovery, she suggests multiple readings and new ways of mining and undermining the evidence of the archive. I adopt this method for reading dancing bodies. Based on my previous encounters with "star" dancers, I have learnt that interviews are not always fruitful. There has been so much media coverage on these public/iconic dancers that formal interviews rarely reveal any information that was not already available publicly. Moreover, these "stars" have been interviewed so many times that they have preset ideas about what they

will discuss during an interview. During one of my conversations with Ibrahim, he curiously queried why I did not ask him about his dance reconstructions and why I focused so much on the “infrastructure” of his company and productions. I told him that I have already seen, heard, and read so much about his dance re-arrangements, but wanted to know more about the means of production, the “invisible” components of his artistic ventures. But even after the disclosure of my scholarly intention, our conversation veered away and the interview did not feed the information that I intended to gather. Therefore, to gain more information, I met with people who were implicitly and explicitly linked to these “star” male dancers. In particular, I spoke with some of the men who performed in the productions of these “star” dancers. I also generated discussions with women: the artists’ mothers, teachers, co-partners, and students. As a result, I gained interesting insights into the lives and works of these male dancers.

Theorizing “Star” Dancers and Cosmopolitan Masculinity

What makes someone a “star”? Why is so-and-so a “star”? In order to theorize stardom in my study, I borrow from two influential works by Richard Dyer. In his seminal work, *Stars* (1998), Dyer elucidates stars as a phenomenon of production and consumption. Focusing on film stars in his scholarship, he explains that as a phenomenon of production, stars represent a form of capital. Stars monopolize the market, circulate as brand, are a guarantee on investment, and possess magic and talent to manipulate the market. Meanwhile, as a phenomenon of consumption, Dyer asserts that the audience is a powerful determining force in the creation of stars.

In another publication, *Heavenly Bodies* (2004), Dyer declares that stars are involved in a process of making themselves into commodities; they are both the labor and the thing that labor produces. However, he argues that the work of fashioning the star out of the raw material of the person, includes the labor of not only him/herself, but also the labor of other individuals - make-up artists, trainers, dress designers, and publicists - in order to produce another commodity, a film.

I draw on Dyer's conceptualization of stardom in analyzing the "star" statuses of Ibrahim, Khoo, and Shetty in my study. By examining closely each of their dance productions, I discuss the way in which each of them circulates as social and "cultural capital" (Bourdieu,1977). Alford A Young (2004) articulates social and cultural capital as epistemology of how to function in particular social settings in order to mobilize, generate responses and affect, and the "degree to which an individual is embedded in social networks that can bring about the rewards and benefits that enhances his or her life" (147), allowing the "star" to flow rather easily in disparate spaces. In each choreographer's case, I take into consideration the multiple laborers who labor in the creation of each production and the role of spectatorship in emphasizing the importance of these factors in the construction of an iconic dance figure.

Each of the "stars" in this study possesses the ability to respond creatively to his conditions and rise beyond the confines of insular communities (to transcend beyond Indian spectatorship), marking him legibly as cosmopolitan. Various scholars in the seminal text, *Cosmopolitics* (1998), have argued that cosmopolitanism does not exemplify the ideal of detachment, but represents a "reality of (re)attachment, multiple

attachments, or attachment at a distance” (3). The multiple “actually existing” (Malcomson, 1998:233) cosmopolitanisms are localized and embodied. The cosmopolitan male artists focused in this study are emotionally and physically attached to their “home” country, Malaysia. These “rooted” (Appiah, 1998) cosmopolitans access cosmopolitanism through clear intention as well as need. This study through dance discourse intends to reveal the way in which cosmopolitanism is “differentially stratified” along the lines of ethnicity, class, social relations, gender, and sexuality.

The similarities in the artistic lives of Ibrahim, Khoo, and Shetty can be traced in their diverse dance training which encompasses eastern and western forms and their high level of artistic freedom. In the current era of globalization, it is a common practice and has emerged as a necessity for dance artists to travel as a brand of social and economic mobility as well as an investment of internationality.⁷¹ It is also important to note that it is not just how often, but also where one travels determines their level of artistic mobility. My study specifically focuses on transnational male artists who move fluently across multiple spaces, including global north. I frame these artists as cosmopolitans, those Malaysian artists who have access to centers of powers, forging strong global networks with first-world countries, predominantly “white” countries, such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. This cosmopolitan status plays a fundamental role in the construction of their “star” image.

⁷¹ Yutian Wong (2009) describes internationality as the perceived ability of artist to transcend national borders while maintaining a reified point of origin. I relate this term to the artistic mobility of star dancers in Malaysia who flexibly move across borders.

This study acknowledges the notion of multiplicity of masculinities due to complexities that materialize within the discourse of masculinity as it intersects with ethnicity, class, and sexuality. I frame masculinities based on the configurations of practice within gender relations, a structure that includes institutional practices, and relationships between men-men and men-women. Masculinity here is characterized by mobility, patriarchal power, hard work (dynamism), and gender hierarchy/division of labor. As a form of dominating masculinity, this chapter posits the emergence of “cosmopolitan masculinity,” to denote the circumstances that enable men to attain artistic mobility and travel disparate spaces and prevent most women from accessing this flexibility. I demonstrate the way in which cosmopolitanism and masculinity interact with and enable one another to affect each other and how these discourses and ethnicity converge at the nexus of “star” male dancing bodies by analyzing the artistic works of Ibrahim, Khoo, and Shetty.

Ramli Ibrahim

Ramli Ibrahim is an acclaimed dancer, choreographer, and artistic director of his dance company, Sutra Dance Theatre. As I have already mentioned in the First Chapter, Ibrahim is an artist of Malay origin. Both his parents are “bumiputera” Malays. Ibrahim bought his parents’ old bungalow house in Titiwangsa, refurbished the home, and converted it to Sutra House that housed a dance studio, an art gallery, a library, and a 200-seat Amphitheatre (Amphi-Sutra).⁷² In April 2007, Sutra Foundation⁷³ was officially

⁷² “Sutra House provided classes, rehearsals, and administration for all its activities since 1995, even though Sutra existed since 1985. In the 1950s, Sutra House was a charming bungalow belonging to his (Ramli Ibrahim’s) father, the late Hj. Ibrahim Mohd Amin. The dancer moved in 1995 and bought the house from his family. He created a contemporary style two-storey house....he retained lots of the old

formed and a Board of trustees was put into place. As the Chairman of the Foundation, Ibrahim pointed out that the foundation is instrumental in creating awareness of performing arts, presenting diverse dance works, and for bringing in sponsorships. Ibrahim moved out of Sutra House to a renovated bungalow house in 2007. According to Ibrahim, this property also belonged to his parents and he had bought over. Here, I utilize Eva Cherniavsky's (2006) work on raced embodiment and the body's relation to capital by extending it to examine the privilege of "bumiputera" Malays over landed properties. This privilege was afforded by the New Economic Policy (please refer to Chapter One), which aimed at bridging the gap of inter-ethnic economic imbalances by bringing 30 per cent of the nation's wealth under "bumiputera" control by 1990. The two large properties owned by Ibrahim's parents point to the economic prosperity of his family. I want to stress that the property rights acquired by Ibrahim enable and enhance his artistic mobility.

Since its establishment in 1983, Sutra has produced numerous *Odissi*, *Bharata Natyam*, and contemporary dance performances. Many of these productions have toured internationally. For the purpose of this study, I have chosen to focus on an all male-cast Bharata Natyam dance production, *The Divine Encounters* and renowned Odissi dance production, *Spellbound*.

structure – wood carvings and sculpture. He spent RM 250 000 for renovations." Extracted from Ziemann's "Staying True to His Calling." *The Star*. July 7, 2000. Before commencing classes at Sutra House, Ibrahim rented spaces such as the Sangeeta Abhivirthe Sabha in K.L. to conduct his dance classes.

⁷³ The Foundation embraced Sutra Dance Theatre, Sutra Gallery, Sutra Academy, and Amphi-Sutra. The board of trustees comprised of Ramli Ibrahim (Chairman), Sivarajah Natarajan, Dato' Muhammad Shafee Abdullah, Dato' Nor Zakiah Abdul Majid, Ken Pushpanathan, and Datin Azliza Ahmad Tajuddin. Dato' is one of the highly regarded honorary titles conferred to a well deserving individual by the state. Each title has a form which can be used by the wife of the title holder (e.g. Datin). I am mentioning this to illustrate the form of support Ibrahim gets from dignitaries in the country for his artistic ventures.

The Divine Encounters: Creation, Production, and Analysis

In 1993, Sutra Dance Theatre conceived work that celebrated the idea of dancing men in Indian classical dance through the work, *Boys in Bharata Natyam*, a performance which featured Guna, Sooraj, and Ibrahim. Following this, the dance institution worked on a project that brought male dance practitioners together to share the stage in a single production. Seven male dancers from all over Malaysia and Singapore were invited to perform at Sutra's Amphitheatre in 2002. Its success led to subsequent productions of *The Divine Encounters* with a more exuberant cast of nine Malaysian male dancers, including the reputable dancer, Dr. Chandrabhanu, in 2003. The purpose of staging the series was stressed in the ensuing write-up in the MyDance Alliance⁷⁴ on-line newsletter about the *The Divine Encounters* in 2003. It was listed under the main theme – “Those Man Enough” and was described as a “provocative” series presented by Malaysian male dancers.

In spite of the general social stigmas and lack of encouragement, Malaysia continues to produce exciting male Bharata Natyam dancers who have taken the challenge of making their *presence felt* in spite of society's pressures to do otherwise.⁷⁵ (my emphasis)

The stigma of dance as effeminate and perceptions that dancing is not a viable option to earn money have consistently posed barriers in encouraging men to pursue dance as a serious profession in Malaysia. Despite these challenges, the numerically small male dancers have continued to be visible as public performers, enabled by the Indian classical

⁷⁴ MyDance Alliance is the Malaysian chapter of the World Dance Alliance.

⁷⁵ *MyDance Online Newsletter*, July-August 2003.

dance collaborative works such as *The Divine Encounters*, which presented spectacle male dancing. *The Divine Encounters with Sri Krishna* which premiered in 2004 went on a five-month tour to various cities on the western Peninsula Malaysia and was broadcasted by the Malaysia's leading cross-media group ASTRO TV services. The 2004 *The Divine Encounters* featured three generations of male dancers from Malaysia, from Ramli Ibrahim to his later successors, Guna, Ajith Baskaran Dass, Dennis Shambumani, Natarajan Muniandy, and Santiago Samathanam who are dance *gurus* with their own thriving dance institutions in K.L., Johor Bahru, and Ipoh. It also showcased younger male dancers such as Parveen Nair, Vasanth Santiago, and Jagatheshwara.

The project of creating a platform for *nartaka* (male dancer) to perform gradually developed not only in terms of the number of dancers, but also in the level of collaboration. Earlier productions of *The Divine Encounters* brought male dancers together, but the shows were fragmented and did not have a common theme. Each dancer presented his own dance piece and all the different dance numbers were interwoven into a single production. But, by the 2004 production, there was a clear collaboration between dancers throughout the performance and the show focused on a theme – celebrating the Hindu god, Krishna. *The Divine Encounters with Sri Krishna*, while displaying ethnically diverse dancing bodies onstage, hypervisibilised the presence of male dancers through their collective gender performance that exhibited complex rendition of rhythmic phrases and an array of *bhava* (facial expression). To illustrate this point more clearly, I will now analyze two lyrical sections from the dance performance.

The following are the first two lyrical phrases (*sahitya*) in the *varnam*, “Nee Indha Mayam.”⁷⁶ *Varnam* was the central dance piece in the production, *The Divine Encounters with Sri Krishna*. This *varnam* depicts a lovelorn *nayika* (heroine) who is suffering from extreme physical distress at being ignored by her beloved, Lord Krishna. She decides to express her personal discontentment directly rather than employing a messenger: *sakhi* (her friend) or a pet (parrot, dove and etc.) as is normally expected.

First sahitya: Nee indha mayam seidhai nyayam tano dayanidhiye?

Translation: Oh repository of compassion, is it fair for you to perform tricks like this?

Second sahitya: Payum maran ambinai punpadu pavaiyaik-kannai paramal innum

Translation: Is it just for you to ignore for so long the maiden who is tortured by the arrows that spring from the bow of cupid?

When performed, this *varnam* juxtaposes *nritta*, rhythmic abstract dance and *nritya*, expressive dance. It begins with a display of virtuosic pure dance phrases and then shifts to dramatic dance. The *nritta* and *nritya* alternate, with the latter building in emotions. In groups of two, three, and four, nine male dancers appear onstage. The rhythmic phrases are lengthened so as to allow these groups to present different combinations of movement patterns. The group that ends the *nritta* segment continues to launch into *abinaya*, the expressive dance. Dancers develop variations to the first *sahitya* as the line of sung poetic texts is repeated. Synchronizing hand gestures and facial expressions, each dancer contributes a different emotional tonality to the phrase. One dancer articulates the phrase authoritatively, another with frustration, and other pleadingly. In the second *sahitya*, each

⁷⁶ Composer: Papanasam Sivan, *Raga*: Dhanyasi, and *Tala*: Adi. This *varnam* was learnt by several male dancers who participated in *the Divine Encounters* from their *guru*, Adyar K. Lakshman. It was reconstructed and presented as group choreography.

male artist takes center stage to perform his own interpretation of the lyrics and to elucidate the predicament of the maiden who is lovesick, symbolically capturing the moment cupid's arrow penetrates her heart. The interpretations grow with intensity by portraying a mildly tortured *nayika* to a severely pining *nayika*, who falls on the floor or travels across the space in total misery. In the final iteration of the phrase, the cast members in each group perform together with synchronized footwork. The end of a lyrical segment signals a transition and a new group enters the stage to execute a new set of complex rhythmic movements.

Groups of two, three, and four male dancers allow the audience to glimpse at an array of movement styles. Each dancer marks his individuality in his own distinct way. For instance, Guna and Ajith Dass stand out in the fast-paced rhythmic dance with their vibrant and well-synchronized movement. Dennis Shambumani's clarity in the portrayal of the pining heroine strengthens his *abinaya* segment. Serene presence, maturity, height, and muscular build qualify Santiago Samathanam to play the character of Krishna. In several dance numbers, he appears as Krishna (indicated by the dress code and ornaments for the divine character), a role he performs convincingly.

The selection of dancers was the strength of the production and created a win-win situation for all parties. Sutra became famous for its large collaborative project and the male dance *gurus* who participated in this production became visible beyond the space of their day-to-day artistic practices. Since collaboration between dance schools in Malaysia is rare, this production stood out as the biggest collaborative work between dance *gurus*. It provided a platform for the dancers to “network, share, and consolidate common

objectives”⁷⁷ and created an opportunity for audience to constructively compare the different styles of *Bharata Natyam* in the respective city centers of Malaysia as represented by the dance schools. This ambitious artistic project at once garnered support. Male dancers in this production, particularly those who reside outside the metropolitan city, K.L., point out that their participation in Sutra production enhanced their career by bringing them to art appreciating *rasikas* (audience). One of the performer Ajith Dass, who runs a dance school in southern state of Johor, emphasized this point by stating that *The Divine Encounters* created aficionados in K.L., who then began to offer support to his own company’s productions.

Based on the success of *The Divine Encounters* series in K.L., dancers brainstormed and decided to launch a nationwide dance tour. With the support of the Ministry of Tourism which promoted the event in its website, *The Divine Encounters* made its presence known in various states. Participating male dance teachers organized productions in the states where they ran dance institutions. They utilized their influences to garner support from the cultural institutions and ethnic communities in various states. Samathanam, who is a committee member with Ipoh Fine Arts, organized a performance at the city of Ipoh in the state of Perak. He promoted the program through this organization and his network of friends.

The Divine Encounters repertoire was put together collectively. Dancers concur that senior dance artists pooled their artistic resources together in the selection of dance

⁷⁷ Jad Mahidin. “Set for Divine Encounters.” *The Malay Mail*. January 24, 2003.

compositions and choreographies. Dancers initially met once a week for rehearsals but as the team approached the date of production, the frequency of practices escalated. Certain dancers who required additional training participated in rehearsals more frequently. Samathanam says, “Although most of us were trained in the Kalakshetra style, we studied under different teachers. Some dancers went directly to Kalakshetra such as Guna and Nada, while others were trained by teachers who formerly taught or learned at Kalakshetra. I had my training here in Malaysia from Meera Venugopal, a disciple of Master V.P Dhananjayan.⁷⁸ Dhananjayan’s style is Kalakshetra bani. But, when we perform onstage, we all had different styles. We made some modifications to the *adavus* (steps) so that there could be some form of uniformity. That needed extra practice.” (personal correspondence, 2011)

Construction of Masculinity through *The Divine Encounters*

The exclusion of female dancing bodies in these series illustrates the act of enforcement of patriarchy in the Indian dance scene in Malaysia. The absence of female dancers in these collaborations creates a venue for “homosocial bonding”⁷⁹ allowing male dance *gurus* to develop artistic alliances with each other. Ajith Dass and Natarajan Muniandy, who became friends after this production, have since produced several successful collaborative *Bharata Natyam* dance projects (*Ananda Absolute*, *Raghava*

⁷⁸ Dhananjayan had his *Bharata Natyam* training at Kalakshetra, founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale in Chennai. After twenty years at Kalakshetra as a student, performer, and dance *guru*, he branched off to establish Bharatakalanjali in Chennai with his stage and life partner, Shanta Dhananjayan.

⁷⁹ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Columbia University Press, 1985. I draw on Sedgwick’s work to discuss the politics of male homosociality (dancing men’s relations with one another) in *The Divine Encounters*.

Yadhava, and *Vismaya Vrisksha*) in K.L. Muniandy explains that from his experience working with dance *gurus*, he has come to realize that it is easier for him to work with men than with women. He argues that women dancers in Malaysia are constricted by family commitments, thus disabling opportunities to team up. This is a very interesting comment to consider because according to this logic, it gives male dancers a rationale for the exclusion of women dancers. Collaborations create more performance opportunities since the financial burden of staging productions are shared among choreographers. Men are in a more privileged position to tap into these opportunities.

The production was conceived, according to artistic director, Ibrahim, to boost male dancing in Malaysia and dispel the link between Indian dance and effeminacy. To what extent did this production dispel the stigma on dancing men and promote masculinity? The series illuminated a rising trend of male dancers. Each male dancer maintained distinctive physicality and individuality. Rather than relying or exaggerating the seemingly more feminine expressive sequence, the production focused on *tandava* (masculine) aspect through an “andocentric” dance theme and content as well as abstract movement vocabularies. There was no unison in the rendition of abstract and expressive dances. The exhaustive rhythmic sequences demonstrated the dancers’ vitality and resilience. They travelled rapidly across the stage with non-repetitive, but symmetrical movements. Energy surges through the coordination of arms and footwork. The expressive segment was rendered through frontal display of bodies predominantly, while the rhythmic dance sequences illuminated vigorous display of motion and shape. Sutra’s trademark movements, which bring bodies in close contact with each other, were not

visible in this production. Dancers maintained a distance; there was no touching, lifting, or leaning. It was only when the men assembled together to create a single configuration or to highlight the iconic image of deity, Krishna, that the bodies made contact. These contacts by and large involved large groups and occasionally group of three or four dancers. The non-expressive sections surpassed the emotions and “softness” in the lyrical section since the latter moved rather quickly without an overtly dramatic display of the yearning *nayika*. While the selection of songs as well as the content and style of overall repertoire reflected a form of emboldened masculinity, the physical appearance of male dancers opened up the discussion about effeminacy in Indian classical dance.

While casually speaking with Samathanam, I asked him, “I have always seen you performing with your moustache. But you removed it when you performed in *The Divine Encounters*. Was it your conscious decision to do so, or were you told to remove it?” Samathanam, who looked at me surprisingly said, “Oh, you noticed! Well, I did not remove it willingly. I did not have a choice. I must admit that I felt very uncomfortable!”

The appearance of dancers onstage is of utmost importance in all Sutra productions. *The Divine Encounters* reflects this emphasizing professionalism, artistic stimulation, physical prowess as well as the beauty of the male dancing body. The bare torsos of the male dancers expose the shaven armpit hair, chest hair, and moustache. Although most male dancers did not highlight this issue, Samathanam’s concern about his moustache-less performance revealed a contradiction. Further queries disclosed that he was uncomfortable because he felt feminized without his moustache, highlighting the general perception that lack of hair is feminine. While the choreographies attempted to

construct masculinity onstage, the opposing perception among men about the appearance of male body onstage seemed to challenge the construction of masculinity.

One of the dancers pointed to the disadvantages of being a part of *The Divine Encounters*. As the production began to go on a nationwide tour and was eventually sold to a TV station, certain dancers could not keep up with the schedule of rehearsals since their own teaching engagements demanded attention. While time constraints were a major issue, some dance teachers were unhappy with the compensation they received for the production. These personal conflicts brought *The Divine Encounters* to a halt and prevented the production from touring internationally. Not one to succumb to challenges, Ibrahim began to envision his next and biggest production, *Spellbound*.

Spellbound

There is much anticipation among K.L. dwellers in February 2005. Announcements and advertisements are aired repeatedly for the upcoming grand performance, *Spellbound*. The most pervasive feature of the *Odissi* dance performance highlighted in the promos is that this is the first time an Indian classical dance recital is being premiered at the world-class performance theatre or “star” space, Istana Budaya (Palace of Culture). The performance promises spellbinding experience through the incorporation of multi-media, live *Odissi* music, and a big cast of dancers. To imagine Sutra’s *Odissi* performance on one of the top ten most sophisticated theatres in the world - a stage that equips mobile sets and advanced mechanical device - is exhilarating thought for most audience. It stands as one the most awaited and talked about performances of the year. Some of us, Indian dance practitioners in Malaysia, discuss among ourselves how

Ibrahim manages to secure the space for an entire week, considering the fact that each night costs 15 000 ringgit! The speculations are: one, Ibrahim got it because he is a “bumiputera”; two, because of his close networking with the Ministry of Arts, Culture, and Heritage officials, particularly the minister; three, because he is just lucky; four, he threw lots of parties and gave under-table money... The list goes on and on..

Spellbound was one of Sutra’s most successful *Odissi* dance productions because of its wide circulation. It premiered at the Istana Budaya in 2005 and toured Malaysia, Singapore, Switzerland, India (New Delhi and Pondicherry), Canada, France, the United Kingdom, and Indonesia. The “star” space in K.L. however seems to be the artistic director’s proudest achievements since Ibrahim emphasizes in several interviews that “it has taken this long, but better late than never.”⁸⁰ While Sutra maintained the basic outline of the program, the cast and reconstruction of the dances have undergone changes during tours.

In the following analysis, I will focus on several moments within the two-hour program to elucidate the choreography and its relationship to gender power, agency, and identity in order to facilitate an understanding of the elements that distinguishes Sutra productions from other dance companies and the way in which those traits elevate the artistic director and his company to the “star” status. Moreover, I use conversations with Sutra dancers off the stage to complement my reading of the choreography, enabling me to tap into “insider” information regarding funding and sponsorship, training, organizing shows, and tours.

⁸⁰ Ramli Ibrahim. Personal interview. February, 2005.

*Spellbound*⁸¹ opens with a video presentation. Richly inserted with images of dancing sculptures, temples, and Sutra dancers, the video offers an introductory narrative outlining the historical background of *Odissi*. Illustrating the divine origin of the dance form, the production shifts the audience's attention to a female dancer, seated cross-legged at the semi-dimmed center stage. She forms the *mudras*, gesturing the Goddess Saraswathi. The first piece, "Mangala Charanam," begins. The female dancer gets up and joins other dancers who enter the stage via an elevated platform located at the upstage. Two male and eight female dancers spread themselves across the performance space and dance in unison to the tune of "Mangala Charanam." The next two pieces, "Mukhari Pallavi" and *tandava* (masculine) *abinaya* piece, "Ashta Shambhu," underscore strong male stage presences: Dancer Guna in the protagonist role as Raga Moorthy in "Pallavi" and Ibrahim as Shiva in "Ashta Shambu." Throughout the dance numbers, Guna and Ibrahim position themselves in the center, occasionally moving downstage (leading the female dancers) or walking upstage to an elevated platform where they strike poses. In "Pallavi," female dancers perform their movement sequences in various formations, at times in unison with Guna's dance phrases and at other times, counter-unison. Certain rhythmic sequences of the dance are reserved primarily for Guna, who performs the central male character, Raga Moorthy, while the women move in circles around him, watching him with awe and reflectively posing. Ibrahim leads the following dance as the hypermasculine god, Shiva. Female dancers, in pairs or trios, sporadically enter the

⁸¹ The music for the *Odissi* repertoire was composed by *Guru* Deba Prasad Das, *Guru* Gajendra Kumar Panda, and *Guru* Durga Charan Ranbir.

performance space to portray supporting roles during the enactment of the attributes and events associated with the eight-fold forms of Shiva. Next piece, “Kadamba Bane Bangsi,” tells the story of Radha, who is tortured by her love for Krishna. It is performed by five female dancers, each taking the protagonist role of Radha. While each dancer articulates her own interpretation of Radha’s agony and desire to be united with her divine lover, Guna briefly enters the scenes several times and the accoutrements he assumes for this *nritya* piece, a crown and peacock feather, identifies him as the character of Krishna. He dances with the women and leaves them in despair. The grand finale of the *Spellbound* repertoire is “Aditya Acharna,” an invocation of Surya (Sun God/Solar Deity). With a huge sun image adorning the background, Ibrahim takes the role of Surya. Guna, who stands two feet away in front of Ibrahim facing the audience, is the charioteer. He places himself in a half-sitting, *chauka* position. Seven female dancers, form an arch, representing the horses that Surya rides (symbolizing seven chakras). The arch is formed several feet in front of Guna’s position. The dance piece begins a chariot riding scene, spectacularized by uniform dance steps moving forward and small jumping steps moving backward. The team then disperses and begins a cycle of sun salutation to the recitation of mantras for Surya. The dance number picks up pace through several rhythmic dance phrases and expressive sequences. A female lead dancer then assumes the role of Surya. Ibrahim and Guna carry her on their shoulders, her body is then flipped to face the floor and she is lifted up. Then, with both her legs wrapped around Ibrahim’s thighs and in an embracing position, she forms *mudras* denoting the solar deity, while Ibrahim makes turns. This is the first moment of body contact between male and female dancers in this

production. The climax returns to the chariot riding choreographic sequence and culminates with all the dancers walking upstage showered in gold dusts. Ibrahim walks up to the elevated platform with hands held up in a salutation *mudra*, while his dancers stop just before ascending the platform and perform salutations in back-bending positions. The standing ovation, repeated curtain calls, and prolonged applause are testimonies that the audience is successfully charmed by the magic of *Spellbound*.

Construction of Cosmopolitan Masculinity in *Spellbound*

Spellbound's repertoire and choreographic strategies exemplify "masculinism," which Arthur Brittan (1989) explicates is an ideology that "justifies and naturalizes male domination" (4). The choices of dance songs, spatial arrangement of dancing bodies, and interaction between the gendered bodies are means through which we could read patriarchal domination on the stage. In the final piece celebrating the sun deity, Ibrahim represents the ultimate beholder of power and agency, Surya. Standing at the center of the stage, he rides majestically on the triumphal chariot harnessed by seven horses acted out by female dancers, ridden by the male charioteer (Guna). This scene is enacted several times in a similar formation. The docile bodies of the female dancers are configured through their passive characterization, while a dominant masculinity is enforced through male sequences that highlight acrobatic movements and that lend support to women (lifting and carrying). Through these dance sequences, Ibrahim and Guna draw their patriarchal dividend through an uncontested display of authority on the bodies of female dancers.

The gendered hierarchy is further complicated by an ethnic hierarchy. This could be analyzed through the allocation of roles on the stage. R.W Connell (2005) elucidates that within the overall framework of gender discourse, there are specific gender relations of dominance (hegemony) and subordination between men. Whenever Ibrahim and Guna are present on the stage (for instance in the final dance as described earlier), Guna does not perform the prime characters. Relegated to a role that is seemingly less important, the Indian dancer, Guna, adopts a subordinated masculinity, while the Malay dancer, Ibrahim, personifies the dominating masculinity, through his leading role. Thus, Ibrahim claims authority via ethnicity and masculinity simultaneously.

Furthermore, Ibrahim's mobility and access to "star" spaces, not just locally, but also globally, construct what I refer as a "cosmopolitan masculinity." What enhances this mobility? His artistic mobility is made possible by major sponsorships from the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) Arts funding, Malaysian Airlines, ASTRO, and Istana Budaya in association with the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage. Parveen Nair, who worked for Sutra and was one of the male dancers who participated in these tours, explains that the Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage, Datuk Seri Rais Yatim and dignitaries from the Ministry, the High Commission of Malaysia, major sponsors, and well-established corporate agencies all attended Ibrahim's premier production. According to Ibrahim, the minister was supportive to the extent that he suggested that *Spellbound* was ready to tour abroad. Ibrahim's declaration evokes Aihwa Ong's (1999) contention that transnationality does not reduce state power (21), but stimulates a new, more flexible, and complex relationship between capital and

governments. While Ong referred to transnational companies and financial markets, I would like to extend this argument to include dance artists. By suggesting that an Indian dance production should tour globally, the minister as the representative of the state power stands as a positive generative force to the development of Indian dance. However, since this sort of support has never been rendered to Indian dance practitioners, I cite ethnicity/pan-Malay ethnicity as the reason for this support. The funding (state and corporate) and revenue from ticket sales enabled the production to tour all over Malaysia and abroad. In addition, the High Commissioner of Malaysia to Singapore assisted Sutra in securing a performance in Singapore. Ibrahim deftly maneuvered similar strategies to bring *Spellbound* out to various other countries. Ibrahim's transnational cosmopolitanism bolstered his masculine power. Highlighting further the discourse of ethnicity, I now move on to discuss the casting, choreographic strategies, and spectatorship. I am primarily concerned in examining the way ethnicity, which is embedded in these factors, aids Ibrahim in the construction of "star" cosmopolitan status.

Ethnicity in *Spellbound*

The cast of *Spellbound* features dancers of many ethnicities. Arguing against the Euro-American discourses that identify skin color as the main visual marker of difference (Wiegman, 1995, Johnson, 2003), I want to stress that the difference in the visible physical attributes among the Malays, Indians, and Chinese in Malaysia, especially during Indian dance performances, are not always apparent.⁸² This is further complicated

⁸² I refer to Pong's (1999) work in which he asserts that in Malaysia, the differences in visible physical attributes among Malays, Chinese, and Indians are relatively small. As such, it is the ethnic groups' different cultures, particularly their language and religion, which have been the basis for conflict.

by dancers of mixed parentage (Chinese Indian and Indian Chinese). I suggest that ethnic difference materializes in Malaysia through a complicated combination of physical appearances or markers and social affiliations. While in some instances, ethnic differences are perceptible through dancing bodies on the stage, in other instances, the differences are revealed through non-performance discourse, all of which depend on the training of the audience that informs perception. There is a potential for the program notes, the emcee's introduction, the interactions among audience members, and the viewing experience to inform ethnic difference, which the visual dancing bodies onstage could "lie" or transcend.⁸³ Whether revealed through performance or non-performance discourse, the multi-ethnic dancing cast is emphasized in all Sutra's productions since it makes the company unique. Thus, the "cultural hybridity" (Gilroy, 1993) plays a vital role in the commodification and marketing of Sutra's *Odissi* productions, such as *Spellbound*, both in Malaysia and abroad.

Odissi, traditionally a solo dance form, is being reworked as group choreographies by contemporary practitioners. Among these practitioners is Ibrahim whose work has a personal signature and that expresses a distinctive "Malaysian" identity. The way in which Sutra's group work is re-constructed and re-designed in space distinguishes it from other *Odissi* dance companies. Ibrahim's rigorous training in ballet, modern, and Indian classical dance allows him to apply multifaceted approaches to

⁸³ To support this argument, I relate to a conversation that I had with an Indian dance practitioner. Referring to a contemporary Indian dance piece presented in 2009 in Chennai, India, dancer/choreographer, Umesh Shetty, pointed out that the dance portrayed the deity Shiva and was performed by dancers of Indian and Malay ethnic origins. He said that several audience members who came to the backstage to compliment Shetty after the performance expressed that they did not realize the presence of non-Indian dancers in the cast until they were informed by Shetty. (personal correspondence, 2010).

Spellbound. Sutra's style is primarily established through its rearrangement of dances.⁸⁴ In *Spellbound*, Ibrahim's utilization of multi-ethnic dance ensemble, body contacts while embracing and lifting dancers, and innovative spatial designs mark his distinctive "Malaysian" *Odissi* style.⁸⁵ The reconstruction of group works coupled with a multi-media installment, live music accompaniment as well as specially commissioned stage and lighting designs have placed Sutra in a very enviable and unique position in an international circuit.

The cast and re-arrangement constantly changed as *Spellbound* travelled to different cultural sites. Ibrahim ascertained that the small group of touring dancers was multi-ethnic and was comprised of Sutra's principal dancers. The choreography was reworked with a smaller cast of well-trained dancers. Since Sutra presented works at indoor and out-door performance sites, core elements such as costume, music, lighting, and performance script were reviewed and modified based on the space during tours.

While I am informed that Ibrahim has attained his "star" status through networking, talent, and hard work, I also want to point out that maintaining the status

⁸⁴ Ibrahim utilizes the terms, dance arrangement and rearrangement, to refer to reconstruction of dances as group compositions or rearrangement of moving bodies in space. Gerald Martinez (1998) describes Sutra's dance rearrangement as, "Ramli's choreography made maximum use of space with dancers using multiple points of entry and exit to add variety and increase element of interest." Martinez, Gerald. "Classical Dance of the Subtle Kind." *The Malay Mail*. June 17, 1998.

⁸⁵ In an article that featured Sutra's performance in New York, Richa Gulati, a freelance writer, writes "Ramli's choreography unabashedly referenced Odissi's sensual history; near the end of "Suriya," for example, a female dancer languidly intertwined her legs around a male dancer's midsection in a full body embrace. Other elements like ballet lifts required dancers to hold one another. These simple touches in Ramli's choreography stood out because they were the only physical interactions among dancers, regardless of ethnicity and gender, the entire evening." (Gulati, 2008) Gulati was comparing Sutra's performance with other Odissi dance companies that performed at the Dance Festival of India in New York in 2008. I am highlighting Gulati's observation here to support my argument on the distinctive features of Sutra's Odissi productions.

would not have been possible without Sutra's multi-ethnic principal dancers such as Guna, Radhimalar Govindarajoo, January Low, and Revathi Tamilselvan. For instance, in a dance review published in the New York Times last year, critic Alastair Macaulay wrote, "...Ramli Ibrahim indicates the drama of his scenes with a certain arch preciousness, whereas his partner, Radhimalar, delivers it with marvelous focus and intensity" (New York Times, 2011). This comment illuminates the strength of Ibrahim's female dance partner. Besides, his two other main dancers such as Guna and January Low have both won "best performer" awards locally for their Indian classical solo dance recitals. Trained in *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi*, Guna acts as the assistant trainer for all *Odissi* productions, offering Ibrahim a crucial back-up support during rehearsals.

Low points out that Sutra's dance reconstructions are the main selling point. She says, "Audience members particularly admired the way Sutra reworked the *Odissi* dance on Surya and this dance was highlighted in all our international tours."⁸⁶ What Low fails to emphasize is that the ideas for the arrangements of dances are a collaborative venture. As dance partners of Ibrahim, female dancers make their individual presence felt in choreographies and performance. Another vital feature of Sutra productions is non-Indian dancers. Two Chinese dancers, who were part of the *Spellbound* production, share their experience;

Sutra taps good talents and offers opportunity to perform regardless of ethnicity and religious background. Everyone here has to work hard. We don't want to be left behind. We were part of the tour to India and Europe for *Spellbound* production. It was a great opportunity. Dancing and touring with Sutra is a whole

⁸⁶ January Low, 2006 (from *Spellbound* DVD).

new experience. When we tour, people see us all collectively as Malaysian and not as Chinese, Indians, or Malays.⁸⁷

Sutra's popularity as a professional performing dance company attracts dancers from mixed Chinese-Indian parentage and non-Indians, particularly Malaysian Chinese dancers. The opportunity to tour countries and emerge as principal dancers or Ibrahim's dance partners are the alluring factors for these dancers. Their participation, in return, enables the creation of the title, "multi-ethnic dancing group," which puts Sutra/Ibrahim in a unique position and enhances his "star" status. At this juncture, I would like to call attention to a form of doubling privileged status – Ibrahim's own privileged ethnic status and the fact that his company is able to stand in for Malaysian multi-ethnicity.

Besides the performers, Sutra's audience for *Spellbound* when it was staged in Istana Budaya composed of members from all ethnicities. Based on observation during the performance in Malaysia, at least fifty per cent of the spectators were non-Indians. Since Ibrahim toured extensively to countries in the global north and south through this production, his circle of audience diversified. In a commentary at the end of the *Spellbound* DVD, Ibrahim suggests that *Odissi* dance in Malaysia has attained a certain level of maturity and it can now boast as having created a "Malaysian *parampara* (lineage)."⁸⁸ While he did not elaborate on the specificities of this lineage, I deduce that the amalgamation of multi-ethnic dancing bodies, Sutra's mode of dance presentation, and the diverse spectatorship for Ibrahim's pioneering artistic ventures are the vital

⁸⁷ Tan Mei Mei and Michele Chang, 2012.

⁸⁸ Ibrahim mentioned the "Malaysian *parampara*" when he discussed the making of *Spellbound* in the DVD, that was sold to the public in 2006.

markers of the “Malaysian Odissi” identity. The branding of *Odissi* is important to the construction of Ibrahim’s “star” image.

Sutra’s Odissi performance, *Spellbound*, and Bharata Natyam production, *The Divine Encounters*, demonstrated Ibrahim’s artistic mobility. Ibrahim’s ambitious effort in premiering his work at a “star” space and his ability to sustain full-house performances for several days, rather than a one-night stand, not only in Malaysia, but also abroad, testified his cosmopolitan masculinity. He also spearheaded the endeavor of bringing together the largest number of male dance artists through *The Divine Encounters*, the first of such collaborative efforts in Malaysia. These artistic ventures were undeniably enabled by political, economical, and social support. I have looked at a “bumiputera” “star” dancer and will now focus on Chinese-Indian “star” dancer, Mavin Khoo, one of the dance prodigies produced by Sutra.

Mavin Khoo

Mavin Khoo came up to me after my debut solo performance, *arangetram*, in 1994 and said, “I enjoyed your performance, your *sringara bakti* (love devotion) in the *varnam* piece was very powerful.” I was not sure if I knew he was Mavin Khoo at that time. No one specifically noticed him. I did not even take the encounter seriously. I was more thrilled with the praises I received from the audience for my dance recital.

Last year, when the Temple of Fine Arts celebrated its founder Swami Shantanand Saraswathi’s Samadhi⁸⁹ day, Mavin Khoo was invited to perform. He

⁸⁹ In Hinduism, *samadhi* refers to a complete absorption of the individual consciousness in the self at the time of death. It is a day when the soul attains liberation. Swami Shantananda attained *samadhi* on July 27, 2005 at the Shivanjali Centre in Coimbatore, India.

rendered an expressive rhythmic piece, “Ulagam Pugalum.” He was showered with loud cheers and applauses. After the performance, he walked into the Annalakshmi Restaurant, located at the ground level of the Temple of Fine Arts building, to meet someone. As he walked in, all eyes turned towards him and people were whispering in each other’s ears. The wave of whispers lingered on even after he left the restaurant.

These two scenarios, separated by two decades, illustrate how Mavin Khoo went from a common dancer to an international icon. The pace and magnitude of his success is rather astounding. Today, he stands as the only leading international dance soloist to come out of Malaysia. He is a highly acclaimed Indian classical dancer-choreographer at home and abroad. His rise to fame in the last two decades, I argue, is neither accidental nor coincidental.

I suggest that Khoo’s talent and hard work alone have not earned him this “star” reputation. To explore the totality of his “star” image, I argue that Khoo, his work, and success must be examined in relation to the social, economic, and cultural conditions in the country. A closer inspection of the conditions that shape his artistic career enables us to understand why Malaysia has not produced any other major international soloist in the past decades.

Mavin Khoo was born to a Malaysian Chinese father and Malaysian Indian-Ceylonese mother. His father, Professor Emeritus Khoo Kay Khim, is a leading national historian and holds the prestigious title “Tan Sri,” while his mother enjoyed a career as a schoolteacher. Khoo’s elder brother, Eddin Khoo, is a poet, writer, and translator. He is the founder of Pusaka – Centre for the Study and Documentation of Traditional

Performance in Malaysia and the publishing house, Kala, which devotes itself to publishing literary translations from foreign languages into Malay. Meanwhile, another sibling, Rubin Khoo, works for a leading English newspaper. Mavin Khoo grew up in an upper class reputable family that was both politically influential and financially prosperous.

Since Khoo was very passionate about dance, he was enrolled at the Temple of Fine Arts (ToFA) under the tutelage of Vasuki Sivanesan at the age of six. Khoo's mother, Rathi, explains that Vasuki's initial dance exposure had an "amazing touch" on her son. Right from the age of six, his parents had wanted him to shine as a "star" onstage and they paved a path for him. As Rathi points out, she and her husband were disappointed with ToFA because the institution did not take her son seriously and Khoo was never offered an opportunity to perform. Khoo's parents took him to watch one of Ibrahim's most acclaimed dance productions, *Adorations* and Khoo was then enrolled in Sutra. He studied *Bharata Natyam*, *Odissi*, and ballet. Within six months of training, he performed in the production, *Kitatakatarikitathom* and by the age of eight, he had made his name known through this production. The print media covered stories about him, highlighting the fact that his father was Chinese.

After several years with Sutra, Khoo went to study under the renowned dance master, Adyar K. Lakshman in Chennai, India. During his initial phase of dance training in India, education was emphasized. He was put into a private school. At the age of eighteen, he went to study dance full-time at the distinguished dance institution,

Kalakshetra. While in India, he established himself as a solo performer. He participated in major festivals and became a seasoned dancer.

Admission to an undergraduate program in performing arts took him to London. London offered him fresh artistic experiences through collaborations and arts residencies.⁹⁰ He was offered a scholarship to continue with his Masters degree in Choreography by the British Council. He currently teaches in the Department of Dance Studies at the University of Malta, while pursuing his doctorate studies.

His artistic journey took him to various geographical locations, enabling him to inhabit multiple “homes” or develop “multiple attachments” (Robbins, 1998) without losing roots in Malaysia. As though reifying his rooted cosmopolitan status, he stresses in one of our conversations that, “Chennai is my “home” for Indian classical dance, London for classical ballet, and my native home is here, Malaysia.”⁹¹ In each of these sites, he performs under a different ethnic/national identity. In Malaysia, he is a “Chinese boy,” in India, he is seen as a “Malaysian,” and when he is in London, he performs as a “Londoner.” In most cases, particularly in Malaysia, his name, fair body complexion, and Chinese facial features accentuate his “Chinese-ness” rather than “Indian-ness,” signaling the presence of a visual economy of race/ethnicity through physical appearance and social affiliation. He points out that each identity simultaneously offers advantages and poses hindrances. For example, he notes that certain experimental works that explore his

⁹⁰ Besides *Bharata Natyam*, Mavin Khoo also trained at the Merce Cunningham studio in New York and furthered his ballet training with Michael Beare, Marian St. Claire, Nancy Kilgour and Ayumi Hikasa in London. He collaborated and danced with some of the critically acclaimed choreographers such as Akram Khan, Wayne McGregor and Christopher Bannerman. He was invited as a guest artist at Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company, Ballet de Zaragoza, Ballet Regensburgh, and Sankalapam.

⁹¹ Mavin Khoo, August 2011.

gay life experiences in London could not be presented in Malaysia which would have likely led to great controversy considering the reputation his family held in the community. Thus, he only stages *Bharata Natyam* recitals in Malaysia and India. He founded his dance company, MavinkhooDance, in 2003. Through the company, he took several productions that he created in London and India on international tours. He presented *Parallel Passions*, followed by *Chandra/Luna* (2004-2005), *Devi: the Female Principle* (2006), *Strictly Bharata Natyam* (2006), and a few other solo *Bharata Natyam* recitals.

For many years, Khoo demonstrated an unquestioning commitment to his *Bharata Natyam* training and performed allegiance to the style and repertoires he was taught. Only in the past ten years, he admits, has he indulged in his “own choreographies,” “own explorations,” and “own artistic voice” (personal correspondence, 2011). He points out that he is trying to get people to see “beyond its community, cultural root”⁹² through his own choreographic works. One of the explorations that has deeply intrigued him and has pushed him into interesting directions both in his scholarly as well as artistic works is gender ambiguity.

Khoo is well-known for two of his most recent *Bharata Natyam* dance productions in Malaysia: *Devi: In Absolution* (2008) and *Dancing My Shiva* (2010). I draw on Khoo’s *Devi: In Absolution* to investigate how he explores gender in this classical dance work. This production which is based on *Bharata Natyam* movement

⁹² Chandy, Anne Marie. “The Dance Unfolds” in *The Star Online*. August 22, 2008.
<http://ecentral.my/services/sprinterfriendly.asp?file=/2008/8/22/soundnstage/1828760&sec=soundnstage>

vocabulary turns away from the traditional repertoire to a work that embraces abstraction. *Devi* also offers a lens through which the construction of his “star” status could be traced and examined in a more explicit manner.

Devi In Absolution: Creation, Production, and Analysis

Khoo’s fascination with the goddess Devi as a child grew into an infatuation, eventually leading to the creation of *Devi: The Female Principle* with French choreographer Laurent Cavanna for Venice Biennale in 2006. After the success of the neo-classical ballet production, he investigated the subject matter deeper by turning towards literary works and scholars in Chennai. The result of his research is *Devi: In Absolution*. In this solo *Bharata Natyam* recital, Khoo brings to the fore three manifestations of Devi: Meenakshi - the child goddess, Durga - the warrior, and Kali - the destroyer. Let us now look at the production.

Devi: In Absolution opens with world-class vocalist, O.S Arun’s melodious voice. Our gaze is directed towards a black and white film portraying Khoo in a foetal position, a sign of a child being born. An eerie figure of a woman in a red sari appears shadowing the child. The representation of Devi is kept symbolic because the mystery and awe one feels towards the goddess is often lost in an imperfect human form. The woman then slides down her finger on Khoo’s back in the film, the visceral reaction to which is produced by Khoo through live performance. The stage light now focuses on Khoo’s live body onstage. With his back facing the white screen, Khoo’s slight twitch of facial expression and body motion reacting to the woman’s touch connects the screen and stage. In the first act of Meenakshi, Khoo depicts the image of a curious child, making lines and

shapes with his gestures. He executes a series of complex footwork, but in a rather light and “playful” manner. He portrays her as a child *nayika* (heroine) who adorns herself. He presents her as the embodiment of beauty and as a girl who possesses intelligence in the arts and sciences and courage of a man. He explores the notion of femininity and masculinity with his *abinaya* (facial expressions) and movement gestures through his interpretation of the character, Meenakshi – the child goddess. Following this segment, there is a short intermission.

During the intermission, I spoke with several dancers who came to watch this performance. One of them said, “It is something new to see how Mavin uses film in his dance recital. Indian classical dancers here (in Malaysia) do not usually use media.” Another dancer interjected, “It is difficult to understand what Mavin is trying to show through the images in the film. I understand that there must be some connection and (metaphorical) meaning for showing the foetal position, the woman in red sari..., but I don’t know if I understood! Quite experimental!”

After intermission, the tone of the performance shifts. Here, he incorporates virtuosic rhythmic patterns and movement sequences to evoke the forms, Durga and Kali. The innocence and love seen in the first half of the program give way to an energy that spells power and domination. Khoo manifests these qualities through his use of space. He moves extensively around the stage through fast, squatting jumps, which turn into double/triple spins and high leaps, creating a robust warrior image.

The mood builds in intensity as Khoo dances with violent fury. Transforming into an empowered and fierce Kali, he repeatedly stomps the floor with his feet. With his “loud” *mudras*, he slashes and destroys everything that comes in his way. The image of blood drops in the film shown above him depicts bloodshed as a repercussion of such destructive force. Simultaneously, *sindoor* (red powder) literally pours down on Khoo who dances on the stage. During this scene, the stage lights are dimmed with only a spotlight on the dancer. It culminates with a climax in which the intensity of singing, chanting, and dancing building on without reaching an end. There are whispers that O.S Arun and Khoo have gone into some kind of trance. Audience members start to clap and the applause slowly brought the performance to an end. This innovative avant-garde Indian dance, set against fragments of an overhead film, is as much a celebration of divine female absolute as it is an all-pervading force of innocence, love, vigor, and obliteration.⁹³

Interrogating Masculinity in *Devi*

As a dance artist who is deeply engrossed by questions of gender ambiguity and “in-between-ness,” I stress that this production gave Khoo ample scope to explore liminal spaces through improvisational movements. This work, which he describes as a personal journey, allows him to discreetly explore his own gender ambivalences. He embodies feminine roles throughout this work, but constantly shifts gender through his movement quality. At times, he assumes feminine gestures accompanying *sringara* (love)

⁹³ Sangeetas. “Mavin Khoo and O.S Arun in KL.” August 20, 2008.
<http://sangeethas.wordpress.com/2008/08/20/mavin-khoo-and-os-arun-in-kl/>

bhava and at other times, masculine gestures through leaps, stomping, and fierce arm movements. In the climax, he attempts to blur the lines of masculinity and femininity revealing his body smeared with *sindoor* (marker of femininity) performing trance like movements. Besides, Khoo's fascination for the goddess in this production asserts his fetishization of the female form. In the absence of actual female body in this solo male recital, he idealizes plots that portray him in different forms of the goddess, who is the representation of a symbolic woman. His flirtation with femininity reflects more of a reinforcement of patriarchal power. Although the central theme focuses on female goddess, being effeminate is not his ultimate aim. He intends to explore the middle line, the ambiguity, by "being genderless"⁹⁴ through an exploration of the qualities represented by those revelations of Devi.

Khoo's body is given much prominence in this work through the "touch" in the film, lingering over certain iconographic poses of the goddess, and the spotlight on his body covered with *sindoor* and sweat. Even though the production is sculpted based on Indian texts about Hindu goddesses, there is a presence of "male-narcissism," in the form of "self-absorption" (Chow, 2009:109) of the solo male dancer. Khoo's own narcissistic self-absorption manifests through his obsessive concern of his body and appearance as well as his identification with the object of desire, Devi. His extreme self-absorption suggests that Khoo is not just dancing the goddess, but he is the embodiment of the goddess. There is also a potential risk in this presentation. The incorporation of his over improvisational self expression to the divine presentation, while emphasizing his artistic

⁹⁴ Gowri,R. "A Beautiful Tension." *New Straits Times Press*, April 22, 2008.

maturity, denies audiences the potential to read or appreciate certain abstract ideas of his work.

Ethnicity

I wanted to meet Khoo after the performance, but he was nowhere to be seen on the stage. As time passed, people were ascending the stage in large groups disrupting my chances of meeting him. It was a very mixed crowd. I realized that I have only seen this sort of crowd during Ibrahim's Indian dance productions.

Commenting on the audience turnout, Khoo's mother explains,

His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince of the state of Perak, Raja Nazrin Shah, attends all our productions. He is a family friend and an ardent supporter of the arts. We also invite other official dignitaries. We have huge support from the Chinese people. While the crowd for most Indian classical shows is insular, Mavin's productions are attended by multi-ethnic audience. People call up for tickets once they see newspapers and ASTRO's promo screenings. Somehow we face difficulties selling tickets to the Indian dance schools.⁹⁵

The royal patronage of the Crown Prince created huge publicity for Khoo's production. The first performance of *Devi* was for the sole viewing of royal dignitaries; it was not until the second day that it premiered to the public. Khoo's "Chinese-ness" attracted media support. The "dancing Chinese boy" (personal correspondence, 2011)⁹⁶ was promoted by popular Chinese newspapers such as Nanyang Siang Pau. Most English newspapers and certain magazines carried promotional materials and reviews written by Khoo's brothers, Eddin and Rubin. The ASTRO Tamil channel, Vaanavil, was another primary supporter of Khoo. Vaanavil crew-members recorded his dance rehearsals and

⁹⁵ Rathi Khoo, 2011.

⁹⁶ It was pointed out by Mavin Khoo's mother, Rathi during the interview.

screened the edited video as publicity free of charge. Additionally, Khoo's dance preview clips were featured in various channels of ASTRO, such as sports, star world, travel and leisure. To date, the cross-channeling privilege had been attained by only two dance artists of Indian classical dance in Malaysia: Ibrahim and Khoo. The nationwide media coverage garnered overwhelming support for Khoo's productions. I would like to emphasize that although Khoo is a "non-bumiputera," his father's influential political and social connection with the Perak state royal family, various state dignitaries, and media aid in creating a patronage structure for Khoo's dance works in Malaysia.

Khoo as Cultural Commodity

The production, *Devi: In Absolution*, was sold out to the Malaysian audience. It brought together two popular world-class artists on one stage: the vocalist, O.S. Arun, whom many Indian dance companies in Malaysia could not afford and the international dance soloist, Khoo. This was the primary selling point for the production. While Arun mesmerized the audience with his sterling vocal performance, Khoo's fans could not have been disappointed because the production contained considerable portions of challenging and virtuosic rhythmic sequences, for which Khoo is famous. Speaking about the collaborator vocalist, Khoo said,

Arun and I have enormous trust in each other. It's like having a dance partner. I feel that I have the freedom to go anywhere and he will be there to support me. I think he feels the same about me. What's nice is that this was initially instinctive but now the more we perform together, the more we develop this skill. I would say about 80% of our performance is based on improvisation and that's very liberating.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Extracted from the article, "Wandering Star," *thestaronline*. April 20, 2011.
<http://ecentral.my/news/story.asp?file=/2011/4/20/soundstage/8342028&sec=soundstage>

Besides the successful collaboration and “working chemistry” between the “star” dancer and his vocalist, patronage plays a vital role in Khoo’s artistic development. The circulation of Khoo’s name as a brand and his father’s influential power ease the process of seeking funding and sponsorships. Rathi, who currently runs Mavinkhoodance Company with Rubin Khoo in K.L., articulates the ways they raised money to stage their productions. She recalls,

Before Mavin became popular, we depended on our network of friends. Each family or friend contributed about 10 000 ringgit. Since I offered Accounting tuition at home, the parents of my students contributed small funds. Mavin’s father knew so many people, they helped us out. Today, corporate giants such as Sime Darby, CIMB Foundation, and ASTRO are funding our programs such as *Devi in Absolution* and *Dancing My Shiva*. Malaysian Airlines sponsored airlines tickets for O.S Arun (business class), Mavin (economy class) and other members of orchestra (economy class).⁹⁸

Singapore’s National Arts Council supports the arts by sponsoring travel and collaborative efforts, but Malaysia does not have such assistance. Hence, arts funding is difficult to find in Malaysia. The funding by ASTRO, Sime Darby, and HSBC Arts Fund are limited to projects that are experimental and community oriented. Malaysian dancer-choreographer, Marion D’Cruz, stresses that funding is all about “luck,” it is based upon “recommendation rather than networking.”⁹⁹ Corporate sponsors are pouring in for Khoo’s performances not necessarily as a result of his status as an international icon, but because of his family’s political and economical power. According to Khoo’s mother, private or corporate sponsorships cover their production costs, while the income from ticket sales is kept as revenue for the company to organize dance programs and tours.

⁹⁸ Rathi Khoo, 2011

⁹⁹ Marion D’Cruz, 2011

These financial gains have given the company the potential to launch big budget productions in the future. For instance, *Devi: In Absolution* toured Australia (Parramasala Festival) and Belgium last year. The Australian critic described it as an “Absolutely devotion-worthy performance at the Festival.” (Sykes, 2011)

A dancer’s rise to stardom does not necessarily point to advantages, but also possible hindrances. Khoo’s mother points out that dance productions, such as *Devi*, have garnered very little support from Indian dance schools. She was not referring to ToFA or Sutra, but other major dance schools, predominantly managed by Tamil speaking Indians. There has been a tendency among Indian dance companies to regard Khoo’s productions as catered for the “elites” considering how extravagantly they are promoted and presented. I suspect this perception could have kept away a certain group of Indian dance practitioners from attending Khoo’s productions. On a further note, his appearance can also be cited as another reason for the lack of support because Khoo does not look “quite” Indian, but Chinese.

I have demonstrated how factors such ethnicity, class, family institution, economy, and global network emerge as imperative forces in the construction of Khoo’s cosmopolitan “star” image on and offstage. Specifically, I am concerned with the way in which financial capital lead this dancer to attain cultural and social capital. An interrogation on Khoo’s stardom, while on the one hand, indicates the enormous economic capital required in the making of a soloist and to sustain that image, on the other hand, suggests the structural limits - the inability to garner support from Indian dance schools and gender policing - involved in the creation of a male soloist “star.” I

have so far analyzed a Chinese-Indian “star” dancer and will now focus on Indian “star” choreographer-dancer, Umesh Shetty.

Umesh Shetty

“Akka (sister), Umesh is not serious. He says he is tired. He is at the canteen talking to some dancers. I am losing my patience, he is delaying the rehearsal.” Suki complained to Suriakala, who came down from India to conduct the first tribute performance in remembrance of the late Master Gopal Shetty in 1990. This *margam* recital was scheduled to be performed by Shetty’s three children, Suki, Ravi, and Umesh. At this juncture, Umesh Shetty casually walked into the rehearsal space and joined the rest as though nothing happened, while his two siblings stared at him angrily. The dancers, who are in their late teens and early twenties, began with “Guru Vandanam,” an item in praise of divine *guru* and continued with the rest of the repertoire. In the old Temple of Fine Arts building,¹⁰⁰ each dance classroom is separated by glass partitions. These partitions are removed during the rehearsal to provide more space for the dancers. While waiting for my father to bring me home after a dance lesson, I sat at one end of the hall to watch the rehearsal. Although Umesh Shetty was described as “lazy” and “not serious,” his dancing proved otherwise. His movement synchronization, precision of steps, deep *araimandi* (half-sitting position), and clean lines kept pulling my attention. I was enthralled with his performance.

¹⁰⁰ In 1991, ToFA’s patron, Swami Shantanand Saraswathi, mooted the idea of a multi-storey building that would enhance his mission of serving the community in many ways. The year 2008 marks the realization of his dream, a five-storey building, complete with dance and music studios and performance hall, together with a library and other amenities was completed. The old building was demolished to construct this new sanctuary for the arts.

“1,2,3....do triple pirouettes, run, slide down on your knees, stretch out both arms: left up, right down in *katakamuka*.” I peeped into the studio. Several dancers were given special training in modern dance techniques for their upcoming Indian contemporary performance. Every brief moment Umesh Shetty yells at his dancers, “You fool, idiot....see what you’re doing,” “You old aunty! I think you better go back to medicine, dancing is not for you!” The dancers looked too tense and miserable. They were trying their best to live up to Umesh Shetty’s expectations. Nerve racking! What a torture! When I saw this, I made a conscious decision not to undergo training with Umesh Shetty. But, I never missed any of his productions.

My “love-hate” relationship that developed through the different encounters with the dancer-choreographer creates a backdrop for me to discuss Umesh Shetty’s personal journey as a performing artist and the construction of his “star” status. While I admired his artistic works as an anonymous spectator, I maintained a distance by not participating in his choreography or attending his classes. It is only in the past three years since I started my graduate studies in the U.S that I have begun conversation with him about dance.

Umesh Shetty, recognized throughout Malaysia as a magnetic performer of Indian dance, began formal training in *Bharata Natyam* at the age of ten. Besides being mentored, taught, and inspired by his late father, Gopal Shetty, he also received training from numerous other dance *gurus*, notably the illustrious dance master, Sivadas. Umesh Shetty learned different forms of Indian classical dances (*Bharata Natyam*, *Odissi*, and *Kathakali*) and folk dances through the training imparted to him by his parents (Gopal

Shetty and Radha Shetty) and several other dance *gurus* at the International Temple of Fine Arts (ToFA). He received special training in *Kathak* with Pandit Rohini Bhatte of Pune India. In 1997, Shetty returned to Malaysia after completing his dance degree at the Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. Equipped with solid training in Indian dance forms at “home” and contemporary as well as modern dance training abroad, Shetty began producing experimental dance works that fused Indian and Western dance traditions.

In the First Chapter, I have already explicated the pioneering contribution of Umesh Shetty’s parents, Gopal Shetty and Radha Shetty, to the development of Indian dance in Malaysia. His older siblings, Suki Shetty Krishnan and Ravi Shetty, have also been actively involved in performances and dance training at ToFA since its inception in the early 1980s. Suki, in particular, is presently one of the dance directors of ToFA in Australia. As a charismatic dancer and dance *guru* trained in different forms of Indian classical dances and ballet, Suki has been one of the key persons in the ToFA team which organizes the annual Swan Festival of Lights¹⁰¹ in Perth, Australia. Ravi Shetty, who is famously known for his lead character as Rama in the most ambitious big budget dance-drama, *Ramayana: The Asian Confluence*, which was staged in 1992, is currently one of the part-time dance instructors at ToFA in K.L.

¹⁰¹ The festival is presented in association with the Annalakshmi on the Swan Restaurant in Perth. The event is supported among others, by the Government of Western Australia’s Office of Multicultural Interests and the Bell Tower. It celebrates Western Australia’s cultural diversity through dance, music, and cuisine and is participated by a diverse range of local and international artists.

Gopal's and Radha Shetty's influential positions as dance directors and senior *gurus* at ToFA K.L.¹⁰² afforded Umesh Shetty the privilege of assuming lead roles in the institution's dance productions just as his siblings. He played lead male characters in *Lady White Snake*, *Shakuntala*, *Ramayana: The Asian Confluence*, and *Butterfly Lovers*. Along with senior dance teachers and his sister, Suki, he choreographed dance scenes for many of ToFA's cross-cultural dance-dramas.¹⁰³ His prime opportunity to shine as a choreographer of a full-length production came in the year 2002 through the dance-drama, *Butterfly Lovers*. As the male protagonist role Liang Shanbo in the Indian interpretation of a legendary Chinese tragic love story, Shetty was able to create contemporary dance sequences for scenes that featured him and his lead female dance partner. He incorporated Indian, ballet, and modern dance vocabularies in his choreography, demonstrating a smooth attempt to move between different dance styles. Besides K.L., this production toured locally - Penang and Johor Bahru, as well as internationally - Singapore, Australia, Sri Lanka, and India.

In 2005, Shetty and three core ToFA musicians (Prakash, Jyotsna, and Kumar) established a performing wing in ToFA called Inner Space. The performing group, Inner Space, was set up with a vision of opening up a performance space for artists to dance professionally. The group aimed at producing experimental and fusion works. The

¹⁰² ToFA has established centers in different countries and the arts institution in K.L. is the oldest and the most popular branch.

¹⁰³ Among others Umesh Shetty was one of the main choreographers for the dance productions - *Ramayana* (1992,1994,1996), *Sundera Keralam* (1993), *Kadambari* (1999), *Dharma Ashoka* (2001), *Shakuntala* (2001), *Mahsuri* (2002), *Butterfly Lovers* (2002), and *Vishva Vinayaka* (2004).

group's first production *Inside Out* was very successful when it premiered in 2005. In particular, his contemporary dance pieces *AlaRIPpu*, *Get This Swaram*, and *SUM* won him numerous awards locally. The former two works were choreographed and staged individually for various productions, but were then assimilated into the production, *Inside Out*.

A well-known female *guru* of Indian dance, who runs her own dance institution, poignantly asked,

Why do people keep talking about him? If anyone was given the privilege Umesh received, they could have easily become “stars.” There is nothing exceptional about this. I do admit he is a good dancer; he has good posture, clean lines, and polished *adavus*, but look at the opportunities he gets. Others have to fight for those opportunities. How is it that ToFA has allowed a performing wing now? So far, no one has heard of a performing wing. If you are Shiva family you get everything? Do you know how many dancers have left in the past because they do not get the opportunity to tour and perform? For example, look at Naren (pseudonym). He has been with Fine Arts (ToFA) all his life, but was never given prominent roles in any dance-dramas. He is so talented, but does only minor roles and performs as a back-up dancer. (personal correspondence, 2011)

As pointed out by this female dance teacher, good physique, clean lines, polished steps, perfection in rhythmic movements, and *abinaya* coupled with the ability to transcend and move between dance traditions earned Shetty much reputation and a “star” status in Malaysia. Prior to *Inside Out*, Shetty was always part of productions staged as a collective effort under the ToFA banner. Through *Tandava I - AlaRIPpu*, which garnered over-whelming support from the multi-ethnic public, Shetty began to venture outside his “comfort zone.” His works reached out to a wider group of audience. As a result of this, his experimentation with ToFA Indian dancers sprouted new methods of training and collaborations with non-Indian dancers outside ToFA.

***AlaRIPpu* – Creation and Analysis**

In *AlaRIPpu*, four female and two male dancers begin the piece in a traditional manner, executing neck and eye gestures in unison to the rhythmic syllables “Ta Dhit Ta, Kitathaka Ta Dhit Ta.” While the upper bodies of the dancers initially retain the basic posture of *Bharata Natyam* with torsos upright, arms out-stretched in *natyarambam*, and fingers forming *mudras*, the lower bodies move in a non-linear and non-conventional ways. Rhythmic syllables are recited throughout the piece, but the background music is hybridized through a blend of sitar, tabla, and keyboard. The upright torsos are extended and contracted. Dancers execute spins on the tips of their toes without shoes and launch into high kicks, jumps, and swift slides. They travel rapidly across the performance space executing movements at different levels and directions.

From the beginning until the end, the piece does not leave any space for pauses. Continuously in motion, the bodies make complex rhythmic patterns in space, utilizing movement qualities such as stomping, jumping, spinning, rolling on the floor, and sliding. The strength of the piece lies in the dancers. Well - trained in diverse dance genres, the beauty of the dance manifests when all the dancers perform the sequences in complete unison with perfect timing. The choreography demonstrates professionalism, artistic stimulation, physical prowess, and vibrancy. Once a friend said, “I came to watch just Umesh’s piece, it is mind-blowing ya!” I could not disagree with her because I was there for the same reason. This piece received cheering applauses from the audience and multiple curtain calls each time it was staged.

Shetty first developed *Alarippu* in 2002 for an event held at ToFA. Two years later, he reconstructed the work and staged it at ASWARA during the performance event - *JAMU 2004*. He named the piece *Tandava 1*. Based on the success of this artistic work, he created *Tandava 2* several weeks later for another major local production, *Emas Sepuluh*, which featured ten prominent dance choreographers in Malaysia.

When *Inside Out* premiered, Shetty formally named *Tandava 1* as *AlaRIPpu*. *AlaRIPpu* was developed from the traditional *Bharata Natyam* repertory dance genre, *alarippu*. *Alarippu*, which means ‘blossoming,’ is an invocatory piece that symbolizes the offering of respects to the Gods of Hindu mythology and to the audience. It is an abstract dance piece that is accompanied by *solkattu* (spoken rhythmic syllables). Extensively utilizing the neck, eye, major, and minor limbs, dancers execute movements gradually building up the speed from slow to medium paced and ending in fast tempo. In *AlaRIPpu*, dancers explore modern dance motives while retaining the basic gestures, specifically the symmetrical dance phrases of the traditional *alarippu*. The traditional narrow and restrictive performance space is subverted here through reinvented movements based on broad travelling movements. Through body weight transitions of *samabhanga* (equilibrium) and *abanga* (disorder), Shetty paves new trajectories of expressions in choreographing *AlaRIPpu*. As alluded in his title, Shetty rips apart the traditional *alarippu*, breaking the boundaries of the traditional framework through his exploratory endeavor.

Ethnicity and Masculinity

Shetty's original choreography of *AlaRIPpu* was developed on Indian dancers trained in Indian classical dance forms at ToFA. These dancers were hand-picked and given six months of intensive training prior to the staging of *Inside Out*. Two of Shetty's principal female dancers, Dhanya and Vidhya, share their training experience,

When Umesh anna (brother) started the core group at Fine Arts (Inner Space), we just finished high school. We were trained in Indian classical dance forms but not contemporary. We were raw, we did not know how to move, did not know anything about contemporary dance. He is a challenging choreographer and when you dance at his space, he demands your time and commitment. We were the *lucky ones chosen* to work with him. Nothing stagnates in his choreographies; he constantly changes the formation and movements. He is such a task master. There were many rehearsal days we were shouted at, called all sorts of names, we stood completely crushed, crying but he was not affected by our tears. *He is a brilliant choreographer and if you dance in his piece, people know that you are damn bloody good.* He will not compromise and will push you to a point to get what he wants. After finishing medicine, we took a year off to train and dance with him. It was not easy convincing our parents, but we made it.¹⁰⁴ (my emphasis)

The personal narratives shared by the two female dancers offer an insight into the enactment of power by Shetty as a choreographer at the rehearsal spaces. As a demanding, competitive, and forceful choreographer, he tends to be verbally “aggressive” towards his dancers to achieve a desired outcome in terms of performance quality. His offstage masculinity manifests through his control over the means of production, in this case, the labor of the predominantly female dancers. Although he is a “tough” and “difficult” choreographer, dancers compete for his attention and for the opportunities to perform in Shetty's choreographies since he is perceived as a brilliant artist. This phenomenon, I want to argue, elevates Shetty to the status of a “star.”

¹⁰⁴ Dhanya Thurairajah and Sri Vidhya, 2011.

Shetty also displays masculine identity as an onstage performer through his choreographic works. The virile, vigorous, and acrobatic dance movements in *AlaRIPpu* illustrate a masculine endeavor. I say this because the choreography prioritizes physical movement, devoid of any emotional elements. Unlike Ibrahim who takes lead roles in his dances or Khoo who performs solo, Shetty's body sometimes fades in the presence of four vibrant female dancers in sections where the team performs in unison. But, yet and again, Shetty marks his presence through his virtuosic movement signature. The movement style which emerges through his choreographies, virile images on posters and print media,¹⁰⁵ and heterosexual partnering in dance-dramas simultaneously feed into the configuration of masculine "star" image.

AlaRIPpu, which was presented by the Indian dancers of ToFA slowly made its way into the academic syllabus of the National Academy of Arts, Culture, and Heritage (ASWARA).¹⁰⁶ Since Shetty was part of the academic team at the government institution of performing arts, *AlaRIPpu* was gradually incorporated into the graduation assessment repertoire and taught primarily to non-Indian students. The Indian contemporary dance piece earned Shetty more popularity after it was made a compulsory dance material to be learned by the students of ASWARA. *AlaRIPpu*'s circulation intensified both locally and internationally through its re-stagings by dancers of ToFA and ASWARA as well as

¹⁰⁵ One of the popular image features him in hand gestures holding bow and arrow with stretched arms and virile body posture.

¹⁰⁶ National Academy of Arts (ASK), which was established in 1994 under the Malaysian Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism is now known as National Academy of Arts, Culture, and Heritage (ASWARA). ASWARA is the only institution of higher learning in the field of performing arts fully supported by the Malaysian Government under the Ministry of Unity, Culture, Arts, and Heritage Malaysia.

through collaborative efforts between both institutions. The multi-ethnic students of ASWARA pointed out the corporeal tension they witnessed when performing *AlaRIPpu*.

I paraphrase here one of the dancers' remarks,

ToFA dancers are well trained in Indian classical dance, but we are amateur dancers when it comes to that dance genre. We don't have their experience. Although some of us can perform ballet and contemporary dance movements rather easily, we don't have the flexibility ToFA dancers have in Indian classical dance. But Umesh will not give up on us; the training is very strenuous. We somehow managed because in ASWARA, we are privileged to have undergone training in different dance forms.¹⁰⁷

Shetty commented on the "corporeal tension" that was pointed out by ToFA and ASWARA dancers in one of our conversations. He said that since each group lacked in one or the other forms of dance training, the corporeal tension emerged in the process of blending the traditional and contemporary movement vocabularies. But he stressed that it was only in this incongruity or struggle that the beauty of the dance manifested. The corporeal struggle, which he described as at times resulting in "clumsiness," shaped his choreography in ways unanticipated by him and offered a whole new dimension to his originally conceived choreographic form. I would like to stress that Shetty deployed various choreographic strategies at different training sites to enable a wide circulation of his dance pieces. His ability to penetrate global spaces through multi-ethnic dance casts signified his artistic mobility and reflected his cosmopolitan masculinity.

¹⁰⁷ Mohd Yunus, 2011.

Production and Financial Support

Two undeniable core facets that lend to the popularity of the production, *Inside Out* and specifically the celebrated dance piece, *AlaRIPpu*, are music and costume. Prakash Kandasamy, Kumar Kartigaesu, and Jyotsna Prakash are critically acclaimed musicians, each an expert in different music instruments. Kandasamy is a professional *tabla* player and Kartigaesu¹⁰⁸ is an established sitar player, while Prakash Kandasamy's spouse, Jyotsna, is a popular piano and keyboard player. All three musicians hold an impressive track records for composing music, accompanying dance artists and vocalists, and performing solo, orchestral, and fusion concerts locally and abroad. Hence, it is appropriate to point out that *AlaRIPpu* would not have achieved its popularity without these three renowned composers. The composers worked tirelessly for months to bring out hybrid/fusion music (a balanced flavor of Indian classical and western music) in this production in line with Shetty's vision of creating a confluence of eastern and western cultural inspiration. The six BOH Cameronian Arts Awards won by the trio locally in 2006 bear witness to their important contributions.

Shyamala Narayanan, who worked for many years at the Lavanya Arts Boutique and possessed a vast knowledge about fabrics, played an important role in designing costumes for *AlaRIPpu*. The choice of costume was not emphasized in the press reviews, but I suggest that it too contributed to the success of the production. She recalled her experience by saying,

¹⁰⁸ Kartigaesu, Kandasamy, and Shetty were trained by renowned master, Ustad Usman Khan in Pune, India. In 1991, they left to Pune together to pursue their training. To further his training, Kandasamy also studied from the late *tabla* maestro Ustad Alla Khan, father of the acclaimed *tabla* player Zakir Hussain. Shetty mastered *tabla* and *Kathak* while undergoing training with the *guru*, Ustad Usman Khan.

When *alarippu* was first presented for Swamiji's birthday at the Malacca Temple of Fine Arts, the dancers did not have a costume. Umesh boiled a big pot of water near the canteen and dipped white full-length pants into a saffron colored liquid just a few hours before the show. We (Shyamala, Umesh, and dancers) were quite worried about how the pants will turn out and how to get them dried. The pants, somehow, turned out well, but the problem was the top piece for the female dancers. They wore whatever blouse piece we could lay our hands on. When this dance number was incorporated into *Inside Out*, we seriously considered the costume for the female dancers. The costume was designed to look hybrid - it was "indian" above the waist, and "western/modern" below the waist. The dancers wore sequined blouses with bare midriff, just like *Bharata Natyam* blouse piece and headset. The pants were retained. I designed a short triangle-shape sequined material, which the dancers tied below their navel. The dancers looked magnificent on the stage.¹⁰⁹

Dyer has convincingly argued that the work of fashioning a "star" included the labor of not only the "star," but also the labor of other individuals. I want to point out that although Shetty is a highly competent artist, the successes of *AlaRIPpu* and *Inside Out* were largely dependent on the labor contributed by Shyamala, the musicians, and Shetty's dancers. It was with each of their body's labor that Shetty was able to enhance his "star" image.

Shetty funded his production, *Inside Out*, through a loan which he obtained from a bank. Based on the support he received from ToFA and ASWARA, he must have speculated that he could completely sell out his production. As expected, he paid back the loan with the revenue generated by the production. Applying for a huge loan may be a daunting idea for many artists, who would rather organize productions with small grants, corporate fundings, contributions, and sponsorship money. In Shetty's case, he banked on his "star" image to lift him from his financial debts.

¹⁰⁹ Shyamala Narayanan, 2011.

By focusing on the popular contemporary dance piece, *AlaRIPpu* and its integration into the production, *Inside Out*, I have examined how Shetty attained and sustained his “star” quality by bringing into perspective the means of production. His artistic mobility to present contemporized Indian dance works to diverse audience beyond the confines of Malaysian audience establishes his “cosmopolitan masculinity.” The interesting point is that, while a “star” such as Ibrahim emphasizes that his presence in his productions is imperative to sell his works in the dance industry,¹¹⁰ Shetty’s choreographies continue to travel widely and earn him recognition even without his presence.

Conclusion

My goal in this chapter is to deconstruct cosmopolitanism by looking at “stars” of Indian dance from a Malaysian perspective. I intend to reveal how cosmopolitanism is differently stratified in terms of ethnicity, class, social relations, gender, and sexuality. Dance scholar and cultural historian, Ashish Mohan Khokar (2011) asserts that in South India, male dancers are either supported by their spouses, venture into group work or turn into teachers due to the lack of performance opportunities. He points out that many organizers believe women dancers attract larger crowds than men.¹¹¹ Contravening Khokar’s assertions, I have in this chapter demonstrated that in the Indian dance context

¹¹⁰ In the article, “Art Imitating Life,” Bissme S. quotes Ibrahim as follows, “Both the sponsors and the audience want to see me on stage.” *Sunday Times*. July 12, 2005.

¹¹¹ Khokar’s statement was cited by Atul Swaminathan in his article, “Platform for Change,” *The Hindu*. October 20, 2011. This article highlighted the fifth *Nartaka* (male) dance festival initiated by the Natyanjali Trust in South India several years ago. Realizing the plight of male dancers, the festival provides a platform and encourages passionate young dancers to exhibit their talent.

in Malaysia, there exist male artists who have created ample opportunities for themselves to perform and have attracted large multi-ethnic spectators to their professionally organized dance performances. Considering the fact that only Khoo is a soloist among the three dance choreographers in this chapter, I do not deny that male dancers venture into group work rather than stage solo performances. However, men resort to group dances not because of lack of opportunities, but because group choreographies are deemed visually attractive and commercially viable. Since most performances are presented on large proscenium stages, group works that require wide usage of space fit into those settings rather adequately, while aiding male artistic directors to sell tickets to the public. As a dance practitioner who has staged several productions with my dancers, I argue that group dance spectacles are more marketable in Malaysia. Along this line, Khoo's popularity is an exception to the rule.

Nonetheless, the successful artistic career of some men should not suggest that male dancers do not struggle in Malaysia, a country where there is very little funding available for minority dance practices. Men do not compete for performance spaces in this multi-ethnic country, but for patronages. Stressing that each of the men understudy possesses certain forms of privileges that encompass ethnic privilege (Ibrahim), economic prosperity (Ibrahim, Khoo, Shetty), family support (Khoo and Shetty), and institutional back-up (Shetty), this chapter has examined the ways in which the artists tapped onto those privileges to rise as "star" dancers in Malaysia.

Ibrahim, Khoo, and Shetty depend on patronage of all sorts to launch their career and enforce their "star" image. The cultural brand/icon – "Ramli and his alter-ego, Sutra"

- draws in financial patronage from the state and the corporate giants. Through networking skills, Ibrahim secures support from the local politicians and develops contacts with dignitaries of influential organizations. Khoo benefits through a strong support from his family. Meanwhile, Shetty's artistic visions are nurtured and promoted by well-established institutions such as ToFA and ASWARA. The unique identity that each dancer embodies: "Bumiputera," "Chinese boy or Chinese magic,"¹¹² and "Son of doyen dance master, Gopal Shetty" are useful in the construction of the "star" quality. These identities spectacularize their dancing bodies and image offstage. Patronage enables them to pursue their dreams and venture beyond their comfort zones. They become hypervisible as they constantly produce works, most of which transcend local stages and national borders.

Transnationalization (mobility across space) strengthens a dancer's position in Malaysia. Ibrahim, Khoo, and Shetty are trained in western and Indian dance forms. They have pursued (or are pursuing) their education abroad, particularly in the first world global north countries. Ibrahim completed his engineering degree in Australia, Khoo finished his Master's degree in choreography in London and is now continuing his Ph.D. in the U.K, and Shetty received his degree in dance from Australia and is currently completing his Master's degree in choreography in London. David Morgan (2005), in his article "Class and Masculinity," argues that when we move beyond binary model of class, which commonly focuses on working and middle class, a range of possibilities become

¹¹² Henry, Wilson. "The Perfect Dancer Performing a Perfect Moksha." *The Malay Mail*. May 25, 2000. This article specifically mentions that *India's Week* slotted Khoo as "Chinese Magic," while London's *Dancing Times* tagged him as a "genius."

available to us. Class comes to be seen as “something that is played out in different sites that do not necessarily have much to do with each other” (171). For instance, he suggests that “class as experience” could be filtered through educational experience. Education abroad and diverse dance training create upward class mobility for these dance artists through enhanced communication, public relations, and creative artistic skills. They become socially and geographically mobile artists. They adopt innovative marketing strategies, expand network of contacts, intellectualize their productions, break boundaries, cultivate professionalism, and emerge as innovative artistic directors. Such mobility and dynamism lead to the manufacturing of “cosmopolitan masculinity” as it bolsters their masculine identities.

This chapter has also shown how ethnicity intersects with cosmopolitanism and plays an important role in the artists’ efforts to claim or sustain “star” statuses. *Spellbound*, which went on a world tour, vitalized Sutra’s *Odissi* and enabled it to carve a distinct identity as “Odissi with a Malaysian flavor” through re-arranged group compositions that comprised of multi-ethnic performers. While I have discussed “bumiputera” body’s relation to the land and wealth, the phenomenon that points to the increasing number of Malay financial donors (Malay dignitaries) who support Sutra’s artistic projects prompts a question, “Who is being supported? The Indian art or the Malay artistic director?” Meanwhile, Khoo’s “Chineseness” and “multiple homes” enable him to present his Indian classical dance works to audience members whose backgrounds transcend ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries. Shetty, on the other hand, attains visibility through his choreographic flexibility. His choreographies, such as *AlaRIPpu*,

are taught to Indian dancers and non-Indian dancers at different institutional settings and these works circulate internationally through their bodies garnering the choreographer cultural and social capital (fame and recognition).

I have also illustrated the ways in which the three men bring to Malaysia their diverse artistic experiences gained through their travels to enrich dance productions at “home.” Jonathan Skinner (2007) and Britta Schneider (2010) have demonstrated that the globalization of salsa has not resulted in its homogenization. Similarly, I argue that the new ideas and inspirations gained elsewhere enable each dancer to develop his own unique perspective/mark/style in Indian dances leading to “heterogenization” (Skinner, 2007) of Indian cultural productions. The new artistic endeavors, I suggest, lead to construction of varied identities “Indian-ness” (Ibrahim, Khoo, Shetty), “Malaysian-ness” (Ibrahim), and “Multiculturalism” (Shetty) in the Malaysian Indian dance public performance context.

The hypervisibility of “star” male dancers render them more vulnerable to surveillance. Their gendered bodies are policed by different regimes such as the state, cultural institutions, family, and public. In Sutra dance productions, *The Divine Encounters* and *Spellbound*, the choreographic strategy of centralizing a male body onstage as well as the masculine movements and androcentric roles aid in building an image of a hypermasculine male dancer, while masking Ibrahim’s offstage “queer” identity. As a “bumiputera”- muslim dancer who is subject to intense body policing by the state, Ibrahim’s “queerness” is closeted during public performances. In the case of Khoo, Khoo’s family is politically and economically influential and has close association

with His Royal Highness, Raja Nazrin Shah. As such, Khoo's exploration of gender ambiguities in productions staged in Malaysia is done in a subtle manner. He chooses *Bharata Natyam*, rather than contemporary dance, as the safest form to present his gender explorations. In *Devi*, film serves as a catalyst through which Khoo explores his fascination with the goddesses, while at the sametime attempting to be "genderless."¹¹³ The film allows him to bring to the fore abstract metaphysical issues which he could not express on the stage. Shetty received his training from a patriarchal dance institution. In the First Chapter, I have elucidated the way in which ToFA's Indian classical dance training enforces masculinity among its male dancers. As a seasoned dancer/choreographer who is accustomed to such training background, Shetty reconfigures and reinforces the masculine nature through his choreography and offstage public image.

Besides, the ways in which the "stars" relate to women (actual women as well as symbolic women) through their artistic endeavors further invigorate their masculinity. In *Spellbound*, for instance, the utilization of female dancers as "horses" in the performance that centers on Surya, the Sun Deity and the dance sequences that highlight male dancers lending physical support to female dancers denote unequal gender power on the stage. Shetty's enforcement of masculinity is most apparent at rehearsal spaces where the docile female dancers are trained by the demanding and "overpowering" male choreographer. Khoo demonstrates his relation with women by embodying the female form of goddess,

¹¹³ Gowri R, 2008.

Devi. His embodiment of the women as an object of desire and flirtation with femininity illuminate patriarchal privilege.

Although Indian dance allows performers to explore various forms of gender manifestations and sexual orientations onstage and the three “star” male dancers, particularly Ibrahim and Khoo, have the potential to perform gender and sexuality in a fluid manner, I argue that these dancers exercise a certain form of caution. This is due to their artistic “branding” and reputation in the country. This is also why I argue that masking “queerness” (through heterosexual coupling and mediation of women) onstage is a crucial factor for an artist to circulate as a “star.”

CHAPTER THREE

MALE DANCERS QUESTIONING MASCULINITIES

Snapshots of Gender and Sexual Politics in Malaysia

“The sodomy, bribery, and corruption trials of Anwar Ibrahim dominated Malaysian politics and media-scapes from September 1998 to 2012. The first trial was held in 1998 and resulted in the former Deputy Prime Minister being convicted and given a six-year and a nine-year prison sentence on two trial phases. These verdicts were overturned in 2004, resulting in Anwar’s release from prison. While assuming the post of leader of Keadilan/Pakatan Rakyat opposition party, Anwar was again charged with various accounts of sodomy. He was tried in 2010 and 2011. In January 2012, he was acquitted.”¹¹⁴

“A 500-strong group of Hindu transsexuals gathered at Sri Karumariamman temple in Klang in mid-2001 to celebrate the traditional full moon festival. This celebration drew transsexual Hindu devotees from all over Malaysia, Singapore, and as far away as London. It was reported more or less respectfully in the state-controlled press. It appears to have proceeded without any hitches or negative repercussions for the participants.”
(*The Star*, 2001; Peletz, 2009)

“In 2003, the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development was desperate to justify every last syllable of its existence. One day while visiting a local university, the minister made known her observation that the campuses are overrun by ‘soft men.’ She reasoned

¹¹⁴ Extracted from various press reports (*The Star*, *The New Straits Times*, and on-line news reports 2011-2012)

this was due to the fact that the Malaysian education system had over the years allowed more women to excel, causing the men to lose their self-esteem and become ‘pondan.’ The press sensationalized the news, painting Malaysia as a country in danger of moral apocalypse as a result of the doubly-whammy social ills known as ‘soft men’ and ‘hard women.’”(Kugan Jerome & Pang Khee Teik, 2009)

“Sixty-six Muslim schoolboys in Malaysia were sent to a special camp in April 2011. These boys who had been identified by teachers as effeminate were sent to “anti-gay” camp for counseling on masculine behavior. They were required to take courses in religious and physical education. State of Terengganu’s Education Director, Razali Daud says, the camp was meant to guide the boys back “to a proper path in life.” He adds that although homosexuals and transvestites exist in Malaysia, the authorities want to limit their number. A campaigner for sexual rights, Pang Khee Teik, described the camp as outrageous and an example of homophobia.” (Online report, 2011)¹¹⁵

“The Annual Gay Arts Festival – “Seksualiti Merdeka” (“Sexual Independence”) Festival was launched in 2008 to promote gay rights in Malaysia and was held without interference for three years. But, it drew growing criticism in 2011 from politicians and religious leaders after awareness of the event became widespread. Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Muhyiddin Yassin, described the event as “inappropriate.” Human Rights Watch urged Malaysia's government to rescind a ban on an annual gay arts festival and

¹¹⁵ Extracted from the article entitled, “Effeminate boys in Malaysia sent to ‘anti-gay’ camp.” April 19, 2011. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-13133589>

amend criminal laws that it said discriminated against homosexuals.” (Online report, 2011)¹¹⁶

The snapshots above demonstrate that the dynamics of gender and sexuality are deeply imbricated in the contemporary politics of ethnicity, religion, and class. The gender and sexual politics illustrate that transgender individuals of all sorts have been very much under siege in Malaysia. Along this line, this chapter narrows down the scope and delves into the discourse of gender and sexuality that surrounds male dancers within the Indian dance circuit in Malaysia. This chapter shows that dancing men move fluidly between different categories of gender and sexuality, making it difficult at times to determine when the transition actually takes place. To demonstrate this point, I focus on effeminate men, gay men, transsexuals, and transvestite artists.

David Gere (1998) points out that American gay men, by virtue of their marginalization, are gender performers who possess wide-ranging knowledge of the range of gender’s corporealized forms.¹¹⁷ Gere elucidates that the “abject” male dancer, who does not conform to the strictures of compulsory heterosexuality, may choose to remain closeted in this identity formulation, saving himself the juridical manifestations of homophobia, or, he may choose to “come out.” Gere’s deliberation on the performance of masculinity by gay men is useful to discuss the gender politics among gay male dancers

¹¹⁶ Extracted from the article entitled, “Gay Arts Festival faces condemnation in Malaysia.” Nov 3, 2011. See <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/35/25834/Arts--Culture/Stage--Street/Gay-arts-festival-faces-condemnation-in-Malaysia.aspx>

¹¹⁷ Gere explains that the construction of masculinity for gay male dancers is embodied differently. He states that the juridical force of gendering is played out on the body of the dancer against the stirrings of homoerotic desire.

in Malaysia. Many gay male dancers, particularly Muslim dance practitioners, may be cautious and choose to closet homosexuality through the mediation of female bodies. I have already discussed the ways in which heteronormative ideals are reinforced through pedagogical tools and choreographic choices in the previous chapters. In this chapter, I am interested in examining the act of “coming out.” Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (2005) state that the act of “coming out” is the first voicing of our desires and refusal to silence the desires. In this chapter, I contextualize the “voicing” not only through the narratives shared by my subjects of study, but also through their choreographies.

Before I proceed further, I would like to explicate certain key terms that I will be using in this chapter. Riki Wilchins (1997) has observed that the term “transgender” began its life as a name referred to neither cross-dressers nor transsexuals, but primarily to people who changed their gender but not genitals. The term then, according to Michael Peletz (2009), mutated to include cross-dressers, stone butches (masculine lesbians), hermaphrodites, transsexuals,¹¹⁸ and feminine gay men. A transgender individual could also have characteristics that are normally associated with a particular gender, identify elsewhere on the traditional gender continuum or exists outside of it as “other.” This person could be “agender,” “genderqueer”¹¹⁹ or “third gender.” Transsexuals are people who identify as a member of the opposite sex to that of an assigned birth and desire to

¹¹⁸ In the Malaysian context, transsexuals are also referred as *mak nyah* (trans-woman) and *pak nyah* (trans-man).

¹¹⁹ Gender-queer do not fit into binary concepts, and refers to a combination of gender identities and sexual orientations. It suggests non-conformity or mixing of gender stereotypes, conjoining both gender and sexuality, and challenges existing constructions and identities. Refer Wilchins, Riki Anne. “It’s Your Gender, Stupid,” in *Genderqueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary*, ed. Joan Nestle, Clare Howell and Riki Wilchins. Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2002, pp. 23-32.

live and be accepted as such. Harry Benjamin (1966), in his seminal text, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, defines transsexuals on a scale called the "Benjamin Scale." This text explains the different levels of intensity of transsexualism such as "Transsexual (nonsurgical)," "Transsexual (moderate intensity)," and "Transsexual (high intensity)." It is notable that Benjamin's moderate intensity only calls for hormonal medication as a "substitute for or preliminary to operation" (23). Hence, it suggests that to be a true transsexual, one need not necessarily resort to a sex reassignment surgery.

In the Indian dance context, cross-dressers or transvestite performers refer to those who wear clothing and make-up of the other gender for performance or entertainment. They do not necessarily identify or want to be the other gender outside the context of a performance. However, it is a threat if cross-dressing is done for the purposes that involve sexual arousal and expression of non-normative desires. Michelene Wandor (1998) explains that cross-dressing, in whatever theatrical form – "camp" or "drag,"¹²⁰ can serve both as a symptom and a response to tension. She asserts that it can function as an "effort to contain rebellion and expression of rebellion" (172). As an expression of rebellion, it turns to a form of witty subversion in which one sex impersonates the other and challenges the "norms" of masculinity and femininity.

¹²⁰ In the western theatrical traditions, Wandor (1998) specifies that drag and camp have their roots in the relationship of gay men and women to the theatre. Drag is the act of cross-dressing, referring to the clothing and make-up associated with one gender when worn by a person of another gender. Drag kings and drag queens are performers who cross-dress for the purpose of entertaining. Camp, according to Moe Meyer (1994) is not simply "style," or "sensibility," but is a political tool that exemplifies "queer parody" (1). Meyer points out that camp embodies queer cultural critique.

Peletz (2009) indicates that Malays and most other Southeast Asians demonstrated a relatively accepting, accommodating, and “relaxed” attitude towards transgenderism as opposed to being viewed as “negative” and “unnatural” in the western societies.¹²¹ However, the efforts to institutionalize heterosexism and homophobia were intensified in the 1990s through the emphasis on the discourses of “Asian values”¹²² in the national policies. The narratives of “Asian values” were introduced and propagated by former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, to counter the values of “the west,” which is said to have witnessed the “separation of religion from secular life and the gradual replacement of religious with hedonistic values” (Peletz, 2009:199). The promotion of an array of nationalist and trans-nationalist narratives bearing on “Asian values” stressed a timeless, tradition-bound, patriarchal, strongly heterosexual, and otherwise essentialized “east.” As a result, the discourse of “Asian values” silenced the communities of subalterns (those who indulged in deviant sexual practices) who were arguably most subject to discrimination, marginalization, and criminalization. For further justification, the discourses of “Asian values” were frequently raised by Malaysian politicians in relation to the widely publicized case of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, who was sacked and jailed in 1998 on charges of sodomy, bribery, and corruption. In this

¹²¹ Peletz clarifies through his study on gender pluralism in Malaysia that gender categories are not arranged in an asymmetric fashion (male and female are viewed in many contexts as complementary in non-hierarchical ways), do not constitute the foundation of social hierarchy, which is structured in terms of descent, age, birth order, and in recent times, social class. (2009: 194)

¹²² Mahathir Mohamad’s “Asian values” is against the Western ideals and is based on Asian “family values.” He advocates the values of “the East” as represented by countries such as Japan, China, and South Korea through emulation of positive traits such as hard work, diligence, and valorization of the group over the individual. For more details on “Asian values,” please see Mohamad’s *A New Deal for Asia*, 1999.

chapter, I investigate how heteronormative¹²³ attitudes of the nation oppress, stigmatize, and marginalize perceived deviant forms of sexuality and gender as well as non-normative desires and self-expressions in the Indian dance scene. Although the nation seeks ways to silence and police marginalized identities, I argue that the “queer” male dancers claim agency through their provocative choreographies and their act of embracing “deviant” gender and sexual practices offstage.

Michel Foucault (2010) asserts that the systems of punishment are to be situated in a certain “political economy” of the body; power is exercised on “individuals, bodies, gestures and behavior” (174), but it is not univocal. The relations between the beholder of power and the dominated define innumerable points of confrontation and focuses on instability. The snapshots of sexual politics clearly demonstrate that the surveillance on Muslim bodies is much tighter compared to non-Muslim bodies. According to Peletz (2009), the enforcement suggests that the patrolling of religious and racial boundaries is a higher priority than the surveilling of national morality per se. Even then, non-Muslims are not completely free from surveillance. Transgressive bodies are disciplined through legal restrictions and gendered policies as well as policed on a micro level by the Indian ethnic community and family. In what follows, I demonstrate how the policing of bodies takes place by focusing on three Indian male performers who transgress or challenge heteronormative ideals.

¹²³ Heteronormativity describes any set of lifestyle norms that hold that people fall into binary gender (male and female) and that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation. It is a “rigid notion of what it means to be man and woman and how the two should relate and the family unit that should result from such relationship” (Narain and Bhan, 2005:3).

This research acknowledges that gender identities and sexual orientations are malleable, hybrid, and protean. As such, it is difficult to classify a person who transgresses gender norms into a particular category such as gay, effeminate man, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, and third gender because there are possibilities that a person could embody several identities or reside “in-between” identities. The assigning of terminology is less complicated when the identity of a transgressor is already established within a community, but in most cases, it is not immediately visible or clear. In line with this concern, this chapter utilizes terms such as “homo-erotically inclined” person and “queer” person. According to Narrain and Bhan (2005), queer encompasses a multiplicity of desires and identities, each and all of which question the naturalness, the rightness, and inevitability of heterosexuality. They assert that queer represents an understanding of sexuality that goes beyond the categories of “homosexual” and “heterosexual.” Although the word queer is not yet commonly used in Malaysia, I take my cue from the *Malaysian Queer Anthology*, the first of its kind, a compilation of original creative writing (fiction and non-fiction) on the gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transvestites of the country. This pioneering Malaysian text on the lives of queer people presents a collage of writing on the discovery of one’s difference, strategies of queer desire not bound by heteronormative expectations, acts of masking queer identities, and acts of “coming out.”

This chapter takes shape due to my deliberate intention to work against the grain. Malaysians watch Indian classical dance performances, but refuse or avoid the subject of sexuality. Framed as a taboo topic, the discourse and visible materiality are not openly discussed. Electronic and print media suppresses information concerning sexuality in

dance. But “juicy” stories concerning sexuality continue to circulate extensively. Just as Anjali Arondekar (2009) in *For the Record* asks of repeated citation that speculates the presence/absence of sexuality in the colonial archive of India, I want to question, “what the “silent” circulation of sexuality stories mean?” Hence, this chapter misbehaves by unraveling and seeking deeper to gain access to those “silences” and “elisions” surrounding sexuality in Indian dance. In attempt to gather information, I shifted positionalities. I assumed multiple roles as a gossip, a snooper, an eavesdropper, a dance researcher, an observer, and an “unruly spectator” (Srinivasan, 2012).¹²⁴ The result of such ethnographic fieldwork gives rise to three case studies that focuses on a male cross-dresser, a transsexual artist, and “queer” male dancers.

Blurring Gender: Male Cross-Dresser

“.....it is highly regrettable that so many misconceptions continue today about male dancing. There are some people who hold that dancing should be delicate and graceful, even if a man is the performer. *Some teachers go to the extent of coercing their male students to imitate their female counterparts in the departments of dress, ornamentation and presentation.*”

(my emphasis)

(Dhananjayan, 1984)

While I was back in Malaysia for fieldwork last summer, I bumped into Jagan (pseudonym) at an Indian restaurant one day. He is a *Bharata Natyam* dance teacher and an active member of the Malaysia Bharatanatya Association. Since we had not met for a long time, we sat down to chat while having our “teh tarik” (milk tea). Jagan filled in with details on the dance activities organized by the association for the Indian dance

¹²⁴ Unruly spectator is an approach utilized by Priya Srinivasan. Srinivasan states that the unruly spectator is a corporeal being who critically engages with dancing body and who moves between different positions and gazes to “revel, critique, historicize, deconstruct, and participate” (56).

community in the past years. I was eager to find out about the participation and support given by male dancers to the association. He pointed out that their involvement had not been too encouraging. He stated, “some (certain well-established male dance *gurus*) did not participate in the annual dance festivals, they said they were not interested. Some did not renew membership. You know what is the other problem with male dancers? Gender issues! Men portray feminine imagery on the stage, that is fine, but it should not be allowed to change their gender behavior outside the stage. This is where the problem begins.” Then lowering his voice, he said, “Ah! I just remembered something, I must tell you this. You won’t believe what happened! During the first festival in 2008, Master Janardan (pseudonym) presented one of his male students in female attire as a Goddess. The boy performed an expressive dance piece. He remained in the attire throughout the evening, walking around, and talking to people. It created “havoc” and I heard the committee had tough time answering questions.” I asked, “Were there no girls in the piece? How do you know it was problematic? I want to watch this performance. Can I get the DVD from the president?” Jagan replied, “It was a solo, only the boy. Everyone I knew was talking about this. Yes, you should try to get a copy of this video from the president. Watch it! You know, parents get scared when they see something like this, “soft” boys parading in female attire. They may not want to send their sons to dance classes, probably don’t want their sons to become “pondan” (effeminate men).¹²⁵ When I

¹²⁵ *Pondan* refers to those adolescent or adult male who dresses, walks, and behaves like a woman. Please refer to Peletz (2009: 186-198) for more explanation on *pondan*.

learned dance many years back, I had to do it without my parents' knowledge. It is not really that easy for men to learn dance.”

The news that Jagan delivered to me by way of gossip coincides with the statement made by the highly reputable *Bharata Natyam* dance master, V.P. Dhananjayan, about how certain dance *gurus* present their male dance students through masquerades of gender. “Why was this act seen as “havoc” or scandalous?” “How is the cross-gendered nature of performance viewed across time and space?” “Particularly, how is it perceived by the audience in the contemporary Malaysian Indian dance context?”

I admit that I could not obtain certain information concerning gender transgressions and sexuality directly from male artists, but I received them through hearsay. Roger Lancaster (1992), in his study of intimacy and the Nicaraguan revolution, discloses that much of his information came by way of gossips, whispers, rumors, and murmurs. Anthropologist, Krista Van Vleet (2003) points out that gossiping does not only establish intimacy in the process of acquiring certain knowledge about others, but is an “embodied process of interaction engaging different ways of knowing and including conflict and contradiction” (513). I approach gossip as a social activity and as a “living” narrative through which one gains privileged access to information and secrets about dance artists. Gossip offered me an opportunity to learn about the cross-gendered performance that was staged during the 2008 *Bharata Natyam* festival in K.L. Utilizing this gossip as an “indicator of the issues and questions that circulate about humanness and reality” (White, 2000), I set forth to meet Master Janardan to enquire further details about his student's performance.

Janardan clarified that his school presented three dance pieces at the festival. While the opening and the finale dances were presented in groups by male and female dancers, the second dance number was a solo. It was an expressive dance that portrayed the goddess of empowerment, Kali. Janardan's senior male dance student, Balan (pseudonym), performed as the Goddess in feminine accoutrements (female costume, long wig, crown, and ornaments). Janardan pointed out that he specifically chose Balan to present the dance number even though his female students performed at the festival. Janardan justified his choreographic and casting decision by stating that the piece was an aggressive, vigorous, and fast dance number which could not be rendered "softly." He emphasized that only a male dancer could present the *tandava* (masculine) dance.

Janardan kept insisting, "women cannot perform masculine movements well, only men can bring out the true essence of *tandavam*. Only men can bring that energy and vibrancy to the dance. There is nothing men cannot do in Indian classical dance. Men have been traditionally teaching women how to enact different *bhavas* (expressions)!" I said, "I understand Master, but why present your male student in female attire. Why must he dress up as female, "Shakti." This is not a dance-drama." Janardan asked in a slightly angry tone, "So, people have been talking about this huh? What did they tell you? I know this news circulates, but no one dare to ask me anything!"

Sensing my curiosity, Janardan became defensive. He argued and cited several examples, such as female impersonation in the Indian movies by famous male film stars, female impersonation in several Indian classical dance traditions, female dancers as male impersonators (performing as Hindu deity Shiva wearing male attire with moustache), the

androgynous form of Shiva, and the tantric practices that promote female impersonation. I must say that Janardan argued his facts rather convincingly because the Hindu belief of androgyny and existence of cross-dressing in tantric cults and Indian dance are widespread.

Mythology does indeed make extensive reference to male embodying femininity; particularly, the infamous Shiva's half man-half woman vertical split as *Ardhanariswara*. This is a theme that has been extensively explored and presented in Indian classical dance repertoires. Besides, in some tantric sects, such as worshipping of Goddess Durga, the male devotees try to accustom themselves to thinking they are women since the goddess implies female power. In order to understand this power, they believe that they have to transform into a woman. Only by doing this, they believe, they can understand the women within themselves and experience true love.

In efforts to demonstrate the long presence of female impersonation in Indian classical dance, I want to briefly discuss the practice by referring to several dance traditions. Indian classical dance form, *Kuchipudi*, which originated from Andhra Pradesh in South India, was originally performed by Brahman males donning female guise. *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* which is an offshoot of *Kuchipudi* dance-drama tradition¹²⁶ was also performed by upper caste men who enacted all the female roles. Male dancers utilized highly stylized gestures, gait, and costumes to portray female characters such as the famous female role, Satyabhama. But in the mid-twentieth century,

¹²⁶ The *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* is a ritual theatre dance performed by Brahmin men in the Tanjavur region. It is an all-male enactment of religious narratives in the form of nightlong dramas that are punctuated by short phrases of dance (Krishnan, 2009:388).

the legendary *Kuchipudi* dance *guru*, Vempati Chinna Satyam, revolutionized the dance by training women. Although women dominated the contemporary *Kuchipudi* stage, female impersonation by Brahman men remained a characteristic feature of the dance form. In Orissa, the Gotipua tradition came into being in the sixteenth century. It was a tradition that embraced dance performance staged by adolescent boys dressed in female garb. Although the boys wore female attire, their dance contained acrobatic movements. The classical *Orissi* or *Odissi* developed from this tradition which exists until today in India.

Hari Krishnan (2009) illuminates the presence of male performers of *sadir kacheri*¹²⁷ in the nineteenth century Tanjavur South India. Since the court dance repertoire was gendered, Krishnan indicates that male performers employed the modality of gynemimesis¹²⁸ in their performances. Although women performers existed long before the advent of Tanjavur court's male performers, Krishnan argues that male cross-dressers or transvestite performers were "part of a larger elite performance ecology in which gynemimesis was key mode of performance" (383). Quoting Kathryn Hansen (2002), Krishnan explains that gynemimetic performers were "desired as men who embodied the feminine" (164).

In the historical development of *Bharata Natyam* in Tamil Nadu, E. Krishna Iyer, a lawyer and a dance revivalist, had been cited by many scholars (Gaston, 1996; Meduri, 1996; O'Shea, 2007) for presenting *devadasi* (female temple dancer) repertoire in

¹²⁷ The word *sadir* refers to court and *kacheri* means assembly. *Sadir kacheri* is a temple/court dance genre of the *devadasis* that later evolved into *Bharata Natyam*.

¹²⁸ Hari Krishnan refers to the tradition of female impersonation as "gynemimesis."

traditional *devadasi* costume in the 1930s. Gaston explains that Iyer performed in female attire to encourage “respectable audiences in Madras to support *Bharata Natyam*” (84) because at that time, there was no specific costume for male dancers and they wore female costumes.

Being aware of the mythological, philosophical, and historical references to gender crossing, Janardan asked me why the Indian audience in Malaysia found his student’s solo dance presentation “offensive.” “Why did it create controversy among the Indian audience?” In response to the dance *guru*’s inquiry, I suggest that we take into consideration the role, nature, and aesthetic function of a male dancer that change through time and according to cultural contexts. In a particular historical time and performance context, the transvestite male performers of *sadir* performed in spaces where it was acceptable and masquerades of gender were seen as “productive new ways of imagining and viewing the female form” (Hansen, 2002: 169). When *sadir* was refashioned as *Bharata Natyam*, a new masculine identity was nurtured as a reaction to the colonial constructions of South Asian men as “effeminate” (Sinha, 1995) and the Indian nationalist state intervention. The enforcement of the new masculine identity called for a “restructuring of gender roles and expectations” (Krishnan, 2009:384). To allow space for the male performers, themes and dance contents were altered (with emphasis on devotion and non-erotic repertoires), more focus was placed on “masculine” movements,¹²⁹ and costumes were designed for men.

¹²⁹ Krishnan (2009) explains that the *Bharata Natyam* dance training at Kalakshetra dance institution in South India borrowed elements from the male-oriented performance traditions such as *Kathakali* dance form from Kerala, which emphasized on “bold, strong, and almost athletic movements of the face, torso, arms, and lower limbs” (384).

Within the Indian classical dance form, there occurs multiple layering of femininity. Since *Bharata Natyam* is regarded as a “feminized” form, the embodiment of female characters or adoption of female costumes by male dancers within the feminine form creates layering of femininity. Based on my discussions with male dance artists, I want to highlight that the stigma that surrounds the notion of “dancing as an effeminate pursuit” largely prevails in the Malaysian Indian dance context. The dominant expectations of how men are supposed to feel and behave, even during a performance, are shaped by the state discourse. Such discourse, that stigmatizes “deviant” gender practices and expressions, spreads throughout the social landscape and influences the family institution. Indian parents very rarely encourage their sons to learn dance for fear that they might emulate feminine grace and charm. As such, many male dancers who intend to pursue dance training only do so later in their lives when they are able to support themselves financially. Furthermore, to counter the prejudices against male dancing, the idea of “dancing like a man” has vastly seeped through the dance community and has influenced the training of male dancers even though the training in Indian classical dance does not espouse male or female duality. As a result, Malaysian audience responds differently to male cross-dressers and female cross-dressers. While a female dancer’s cross-dressing performance onstage with male attire and a moustache does not unsettle audience’s reception, the reverse, a male dancer’s cross-dressing, creates tension and panic and troubles viewing pleasures. For further clarification, I want to stress that when a male dancer is identified to have cross-dressed, it can pose a problem for him both on and offstage. In Balan’s case, the “chaos” only emerged after the performance.

Janardan is famously known for his talent in costume selection and theatrical make-up. His meticulous attention to facial make-up and costume brings to reality the divine characters portrayed by his dancers. The appearance is flawless. Since Janardan's student, Balan, is not a well-known artist in Malaysia, his goddess persona on the stage could have blurred or invisibilized the dancer's actual gender identity onstage. However, Balan's actual gender identity became apparent when the dancer remained in his female attire and mingled with the audience after his performance. The post-performance gender visibilization was the cause of the controversy.

Our conversation continued and I asked, "So master, is Balan still learning dance with you? Could you tell me more about him, his background? Were his parents comfortable with the cross-dressing performance?" Janardan said, "Balan is a very talented dancer, one of my best students. He is able to do any roles, any dances, just name it! His parents have lots of respects for me. They have no problems with the performance...But he is not in Malaysia anymore. He has turned into a woman, residing abroad now." Slightly diverting the subject, he said, "I heard news that several prominent male dancers had become transsexuals. They used to be my close friends. I don't understand why they made such decision. Someone asked me whether I am planning to change (sex). I just answered that I am not married but I have a big family and what would I tell them (family) or how would I face them?"

Janardan's response underscores the rising number of transsexual artists among male dancers in Malaysia. This phenomenon also ironically signals towards the declining talented male dancers onstage. While this is a matter of great concern, it seems clear that

the gender based “governmentality” (Foucault, 1991) exerted by the family institution to a certain extent plays a major role in controlling the deviation from gender/sexual norms.

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent the subjects are using dance as means to transgress gender, but the question posed by Janardan’s friend (whether Janardan is planning to change sex) seems to have a “satirical” effect on the general image of male dancing in Malaysia. In Balan’s case, I trace a correlation between cross-dressing and sexual transgression since Janardan points out that his male student became a transsexual a year after the performance. This finding is in contrast with Krishnan’s research trajectory that highlighted that the elite male transvestite performers in India were embraced because they did not unsettle heteronormativity. Krishnan pointed out that the aesthetic value of “gynemimesis” did not radically change the sexual politics in the context of Tanjavur court practice.

I intend to pursue this interrogation by raising the question/s, “Did the Indian classical dance training or performance perpetuate the gender/sexual transgression or the act of ‘coming out’ in any way?” or/and, “Did the performance enforce non-normative desire which was already present within the male dancer prompting him to ‘come out’?” In line with this query, a well-known *Bharata Natyam* dance practitioner claimed that he had ten male dance students who enrolled in his classes initially, but the number dropped drastically, leaving only two male dancers who were truly dedicated to the training. The rest, he stressed, were not serious. He asserted that those who were effeminate tended to gravitate towards Indian classical dance since they were attracted to the possibility of

being able to “dress up” for performances. He agreed that Indian dance offered room for that.

The controversy surrounding cross-dressing suggested an underlying anxiety regarding cross-dressing and its implications of effeminacy. Whether or not Balan’s female impersonation onstage had anything to do with his sex transition, the act was read as “transgressive” and threatening to the construction of masculinity. The cross-gendered performance also opened up space for a collective suspicion considering the phenomenon of increasing number of trans-sexual men in the country. Although Balan “came out” to his family and friends through his sex transformation, I argue that his new identity was not transparent to people other than his close acquaintances due to his migration. If the concealed identity was openly revealed, his gender transgression could have led to greater tensions among the Malaysian Indian dance community and the Indian community in general who were already intolerant towards cross-dressing and transgender practices. To illustrate this point more clearly, the following case study expresses the implications a transgender person meets or faces through the act of “voicing” and “coming out” publicly.

Complicating Gender: Transsexual Artist

(At an Indian classical dance concert in K.L., September 2011)

I : Hi V, how are you? When did you come back from Singapore?

V : Hi, Prema? Your name is Prema, right?

I : Yes.

V : The dance tour went very well. I came back two days ago.

I : Hmm..(hesitation) I wonder if you could spare sometime to talk with me, this is for my Ph.D. research. Remember, I told on the phone a month ago?

V : Yes, I remember now. I am not free this week, maybe next week. What about Monday afternoon? Call me that morning to remind me, I might forget.

I : Sure V, thanks!

(Phone conversation, October 2011)

I : Vanakam (Greetings) V, are we meeting this afternoon? I just wanted to confirm our appointment. I called you many times yesterday. You must have been very busy with classes.

V : Oh yes! I am sorry that I missed your calls. I was back in my husband's hometown, his relative was not well. We came back late last night. About our meeting today, can we postpone it? I have to go to the bank, get groceries....my husband will not be happy if I don't run these errands.

I : Sure, when would you be available to meet next?

V : Call me sometime early next week.

(Another phone conversation, December 2011)

V : Hi Prema, you know what? Christmas is just around the corner and I have not done any shopping. Shall we meet later sometime...?

I : V, I am so sorry to say this, but I don't have much time for my fieldwork. I have been trying to meet you since August. It has been four months now. I really hope you will not turn down this appointment. Just an hour or two is all that I am asking. Please!

V : (after a long pause) Ok then, let's meet around 1pm today. I will spare an hour for you. That is enough, right?

I : I am not sure, we'll see. Shall we meet at the Temple of Fine Arts – Annalakshmi Restaurant? We can have lunch there.

V : Oh no! I know lots of people there. I have to “dress-up,” I have to wear a sari, put on my make-up...too much work. No, let's meet somewhere else, at Old Town White Coffee in Old Klang Road.

I : Ok, see you then!

(At Old Town White Coffee)

V's presence is signaled by the sound of her anklets. From the couch where I am comfortably seated, I turn my attention towards a tall, slim figure. I waive to her. Upon seeing me, she approaches my table. She looks stunning in a bright blue salwar kameez and dupatta. Her waist length wavy hair is left untied. Simple make-up (lipstick, blush, and eye shadow) and a bindi on her fair complexion and spotless facial skin radiate her beauty. Without blinking my eyes, I stare at her enviously. We exchange greetings and the interview starts.

V : Let's start. Just before that, please do not record this conversation. I am not comfortable with that. You can take notes.

I started learning dance.....

Wait! I don't want you to write that down, do not quote me.

(Looking at my notes) Have you written it?

I : No, don't worry.

V :.....and then in 2003, I decided to.....

I : Hold on! Can I write down what you just mentioned about sexuality. Am I allowed to..?

V : (Laughter) Sure, there is nothing to hide anyway!

V, a transsexual (trans-woman/*mak nyah*) Indian classical dancer, was a well-known male performer in Malaysia prior to her sex reassignment surgery. Her sex transition created a huge controversy among artists of Indian dance in the country. Gossip about her transsexual identity circulated extensively and reflected the mixed feelings people had towards V's bold move. While some people sympathized and accepted her courageous decision, many others particularly male dancers, resented and condemned her for tarnishing the image of male dancing in the country. As a feminist ethnographer who is concerned that sex reassignment surgery reified the rigid definitions of gender, I question what is at stake for a man who has turned into a woman and to what extent the transition in one's physical sex and social gender presentation impinges on the person's artistic career.

Deep-rooted prejudice and social hostility against transgender and transsexual people in Malaysia had not diminished V's visibility on and offstage. She continued to present work on the stage under her new gender identity and attended performances as a spectator within the Indian dance circuit in Malaysia. She was also invited as an examiner for *Bharata Natyam* dance exams and as a judge for *Bharata Natyam* competitions. Realizing her eagerness and courage to "come out," I decided to approach her for my study. From the first interactive moment, I sensed V's resistance to participate in this research, her refusal to become my subject of study. As illustrated in the aforementioned

scenes, it took me four months to finally engage in a conversation with her. All along, I received ambiguous responses and mixed signals to my requests for scheduling an appointment with her; she agreed to meet, but refused to answer my subsequent phone calls and after several weeks, she offered all sorts of excuses.

Sharing this dilemma with several female dance teachers, who were closely acquainted to V, one of the female dance teachers said, “Oh, she, pavamla (pitiful), the poor thing! She has her mood swings. She is a married woman ya, probably she has problems at home. She will be fine after sometime. She does this (not picking up phone calls) to me too! Keep trying (to reach her)!” Another female dance practitioner said, “people like her do not usually prefer to share their personal life stories. Maybe she is giving you a hint that she is not interested in participating. You should read between the lines.” When I was about to surrender hope of interviewing her, I got the opportunity to speak with V’s dance *guru* and mentor. Realizing my enthusiasm and sincerity as well as the importance of V’s voice in my research, V’s *guru* convinced her to meet me. V agreed for an interview, but did not allow me to observe her dance classes or record her voice through audio recording devices. There was “body policing” throughout the interview. I felt as though she was scrutinizing my reactions to her narrative. She was very cautious about what she narrated to me and what she wanted me to record during the interview. I sensed a deep feeling of insecurity that emerged along her desire to “come out” to the dance scholarship.

Kamala Visweswaran (1994) theorizes a kind of agency in which resistance can be framed by silence, a “refusal to speak or say” (51). I apply this theorization to V. I

read V's transition from subject refusal to becoming subject of study as empowering and as marker of agency, although this included attempts to withhold certain information and policing "what cannot be said" in the scholarship.

V received training in *Bharata Natyam*, *Odissi*, and *Kuchipudi* dance forms in Malaysia and abroad. Prior to the sex change, V performed extensively in Malaysia, Australia, India, and Singapore as a male dancer ("V"). "V"¹³⁰ participated in major collaborative Indian classical dance works in Malaysia and was featured in the Indian classical dance programs aired on ASTRO Tamil Channel, *Vaanavil*. In 2005, a dancer, who is a close friend, called me up after watching one of the dance programs performed by "V" and said, "Did you notice one of the male dancers in that dance program? He is developing breasts! I bet he is in the process of changing his sex. Just wait and see!" Just as my friend predicted, the male dancer she pointed out transformed into a woman through a sex reassignment surgery and became known as V in the following year (2006).

V explained that the desire to be a woman existed since childhood. V grew up with four older female siblings. From a young age, V possessed feminine nature, behavior, and mannerisms. As a boy, he ("V") preferred to wear female attires. He was attracted to Indian classical dancing and pursued dance training with various dance teachers through self-financing. V pointed out that when she was a man, she never cross-dressed in *Bharata Natyam* and *Kuchipudi* dance performances for fear of what the society might say. "V" concealed his desire to "come out" for a long time. The contradictions between what he was and what he aspired to become constantly troubled

¹³⁰ I want to differentiate that "V" refers to the male dancer, V before the sex reassignment surgery.

him. He felt that he was a “female trapped inside male’s body.”¹³¹ While cases such as this that involved non-Malays or non-“bumiputeras” tend to go unnoticed, the media picked up and sensationalized stories of cross-dressing and transgender behaviors among Malays. Following the news coverage, the minister at the Prime Minister’s department linked “gender woes” of all varieties to upbringing.¹³² Datuk Dr. Abdul Hamid Othman criticized that insufficient vigilance on the part of parents, teachers, and political and religious associations as the causes of unnatural and threatening gender behaviors. He pointed out that by developing female characteristics at a young age, the child become confused about his gender. The interesting paradox that emerges out of the gender transgression phenomenon is that the state perceives gender queer and trans-artists/people as woeful while, transsexual people such as V, sees the sex transition as liberation, something that “relieves” her and makes her “feel good.”

The statement made by the minister coincides with V’s gender conflict. The contradiction and dilemma in accepting his gender assignment led “V” to the process of physical alterations. The therapy of changing sex took place in stages and reached completion in 2006. V believes that gender identity is malleable and can shift at any point of time in one’s life. He asserts that it just requires the courage to “come out” to one’s family and society. “So, how did V decide to open up?” Responding to this question, V recalls,

¹³¹ Peletz (2009) associates this state with the identity of “third sex,” or “third gender,” because such person is viewed as different from normal males and females. (240)

¹³² “Minister links gender woes to upbringing.” *The Star*. February 19, 1997.

I was very fortunate because my family members, students, and their parents understood my situation. Since the process of changing sex occurred in stages, there was no shock or panic. There had been no drop in the number of student population in my dance school. In fact, the student recruitment had increased. Currently, I have six male dance students who are very dedicated to the dance training. I maintain good relationship with all my students. They call me “amma” (mother). (personal correspondence, 2011)

V’s family members accepted her choice since they understood her internal conflicts regarding the assigned gender identity and her desire to transition. When V decided to “come out” to her students, there were no confrontations. I suppose that the “process of transition” that took place in stages allowed the students to comprehend the gender/sexual crisis and embrace their *guru*’s new identity. The total number of hundred dance students who are currently enrolled at V’s dance institution stand as a testimony to the students’ acceptance. As a result of assuming a maternal figure, V explained that her relationship with her female students improved and the school’s recruitment of female dancers increased. A close bonding emerged between her and her female students. They were more “open” to her in terms of sharing their personal and dance training problems. Furthermore, she emphasized that the knowledge and corporeal experience of being on both spectrum of gender enabled her to guide and train her male dance students in the execution of dance movements. Even though she was more inclined to femininity, she enforced masculinity among her male dance students through her dance pedagogy (themes of dance repertoires, selection of dance songs, movements, and gaits). In this context, she aligned her teaching pedagogy for men with ToFA.¹³³

¹³³ Please refer to Chapter One where I have discussed the dance training for male dancers at ToFA.

V decided to “come out” to the society through a forum aired by ASTRO Tamil channel, Vaanavil, in 2008. It was a weekly program and the theme of discussion in the segment that V appeared centered on transgender. She recounted the story of how she became V and how she was coping with the public’s anxiety about her gender transgression. Several female dance practitioners, who saw this program, expressed their resentment during one of our conversations. One person said, “She is looking for cheap publicity. Is this something to be proud of? What kind of message is she delivering to the society? Anyone can change sex as they wish?” Another dancer said, “I have lost respect for her, she shouldn’t have done this.” During my recent interview with V, she challenged the accusations by questioning why she should be silent. For her, the “act of coming out” is an act of political assertion, asserting her gender rights.

V’s narrative also alluded to her struggle in finding a place of acceptance within the dance community. Narrain and Bhan (2005) expressed that there is no queer person who doesn’t understand the moment of utter loneliness on realizing that the world is not made for people like them. At that point, the authors stated, queer people look for affection between friends. In the public space, V’s body becomes simultaneous site of attraction and aversion. V always “dress up” extravagantly (she wears expensive silk saris, ornaments and anklets, and jasmine flowers on her braided hair) when she makes appearance in every public event. Her persona attracts much attention and renders her marked body a spectacle. While V is included in dance related events as an examiner, a judge or an audience member, there appears to be an exclusionary attitude that largely looms among the Indian dance community. V stands in a “liminal” space that distances

her from her male and female dance counterparts. Male dancers who used to collaborate with her maintain a distance because she is now a married woman. Meanwhile, female dance practitioners remain partially hostile to V's female identity. Hence, V faces the dilemma of trying to fit herself into the community of dance artists.

Despite the prejudices, V expressed her contentment with her new identity because the sex reassignment surgery brought her body in line with a deeply felt gender. She pointed out that she did not have to conceal her desire to be "the other." She expressed it as a sign of liberation since she enjoyed the freedom of being able to dress up as a woman publicly and perform Indian classical dance in female attire. She presented Indian classical dance productions with her students to full-house audiences. V formed a small circle of female friends who continued to support her emotionally. The sex transition also opened up opportunity for matrimonial bonding that offered her economical support. V noted that she was fortunate to have found a man who understood her "queer" nature. Commenting on this, she says

It was a love marriage. I found love immediately after I changed sex. I try to be as responsible as possible in performing my duty as a wife. I do chores just as any housewife would do, such as cooking, ironing cloths, cleaning house, etc. I just enjoy doing these errands. But, the only problem is the legal issue. The law allows you to change your name in the identification card but not your sex. I face too many problems with the state because of that restriction. I am looked upon as a "criminal" in the eyes of the law. I am thinking of migrating to overseas in the future. (personal correspondence, 2011)

At the beginning of this chapter, I pointed out that transgender people are subjected to discrimination, criminalization, and marginalization through the means of state apparatuses. Drawing on that argument, I would like to articulate that V's marriage could not be legalized because she is marked as "male." As such, her marriage is regarded as a

homosexual union (same-sex marriage), which does not conform to heterosexual relationship. While this is one of the main concerns, her gender identity which is legally labeled as “male” poses problems for her in the public since it does not match with her new physicality. In his seminal work, *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault (1979) stresses on how the body had become an object of such imperious and pressing investments and how in every society, the individual body was put under the grip of very strict powers which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations. V is endlessly interrogated and harassed while attempting to access public services. In the process of verifying her “actual” identity, she is queried at public spaces such as in the banks, insurance companies, clinics or hospitals, and the immigration department. She is constantly pressured to justify her “deviant” gender identity. V argues that stigmatization and marginalization have caused enormous frustration which she hopes to overcome by crossing national borders just as Balan has done in the previous case study.

Queer Desire: Homoeroticism

In the dim light, there are some movements at the center back of the stage, the motion of the limbs. First, it seems like the limb movements of one person, but then there are two of them. One body overshadows the other, with both bodies turned back to the audience. Then, synchronizing with the rhythm of the music the bodies turn towards the audience...slowly.....the lights are focused on the dancers. Two dancers perform, posing as Shiva (the male energy) and Shakti (the female energy), the dance of cosmic duality. In the culmination of the performance, Shiva encircles his arms around the waist of Shakti and pulls her closely to him. With her back turn to him, she rests her head on his

chest. Shakti then turns to face him and places both hands on Shiva's shoulders locking her fingers at the back of his neck. She looks up at him eye to eye. With both chests touching, both faces get closer to each other.....the lights are dimmed.

This is an excerpt from an expressive *Bharata Natyam* dance piece, "Ardhanarishvara." It premiered in K.L. in 2007. This piece, a component of the dance recital, *Dancing Shiva*, was presented by one of the prolific and vibrant young male dancers of the country, Deva (pseudonym).¹³⁴

"Ardhanarishvara" was presented in the form of theatrical art through character-based costumes and accessories, which are generally not required in a *Bharata Natyam* performance since a dancer enacts all the characters that appear in a dance piece. Bharata Muni, who is the author of the influential Indian dramaturgy, *Natya Sastra*, says that when an artist is dressed up as a particular character, the concept and context is already communicated, even before a word is spoken or an action performed. While the other dances in *Dancing Shiva* incorporated female performers from the dance company, "Ardhanarishvara" featured exclusively two male dancers, Deva and his dance partner, Vivek. Vivek played the male role as Shiva, and Deva took the female role as Shakti. The character each male dancer assumed was illuminated by their costumes: the sash that Deva wore was longer (a visual marker of feminine role) compared to a shorter sash commonly worn by male dancers in a *Bharata Natyam* performance, the dancers' ornaments and accessories (wig and crown) as well as their movement gestures.

¹³⁴ Deva pursued training in *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi* under various dance *gurus* in Malaysia, Singapore, and India. In the past twenty years, he has performed in South-East Asia, India, the U.S.A, Canada, and Europe. (Thiagarajan, 2005)

The concept of “Ardhanarishvara” that depicts an androgynous manifestation of godhead Shiva had been previously explored by male dancers in *Bharata Natyam* and presented as a solo performance or through heterosexual partnering. In the former, a male dancer takes on both characters as a soloist and in the latter, he assumes the male character of Shiva and partners a female dancer who takes on the role of Shakti. However, in Deva’ choreography, he appeared as Shakti in semi-feminine accoutrements (besides the long sash, Deva did not adopt a female attire) opposite Vivek, who posed as Shiva. This dance centralized male-male bonding by displacing female subjectivity onstage. Deva’ expressive dance that encompassed frequent body contacts, embraced poses, and almost kissing movement sequences signified a homoerotic desire or pleasure within the homosocial performance space.¹³⁵ Seen in this light, I stress that Deva’s version of a male duet performance of “Ardhanarishvara” appeared to challenge the gender normativity and epistemologies of visibility within the Indian dance context in Malaysia.

My curiosity about this dance piece paved the way for me to analyze the performance through different theoretical lens drawing works from the Indian dance scholarship, gender studies, and queer studies. Several drafts of my reading of this performance were presented in seminars and conferences in the past three years. These drafts were written primarily based on my gaze, a Malaysian Indian female dancer/*guru*/spectator. In efforts to present a more objective reading, I consider the concept of “multiple gazes” in this study. I propose to read different spectators’

¹³⁵ Here, I draw on the Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (1985) theorization of “homosocial desire between men” to examine the erotic male bonding performance onstage.

perspectives of this expressive dance piece through their eyes. This is a methodology that was utilized by the Indian dance scholar, Priya Srinivasan (1997), in her study to analyze how different audience views a *padam* (an expressive dance) which was staged by a well-known dance performer in Madras (Chennai). Srinivasan used this method to read the performance of a solo female dancer in India, while I am interested in adopting this method to read a queer performance staged by two male dancers in the Malaysian Indian dance context. I tap into the diverse feedbacks that were gathered from spectators who watched this performance (either in the form of live or recorded version) in formulating discussion surrounding this dance piece. Besides placing emphasis on the audience's reception, this analysis also privileges the voice of the choreographer-artistic director, Deva.

Dancing Shiva was presented on a proscenium stage in the metropolitan city of K.L. where the audience comprised of multi-ethnic spectators. The majority of the crowd that attended this performance comprised of the Tamil speaking Indians. The audience members encompassed artists - dance practitioners of Indian dance and other dance genres, and musicians; parents of dancers; connoisseurs; Indian dance enthusiasts, and “uninitiated” audience.¹³⁶ While some of these audience members were most likely aware of the intricacies of the dance form and the dance piece (“Ardhanarishvara”), many others were either partly knowledgeable or unknowledgeable viewers. In the subsequent section, I present the responses gathered from different audience members.

¹³⁶ “Uninitiated” audience is referred to those people who are not familiar with *Bharata Natyam* form and its content or “out of tune” audience. These people are not the knowledgeable *rasikas* (connoisseurs).

Audience Member Responses:

- A : “*Ennathan solrathu!* (what should I say!) *Siva Siva, pakka mudiyale* (Shiva, Shiva, I could not see or stand it!) *Ippidiya aduradhu?* (Should they dance like this?)”
“What were they thinking? Somebody should tell Deva to stop these sorts of things. He is such a good dancer.”
- B : “We (my Chinese friend and I) didn’t know that men can perform like this. Never seen before. Something different! I enjoyed it. But seriously, as a dancer, I am not sure if I can do that. Don’t think my dance teacher will allow me to perform movements like embracing, touching ...”
“At first very confusing, I don’t know the story. Not sure who is doing which role. Both of them looked same to me. My friend had to explain to me. Then I began to appreciate Deva’s performance, it moved me. His female role was strong, very good expression. The other dancer wasn’t as convincing.”
- C : “Well, my sister used to dance. I am not a big fan of Indian classical dance. It is boring, sorry to say that. I rather spend time at the pub, watch movies, or sports. I have no patience to sit and watch long concerts. Someone told me about Deva’s performance, so I wanted to give it a try. Hmm..he is quite daring, isn’t he? To perform like that publicly! Does he always perform like that? Is he openly gay? Curious, just wanted to find out. Did you hear the cheering at the end? He (Deva) has lots of admirers I suppose, men particularly. I wonder if those guys (who cheered) are gay too? It looked funny, what those men did onstage. Maybe that’s why I didn’t leave the concert halfway.”
- D : “What is Ardhanarishvara? What does it mean? Dancers should analyze the text and understand what the myth indicates metaphorically rather than taking it at its face value. Everything in this world exists in duality; there is male and female energy within each one of us. The female energy is the shakti (kundalini power) within us which must be awoken, it rises up to the crown chakra (situated at the top of the head) where Shiva resides. When the two energies merge, we attain liberation. It is a high level of consciousness; I think the subject should have been handled in an appropriate manner. The depiction of union should be divine, not erotic or vulgar. It should not have any homosexual connotations. If Deva decides to take on a female role, why did he switch role as Shiva in the middle of the piece? Leads to confusion!”
- E : “My husband and I try to catch as many Indian dance performances as possible whenever we are in K.L. We watched Deva’s dance recital in Sutra several years back. I can’t recall the name...but we liked it, very cleverly presented. It is nice to see him perform after a long time. The men’s performance in Dancing Shiva was something unusual..erotic..experimental. We weren’t shocked or troubled seeing

it. But, some people seated next to us did not look comfortable. We understood that exploration with gender such as this can be scandalous in this country.”

The thoughts and conversations of audience stemmed from eavesdropping audience’s response during the performance, gossips, casual talks, and interviews. The identities of these people are masked in this study because those who commented are people known to the subject of study and do not wish to be recognized. However, I would provide a brief description about the audience member/s that fall under each grouping. I looked out for varieties in responses and selected five different audiences’ perspectives for this study. The first response was elicited from a combination of responses from a traditional middle-class Tamil woman in her early sixties, who frequently watches Indian classical dance concerts and a *Bharata Natyam* female dance *guru* in her mid-forties. The second response was drawn based on a collective feedback that came from two young men, an Indian and a Chinese, who were in their late twenties and early thirties respectively. They work in corporate companies and pursue Indian dance training. It is unknown whether they are friends or a “queer” couple. The third response came from an Indian man, a busy lawyer who travels extensively. He watches Indian dance performances very infrequently, whenever he wishes. He is a cosmopolitan man. He could be a straight or a gay man. The fourth response emerged from my discussion with a middle-class Indian female dancer - Indian classical dance *guru* - dance critic. The fifth response was derived from a married American couple, who were in their early seventies. This couple occasionally visits Malaysia and they are the ardent supporters of Indian art forms.

The concept of gaze came from the ideas formulated by European and American film theorists¹³⁷ and the gaze theory has been extended and is now broadly used by scholars from various fields of study to look at the images of people in any visual medium. Since I am focusing on a male-male performance onstage, I am interested in utilizing the gaze to examine policing of gender and sexuality. Specifically, I read the act of “coming out” through the spectator’s gaze. Scholars have widely coined different forms of gaze such as “male gaze,”(Mulvey, 1975; Kaplan, 1983; Daly, 1987) “female gaze,” (Dolan, 1988), “indigenous gaze” (Meduri, 1992; Coorlawala, 1996; O’Shea, 1997; Srinivasan, 1997; Chakravorthy, 2004) and “gay spectatorship” (Manning, 2001). In efforts to historicize spectatorship, Manning (2001) suggests the possibilities of “cross-viewing.”¹³⁸ I find the conceptualization of the different gazes useful since this analysis takes into consideration the feedback from multi-ethnic audience, who do not view the performance under study in a unified manner.

Gaze is embedded within specific cultural, spatial, and psychological references. While certain spectators who attended the performance in K.L. identified with the dance piece, many others did not. In this study, a Chinese audience member (B), the foreign “white” couple (E), and certain Indian spectators (B and C) engaged in voyeuristic gaze, while those who had resistant gaze were mostly Indian spectators (A and D) who held

¹³⁷ These ideas have been adapted by the models set up by psychoanalysts, Sigmund Freud and semiotician and Jacques Lacan in examining the “gaze.”

¹³⁸ Susan Manning (2001) defines cross-viewing as a process of spectatorship in which spectators from different social locations view and read performances differently, thus effect social and artistic change. I use cross-viewing in my work to examine how people from different ethnic groups view Indian classical dance production in Malaysia.

“indigenous gaze.” Acutely aware that there is a power in looking or in the act of gazing, this study sets out to examine several issues that surfaced through audience’s responses such as ambiguous views about intimacy and homoerotic movements on the stage, dancers’ making gender statements, Deva’s empowering performance of femininity and flirtation with femininity as well as the act of “coming out.” “What does the diverse feedback indicate? Transgender performance? Queer performance? Homoerotic pleasures? Homophobic audiences?” In the ensuing discussion, I analyze the issues that surfaced through audiences’ responses and Deva’s choreographic strategies.

Bharata Natyam is a dynamic dance form that allows ample room for improvisation within a given narrative. “Ardhanarishvara” is a composite androgynous form of Shiva. The deity’s half-male and half-female vertical split image represents a transgender entity. The hermaphrodite form of the “Ardhanarishvara” can also be interpreted to represent the concept of oneness and wholeness. The gender ambiguity that is present within the concept of “Ardhanarishvara” allows for multiple interpretations and depictions among dance artists. In efforts to extend the concept, Deva explained that he wanted to portray the balance between masculinity and femininity. He aimed to explore the duality “within us.” This is the reason, Deva elucidates that, he and his dance partner switched between genders, in other words, from Shakti to Shiva and vice versa, in the dance piece. The fluidity in switching gender was aimed at bringing out the message that Deva and his dancer wanted to be “gender-less” in the performance. But, this gender volatility also allowed for his identity to be read as “queer” or “third gender,” neither male nor female. The blurring of gender in this performance complicated the viewing of

the male body and the construction of the masculine subjectivity. Dorinne K. Kondo (1990) examines the way in which Asian American David Henry Hwang queered the conventional narrative of the opera, *Madama Butterfly*, through his play, *M. Butterfly*.¹³⁹ Kondo explains that the original play is defined by a certain form of familiar narrative conventions, but *M. Butterfly* subverts and undermines a notion of unitary identity within the time and space of the play through the gender ambiguity that was apparent in the title as well as the characters in the play. Thus, *M. Butterfly* breaks from the particular presupposition of identities as bounded or fixed entities situating Hwang's project as a creative "subversive." Similarly, I would like to posit that Deva queered the concept of "Ardhanarishvara," which in its own right contained ambiguous gender identities, through his choreographic strategy. This was one of the reasons that led to confusion among the audience members.

Unlike Balan (in the first case study) who cross-dressed in his performance or the gynomimesis performance in the nineteenth century South India, there was no explicit cross-dressing in this piece. Deva pointed out that his motive was not to cross-dress. But, he incorporated paraphernalia such as a wig, a crown, and a diagonally worn long sash.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ David Henry Hwang's play *M. Butterfly* is a tale of mistaken gender identities. The narrative of the original play, *Madama Butterfly* about "submissive Oriental woman and dominating white man," is subverted in *M. Butterfly* through power reversals and gender ambiguity. Please refer to Dorinne K. Kondo's "M. Butterfly: Orientalism, Gender and a Critique of Essentialist Identity." *Cultural Critique*. 1990 (16), pp. 5-29.

¹⁴⁰ Women normally wear a costume piece (*thavani* or *odhani*.) over a blouse piece to cover their bosom and open midriff. It is a sign of modesty. In *Bharata Natyam*, it is worn diagonally, where a certain length of the piece of cloth covers the front torso. Then, the remaining material is made into pleats and pinned at the left shoulder blouse piece. The piece that is brought over the left shoulder is normally tucked into the pants at the back or left to flow down to the thigh.

In fact, Deva's partner also wore a wig and a sash, but obviously shorter than the ones worn by Deva. Commenting on this costume choice, Deva says

The wig came in only three days before the show. I videotaped the rehearsal and watched it. When I saw our (Vivek and Deva) poses, I felt that it would send out the wrong message. It might take homosexual connotations. I wanted to make it look more iconic. So, I incorporated wig and crown and made some changes to our costumes. It appeared less homosexual to me. (personal correspondence, 2011)

"How did the audience perceive this?" Besides the responses presented in this chapter, Deva pointed out that some of the members from the audience queried him about the strong homosexual connotation in his piece. The embraces and almost-kissing movement sequences were perceived by many people as depicting homoerotic pleasure and expression. William O. Beeman (1992) who examines the practice of mimesis and travesty in traditional Iranian theatre forms in the nineteenth century explains that even though men in Iran assumed female roles, they maintained a certain form of distancing (e.g. comic distancing). This is to ensure that they are not looked upon as real women (even though they assume mimetic representation) or "erotic objects." Deva's decision to bare his chest signified a form of "distancing," to enforce his "maleness" on the stage. But, his flirtation with femininity and "intimate" poses with his male partner onstage collectively rendered Deva's choreography as a display of same-sex desire or eroticism.

Responses two and three illuminate power relations associated with Deva's femininity in the performance. Film maker and critic, John Berger (1973) argues that a man's presence is largely dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies and if the promise is large and credible, his presence is striking. Berger states that a man's presence may be fabricated, in the sense that he pretends to be capable of what he is not.

But, the pretence is always towards a power which he exercises on others. Deva emphasized that by dancing topless and shifting gender roles (from Shakti to Shiva and vice versa) while assuming essential “props,” he wanted to make a political statement that reads, “I am dancing as I am, as a man.” He wanted to assert that as a male dancer, he is able to portray any character. He wanted to demonstrate that he could bring out the woman psyche through his feminine role as “shakti.” I want to reiterate that his intention to visibilise patriarchal power through his appearance and performance was successful to a certain extent. Some spectators were attracted to Deva in the “shakti” persona. They noted about the depiction of femininity being convincing and real as well as Deva’s discovery of woman in him within the space of performance. Kondo (1990) has demonstrated that gender reversal holds the potential of empowering transgendered performances through its subversion. I would like to argue that while Deva’s performance of femininity unsettled certain audience members, it also provided a transformative experience for him and some audience members. In other words, “Ardhanarishvara” was not a rendition of a passive female role, but signified empowerment through a powerful goddess role. Since the spectatorial pleasures also came from the male viewers, I suggest that “Ardhanarishvara” introduced new possibilities of homoerotic gaze.

Deva explained that the erotic poses incorporated in his choreography were inspired by temple sculptures. The poses were meant to be sculptural and visually attractive. Y. Krishan (1972), in his study on erotic sculptures in India, explains that the

sculptures on the temple walls in India¹⁴¹ show love images or acts and sexual union between a man and a woman. He explicates that the state “which is like a man and a woman in close embrace, is a symbol of *moksa* (liberation)” (337). On the same note, he also points out that same-sex acts are depicted in the sculptures, but stresses that “the law givers and the *puranas* held out the threat of sanctions against perversions” (338). When the erotic sculptural iconography was visually embodied by two male dancers through poses, I suggest that it deconstructed the hetero-homo binary. The proximity of bodies, poses facing each other, and eye contacts between the male dancers contributed to the reading of the dance as erotic.¹⁴² Since Malaysian audiences are not commonly exposed to these movement sequences in a male duet within the traditional Indian dance framework, the comments stated earlier reveal that the “perverse acts” on the stage shocked some audience members. I want to suggest that Deva’s performance also asserted the discourse of camp. Moe Meyer (1994) argues that queer identity emerges as self-consciousness of one’s gay and lesbian performativity sets in. Thus, he defines camp as the “total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity,

¹⁴¹ Most of these temples in India bearing erotic sculptures are to be found in Central India (Madhya Pradesh), Western India(Gujarat), and Eastern India(Orissa) in the North, and in Southern India (Andhra Pradesh and Mysore); and mostly date from the tenth to the thirteenth century A.D. (Krishan, 1972:332) Krishan suggests that the erotic sculptures portray the amorous and erotic activities of the temple dancers/courtesans, the *devadasis*. Over time, he states, with the decline in the *devadasis* institution, the original motivation and purpose of the sculptures were forgotten. The erotic sculptures were not displayed in many temples, especially in Tamil Nadu and Kerala in the South India, due to stigmatization and marginalization of the *devadasi* institution. The strength of the orthodox public opinion against pornographic disfigurement of temple walls, he argues, adequately explains it.

¹⁴² When the *devadasi* dance, *sadir* transformed into *Bharata Natyam* in the twentieth century, the element of *sringara* or erotic sentiment was replaced with *bhakti* or devotion, devoid of sexual referent. It involved omission of sexual metaphors in thematic contents, usage of hand and facial gestures devoid of eroticism and emphasis on non-erotic repertoire. The modification shaped the twentieth and twenty-first century *Bharata Natyam* training and choreography. However, the question surrounding what is the accepted level of eroticism in Indian classical dance is very subjective and is open to debate.

with enactment defined as the production of social visibility” (4). The provocative choreography of gay choreographer, Deva, proposed an alternative way of reading his work, as an enactment of queer desire and queer identity (neither male nor female) within the “queer time and space”¹⁴³ (Halberstam, 2005) of the performance.

After *Dancing Shiva* premiered in K.L., Deva presented the production abroad. He stressed that “Ardhanarishvara” became the highlight of the repertoire in Singapore and California. The dance piece was well-received by predominantly Indian audience, who commended the choreographer for a “well-thought and intelligently put together” (personal correspondence, 2011) dance concept. “So, why was there more resistance to Deva’s work in Malaysia?” “Does Malaysia nurture homophobic audience?” Responding to this, Deva said that the audience members in Malaysia do not read the program text before they watch a performance. Hence, he states, they could not read the mind of a choreographer. I disagree with his view mainly because I believe that a program text is just a guide. It cannot completely capture and illustrate a choreographer’s artistic vision even if one reads it thoroughly. The dancing body (what a body does onstage) plays a significant role through which a choreographer’s mind can be read. There is a high possibility for the body to express more than what is stated in the text through improvisations. Even though Deva did not explicitly mention the “queerness” in his piece, the enactment and embodiment of movements in his choreography signaled an attempt of “coming out.” In Malaysia, the queer male dancing body is a contradictory site and is

¹⁴³ Following Judith Halberstam’s (2005) ambitious claim that there is “queer time” and “queer space,” I frame “Ardhanarishvara” as a model that highlights the queer time and space through the queer male network in the dance performance.

disruptive. Queer desire is “impossible desire” (Gopinath, 2005) that must be silenced both on and offstage. Thus, the male dancing body is disciplined and contained through intense gender policing by the society which is part and parcel of the nationalist discourse that consolidates the nation in terms of institution of heterosexuality.

“Ardhanarishvara” allowed for suspicion and speculation about Deva’s gay identity, which prior to this performance has been well-guarded and masked on and offstage. As a popular dance icon, Deva continues to produce dance concerts despite of criticisms from the local audience members. He has no intention of moving out of the country like V and Balan.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that Malaysia, in general, is not a site of openness and tolerance towards non-heteronormative gender practices and “perverse” sexualities. I argue that the tightening of gender governance is caused by an increasing emphasis of the state on the discourses of “Asian values” and influenced by the spillover of the severe political crisis involving the sodomy case of Anwar Ibrahim. In this political climate, those who think beyond the hetero-normative ideal are considered threats to “morality” and to the society at large. Such gender sentiment prevails throughout the nation. In the Indian dance scene, it affects male dancers socially and artistically. The controversies that have been presented in three case studies surrounding a cross-dresser, a transsexual artist, and “queer” male performers, speak to the ways in which “queer” desires, bodies, and subjectivities become dense sites of meaning in the construction of masculinity in the Indian dance circuit in Malaysia. The case studies illuminate the undesirable

consequences faced by male dance practitioners when they challenged the national and communal gender expectations. Even then, the “queer” male dancing bodies continue to resist the pressures and boldly make non-normative gender assertions through their voices and choreographies. Hence, revealing such opaque gender/sexual desire is simultaneously an act of political assertion, of celebration, of defiance, and of fear. This fear does not just apply to my subjects of study, but also to me as a dance scholar. Here, I “veil” my own fear to allow my desire to read against the grain for the obligation to scholarship.

CHAPTER FOUR

WOMEN ON AND OFF THE PERFORMANCE STAGE

This chapter focuses on women (dancers and dance *gurus*) and their experiences as dance practitioners to illuminate the contribution they make to the development of Indian classical dance forms in Malaysia. Women assume multiple responsibilities as onstage performers as well as offstage performers. By incorporating women's subjectivities in the context of Indian classical dance practices, I intend to examine the gender relations, gendered hierarchy, power dynamics, and relations of access within the Malaysian dance community. I suggest that an investigation of female dance practitioners lends to an understanding about the gender and sexual politics within the Indian dance circuit in Malaysia, particularly why male dancers have risen to prominence in Malaysia (in contrast to India or other parts of the world). This chapter explores the ways in which masculinities are organized and practiced within the context of gender relations, specifically the ways in which interactions with women express, challenge, and reproduce gender inequalities.

“How do women and men experience visibility?” “How does in (visibility) link to power and how are these dynamics played out in different dance contexts?” Simpson and Lewis (2010) argue that visibility in organizations can be encountered differentially, often as constraining and detrimental for women, but advantageous for men. They explain that visibility can have negative consequences for women through “performance pressures, creation of hostile working environment, and social constraints on behaviors social interactions” (3). In this study, I investigate the dialectic between power and

visibility in the dance scene by pursuing ethnography that focuses on female dance practitioners in studios, classrooms, and performance spaces. I believe that the “visual/visible economy” (Wiegman, 1995) of female bodies helps to construct understanding about power structure. The previous chapters point out that male dancers dominate the Malaysian stages. Yet, my contention is that, although women may not be as “hypervisible” as men onstage, they play a crucial role in the dance pedagogy and in staging performances. Through the examination of women dance practitioners who perform domestic tasks while earning wage in the formal economy, I demonstrate how dance complicates the division of labor through the intersection of dance labor (both visible and invisible labor), and domestic labor (invisible labor). Since visibility in this chapter is conceptualized both literally (through onstage appearance) and metaphorically (voicing, attention, and recognition), I examine how divisions of labor (between male and female teachers, between choreographers and dancers, and between onstage and offstage work) play out in terms of visibility/invisibility and occasionally complicate the vision-based binary.

This chapter looks at three groups of women: dance *gurus* at the Temple of Fine Arts (ToFA), “star”/principal dancers of Sutra Dance Theatre, and a producer of dance recitals. In each of these case studies, I examine the roles of women in the spatial organization of dance production by taking into consideration the labor in the rehearsal spaces, labor onstage, labor at backstage, and labor in dance related events. I analyze the interaction between men and women through the division of labor to demonstrate how gender relations are made, remade, and contested in different dance settings.

I refer to the ethnographic writings of Assia Djebar (1985), Kamala Visweswaran (1994), Lila Abu-Lughod (1993), Marta Savigliano (1995, 2003), and Priya Srinivasan (2012) as models for this chapter. Each scholar has used ethnography to insert her own voice/autobiography alongside the oral histories gathered from their informants. As a dance practitioner who has studied dance in different institutions, who conducts her own dance company, and has interacted widely with the female dance practitioners presented in this study, I include my voice and narrative into this ethnographic writing. My engagement with issues such as power, dominance, and authority arise from my own location as a Tamilian female Indian classical dancer/*guru* negotiating unequal gender and power structures in the Indian dance milieu in Malaysia. The experiences gained as a dance practitioner has greatly assisted me in framing discussions on the struggles and challenges faced by female artists in the country.

Female Gurus Performing “The Labor of Rehearsal Spaces”

In this section, I focus on four main dance *gurus* who are part of the *Bharata Natyam* dance program at ToFA – Vatsala Sivadas, Latha Uthaya, Shyamala Narayanan, and Vasuki Sivanesan as well as a former ToFA dance *guru*, Usha. The material for this section was gathered from interviews and observations conducted at the institution located in Kuala Lumpur (K.L.) between July and December 2011 although my interactions with many of them date back to many years before I embarked on my research in the United States.

The contribution of female dance *gurus* to the development of arts and culture in ToFA could be studied from various dimensions and I believe that each study would yield different theoretical insights. While it is beyond my capacity to focus on all those dimensions, I frame this study to specifically focus on the labor of female *gurus* in the staging of their students' solo debut, *arangetram*.

I am scheduled to meet Vishnu (pseudonym), an experienced male *Bharata Natyam* dancer/*guru* in ToFA at 1pm today. Upon reaching the ToFA building, I take an elevator to the third floor and walk towards the dance studio where Vishnu is conducting rehearsal for three teenaged male dance students in preparation for their upcoming debut solo recital, *arangetram*. I knock on the door and enter into the studio. Vishnu says, "Prema, come in, why don't you sit down and watch the rehearsal, we can talk later once I am done." I quickly take my seat beside Vishnu and observe the dance practice. Suddenly someone who is sitting behind me states, "Did you see that! Did you see how Vishnu *anna* (brother) executed the movement; remember it, so that I don't have to recall it for you later when we rehearse this piece." It is the voice of Vasuki Sivanesan, a senior female dance teacher at ToFA. I remember her very well. Many years back, I used to attend her *adavu* classes to build stamina, while preparing for my own *arangetram*. She is such a task-master. I acknowledged her presence when I entered the studio earlier, but she has suddenly become hypervisible to me. I look beyond the male dancing bodies into the mirrors attached to the walls at the end of the studio to observe her actions during the training session. She occasionally uses facial and hand gestures to non-verbally communicate with her students, reminding them to maintain their upright torso, to sit in

araimandi, to smile, and to focus on the movement sequences taught by Vishnu. Apart from interjecting in-between to point out the corrections and making comments about her students' renditions of movements, she quietly takes down notes throughout the two-hour dance rehearsal.

“Why did she suddenly matter to me?” “While my purpose was to speak with Vishnu, what could have turned my attention to her?” Vasuki Sivanesan¹⁴⁴ was the dance *guru* of the teenage boys who were about to stage their solo recitals. As their dance *guru*, one would expect her to play a significant role in the *arangetram* training especially in the selection of repertoires and in the process of choreographing dances. Since she was not literally silent, her choreographic “silence” raised much curiosity in me. “Was her silence an act of passivity or submission?” “Why was she pushed to the ‘periphery’ in this most important phase of Indian classical dance training?” “Was her silence a strategy of resistance by intentionally staying out of the process of choreography?”

Cindy Garcia (2008), who conducted a study on a Los Angeles Salsa club, The Legend, moved away from the dance floor choreography that was based on heterosexual couplings to focus on the choreography that took place among women “beyond the heterosexualised space of the dance floor” (199). She argues that this queer ethnographic frame of study allowed her to consider the hierarchies, divisions, and alliances among women in the peripheral spaces such as the bar, the bathroom, and cyberspace. In my own study, I have observed that, while Vishnu teaches choreography for dance recitals,

¹⁴⁴ Vasuki Sivanesan, trained in the Kalakshetra *bani* (style) of *Bharata Natyam* locally, joined ToFA in the 1980s. She is one of the senior dance teachers at the institution.

either in groups or solos, female dance teachers conduct additional practice sessions for the students to rehearse the choreographies learned from the male choreographer. By drawing on Garcia's strategy of study, I focus on spaces where the female dance teachers conduct rehearsals rather than focusing on the "actual" choreography, which takes place under the male *guru*. In doing so, I intend to examine how the gendered division of labor operates in the institution's training.

"What is an *arangetram*?" "Why is it important in the Indian classical dance pedagogy?" *Arangetram*,¹⁴⁵ which literally means "ascending the stage," is the first solo dance debut of a student of Indian classical dance.¹⁴⁶ It is a first step in establishing a career in dance. According to Anne Marie Gaston (1996), it is regarded as the culmination of the training phase for a *Bharata Natyam* dancer. Supporting this view, M.A. Greenstein (1998) adds that an *arangetram* is a rite of passage that marks the transition from novice to accomplished student of *Bharata Natyam*. Referring to the role of *arangetram* in the diaspora, Priya Srinivasan (2012) emphasizes its importance by stating that *arangetram* is a "cultural performance of citizenship" (143) for the Indian community.¹⁴⁷ This essential ceremony is conducted after many years of vigorous corporeal training and displays a dancer's ability to perform a *margam* (repertoire).¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ *Aranga*, or *arangu* means raised floor or stage, and *etram* means ascending.

¹⁴⁶ It should be noted that although *arangetram* is conducted in other Indian classical dance practices such as *Kuchipudi*, *Odissi*, *Mohini Attam*, and *Kathak*, it is most popularly associated with *Bharata Natyam*.

¹⁴⁷ In her work that focuses on *Bharata Natyam* dance training in America, Srinivasan points out that young girls model Indian cultural citizenship onstage through *arangetram* by performing Indian gods, ideal female characters, and Hindu mythological stories at American stages.

This public performance is a critical moment for both the *guru* and *sishya* (student), as the former's artistic knowledge and the latter's talents are both evaluated by the audience members.

Besides putting together a repertoire of dance items and choreographing dances for the recital, a dance *guru* commonly assumes the role of a *nattuvanar*, the conductor of the musical ensemble. *Nattuvangam* is performed by using cymbals and *solkattu* (spoken rhythmic syllables). Before the 1930s, the choreography and instruction of Indian classical dance in South India was largely under the domain of a male *guru*, who trained female dancers, choreographed repertoires, and acted as *nattuvanar*. However, Rukmini Devi Arundale, an upper class Brahmin woman, who played a distinctive role in the reincarnation of the court dance form, *sadir*, as *Bharata Natyam* in the early twentieth century, created opportunities for women to emerge as choreographers. At Devi's dance institution, Kalakshetra, which was founded in 1936 in Madras (now known as Chennai), South India, middle class women were granted more responsibilities in teaching, developing new choreographies, and conducting *nattuvangam* apart from performance. In doing so, Devi "eroded a gendered division of labor," (O'Shea, 2007: 121) in which traditionally the women perform while the men choreograph and teach dances. Women soon enough took up positions of authority in dance such as "composer, instructor, and conductor" (121). This study reinforces that the role as a choreographer and a *nattuvanar* are positions of power (masculine roles) that garner visibility to the occupant of those

¹⁴⁸ A *margam* is a repertoire that contains seven or eight genres of dance pieces in a specific order. It begins with pure or abstract dance pieces such as *alarippu* and *jatiswaram*, followed by expressive items such as *sabdam*, *varnam*, *padam*, and ends with the abstract dance piece, *tillana*. Although there have been some modifications, the original repertoire had been retained in traditional order for most *arangetrams*.

roles. A choreographer gains recognition and attention when his/her choreography is embodied and visually presented by student/s on the stage. A *nattuvanar* attains visibility by conducting *nattuvangam* for dancer/s and leading a live musical ensemble on the stage.

When I was preparing for my solo debut in the early 1990s, I was trained by female dance teachers at ToFA. ToFA International has several branches locally in K.L., Penang, Johor Bahru, and Malacca as well as globally with centers in Singapore, Australia (Perth), India (Chennai and Coimbatore), and the U.S (New Jersey). Suriakala, who was the International Dance Director of ToFA and the dance director of ToFA Chennai, flew in from India to conduct advanced dance training for *arangetrams*. There were two forms of training for *arangetram*: the primary training focused on learning new dances and the other form of training, which I would like to refer as supplementary training, placed emphasis on rehearsing the items learnt. My dance *guru*, Vatsala Sivadas,¹⁴⁹ assisted Suriakala by conducting the supplementary or follow-up training sessions. At this phase of training, Suriakala held more power since she choreographed my repertoire. After I had learned new choreographic material from Suriakala, I would rehearse the rhythmic dance phrases and *abinaya* (expressive) segments under Vatsala's supervision. Vatsala would correct my posture and my rhythmic sequences. She would also offer suggestions to enhance my *abinaya* during the rehearsal sessions. As the primary *nattuvanar* for my *arangetram*, Suriakala sang and recited *solkattu*, while Vatsala stood in as the assistant *nattuvanar*. I want to emphasize that as a disciple of

¹⁴⁹ Vatsala Sivadas is the wife of the pioneer dance master, V.K Sivadas. She is currently one of the dance directors at ToFA K.L. For more details, please refer to Chapter One.

Suriakala, who later pursued advanced dance and *nattuvangam* training under her in India, I could persuasively argue that she held the power and agency that no other female teachers at the ToFA K.L. had held until now. Suriakala sang, choreographed, and rendered *nattuvangam* for all *Bharata Natyam* dance recitals at the institution in K.L. until 2003. After that, the tasks of choreographing and conducting *nattuvangam* were passed on to Vishnu, while Suriakala focused on developing the dance program at ToFA Chennai. This transition of power was a one-off event, something that did not usually occur.

With the shift of position of power from a female *guru* (Suriakala) to a male *guru* (Vishnu), the women slowly vanished from the performance stage since they did not perform *nattuvangam* in the public performances. They became invisible as “backstage performers,” by undertaking roles as costume designers, make-up artists, and stage managers, and “off-stage laborers” as rehearsal directors. With the intent to examine these shifts of power and economies of visibility, I ask, “To what extent are women’s behind the scenes and invisible roles empowering or disempowering?” “Does the preparation involved in the *arangetram* signify unequal power relations (empowering men while disempowering women) or a collaborative effort that in some unique ways empower female labor?”

Silence as Disempowerment and Empowerment

Gayatri Spivak (1988) in her influential article, “Can the subaltern speak?” (1988), points out that even when a subaltern female enters a discourse, “she cannot be heard or read,” (104). Thus, the denied “subject hood” indicates an absence of agency. However,

Kamala Visweswaran (1994) destabilizes the equation of speech and agency by theorizing “silence as a marker of agency”(51). In Visweswaran’s ethnographic account, she points out the ways in which moments of “silence” become points of entry into systems of meaning and power. Merging both conceptualizations, I would like to argue in this framework of study that “silence”¹⁵⁰ could signify simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment.

The *Bharata Natyam* program, the oldest dance program at ToFA, is taught by a team of nine teachers, of whom three are male. This is a revenue-generating dance program¹⁵¹ with the greatest student population at the institution. The *Bharata Natyam* curriculum consists of five stages of dance training. Students begin with basic *adavu* (dance steps) training and gradually advance to higher stages through a successful completion of annual theory and practical dance examinations. Once the dance students have completed their fifth stage of exams, they qualify to participate in the repertory examination which subsequently leads them to their solo debuts.

From the first to the fifth stage, dance students are primarily taught by the same female dance *gurus* with the guidance of standardized course syllabi created by Vishnu. Upon completion of stage five exams, dance repertoires are customized and choreographed by this male dance *guru*. He takes on the responsibility of providing advance dance training and *nattuvangam* accompaniment to the dancers who prepare for

¹⁵⁰ I am not referring to “silence” as merely a lack of speech, but extending it to focus on actions and performances as well.

¹⁵¹ Approximately 25 000 ringgit a month (five hundred students X fifty ringgit fee per student). This approximate figure was provided by the President of ToFA K.L, Kanagasivam, during an interview (Kanagasivam, 2011).

their live solo recitals. I read this gendered division of labor as disempowering female teachers since their labor is subordinated.

In order to investigate this issue, I spoke with Vasuki Sivanesan after a rehearsal session at the studio. We discussed her role during the recital training. She told me that she was notating the movements choreographed by Vishnu to enable her to coach her three male dance students for their upcoming *arangetrams*.

Vasuki : “Vishnu is a wonderful choreographer. The minute he looks at a poem or a text, he knows how to develop the piece. He is very knowledgeable. You have seen his choreographies, right? I do not have to explain more. He currently travels a lot and meets lots of musicians. So, he developed *nattuvangam* skills rather quickly. He creates new *jatis* and experiments with different *jati* compositions. *Arangetram* is more like a team-work. He concentrates on choreographing items and conducting *nattuvangam*, while some of us (female teachers) focus on matters such as dance rehearsals, costumes, and food.”¹⁵²

As a senior dance teacher who had been with ToFA for more than twenty years, Vasuki is recognized as a “perfectionist” and a demanding trainer. She is a critical assessor of *Bharata Natyam* performances. Hence, she is both feared and respected by ToFA dance students. The authoritative power that she holds as a dance *guru* is somehow not apparent in the process of staging *arangetrams*. The primary role of choreographing dance pieces is assumed by the male *guru*, while she plays the secondary role at rehearsal spaces. Her voice is essentially absent in the choreographic process. However, Vasuki explains that she plays a vital role in conducting dance rehearsals. She “polishes up” and “cleans” her students’ dance movements so that each item is perfected before the students present their solo recitals. Furthermore, Vasuki states that she is consulted by her students on all

¹⁵² Vasuki Sivanesan, 2010.

matters pertaining to the management of the event such as costume designs, invitation cards, program books, food arrangements, honorarium for the musicians, and other performance protocol details.

Two other dance teachers point out that performing *nattuvangam* requires extensive practice and enhanced skills. The role of a *nattuvangist*, according to them, offers them a visibility that they would rather avoid.

Shyamala: “I do not prefer to be in limelight. Performing *nattuvangam* requires lots of practice. My timing is tight. I do not have time to devote to *nattuvangam* practice. Even for my son Madhan’s *arangetram*, many people asked me why I was not part of the live ensemble as a conductor of *nattuvangam*, but I told them that I was happy to watch his performance as a spectator. No tension! As a dance director, Vishnu performs his responsibilities as a choreographer and a *nattuvangist*. So, we (the female teachers) leave those tasks to him.”¹⁵³

Latha: “In the first place, I do not have any formal training in *nattuvangam*. It scares me...those *kanaku* (mathematics), the calculations. You have to know the intricacy of how to play *nattuvangam*; you need the practice and confidence. It can be very stressful to perform in the public. You must live up to the expectations of the musicians in the ensemble and audience. I would rather just train my students for *arangetram* than choreographing and performing *nattuvangam*.”¹⁵⁴

Shyamala and Latha¹⁵⁵ are more comfortable with the task of training students at the private studio spaces rather than performing in public spaces. For them, choreographing

¹⁵³ Shyamala Narayanan, 2011

¹⁵⁴ Latha Uthaya, 2011

¹⁵⁵ Shyamala Narayanan had her initially training in *Bharata Natyam* from Shanta (Dhananjayan) in Malaysia. Shanta Dhananjayan graduated in *Bharata Natyam* from Kalakshetra. Shyamala had the privilege of undergoing training with Shanta, while the latter was in Malaysia (before she left to India to marry Dhananjayan and settle down there). Shyamala began her career in ToFA not as a dance teacher, but as an employee who worked at the Lavanya Arts, the boutique (the art centre) of ToFA and Annalakshmi, ToFA Restaurant in Singapore. In 1986, she joined ToFA K.L as a dance teacher. Latha Uthaya was trained by the pioneer master, Gopal Shetty and his wife, Radha Shetty, in ToFA K.L. She presented her *arangetram* in 1990 and continued to perform and teach at the institution.

dances and performing *nattuvangam* are strenuous and challenging tasks that demand more time and effort. During *arangetrams*, these teachers spend extra time and effort with their performing students besides conducting routine dance classes for non-*arangetram* students. This hectic schedule does not allow space for these teachers to immerse themselves in new choreographies and *nattuvangam* practices. Since these female dance teachers are married women, family ideology¹⁵⁶ is also a constricting force that limits their artistic mobility.

Based on Shyamala's and Latha's viewpoints, it is evident that the more visibility a dance *guru* attains on the stage, the more vulnerable he (or she) to public scrutiny. The question is, "how much risk is one willing to take?" Latha points out that coaching her dance students offers her much gratification. The feedback and suggestions gathered from evaluators during *margam* exams and from Vishnu are utilized in rehearsals to rectify the weaknesses in her students' performances. For Latha, preparing her students to perform up to standard is in itself a challenging venture and she does not wish to take on additional pressures.

Female *Gurus* as Multi-Taskers

Although female dance teachers do not choreograph dances for *arangetrams*, they still choreograph dances for non-*arangetram* performances, such as state sponsored shows, corporate shows, cultural shows, and ToFA dance events. Vatsala, a senior dance teacher and one of the current dance directors of ToFA, explains,

¹⁵⁶ Ideology that takes into account the relationships between couple (husband and wife) and parents-children. It is about family structure and functioning (Levinson and Huffman, 2006). I refer to how domestic duties limit married women's artistic movements in the dance institution.

Those days in the 1980s and 1990s, I used to choreograph short dance pieces for performances. You have danced in several choreographies, haven't you? Remember the piece on Krishna and his gopis...that was a popular choreography! But, I do not choreograph dances for *arangetram*. Suriakala used to do that. Now, we have many teachers, we have Vishnu. I focus on other duties as a dance director.¹⁵⁷

According to Vatsala's explanation, choreographies for *arangetram* require a certain level of expertise and skill and call for a clear division of labor. She did not seem to be troubled or challenged by the current division of labor since she noted of assuming greater responsibility as one of the dance directors of ToFA, who administered various dance programs at the institution. Furthermore, her labor in producing dance graduates of Indian dance in Malaysia has been recognized by the state and cultural associations that have conferred her with various awards such as ASTRO Lifetime Achievement Award, Ministry of Arts, Culture, and Heritage Living Heritage Award, and several other awards by Indian associations such as Pure Life Society and Sangeetalayam.¹⁵⁸ I am intending to point out that although the male *guru* attains "limelight" through his power-laden roles during *arangetrams*, such attention has not marginalized or overshadowed the labor of female *gurus* such as Vatsala.

Female dance teachers of ToFA perform multiple tasks besides teaching. They assist in administrative work at the management office and perform voluntary work at the Annalakshmi Restaurant¹⁵⁹ and Lavanya Arts Boutique which are housed in the multi-

¹⁵⁷ Vatsala Sivadas, 2011

¹⁵⁸ Sangeethalayam is a Society of Indian Classical Music. It was formed by a group of musicians to organize music concerts. The organization stages annual cultural production to encourage young artists to show their talents.

¹⁵⁹ The teachers assist in preparing and serving food to the customers. In return, they are able to consume their meals free of charge.

storey ToFA building. Female *gurus* are not paid for the voluntary work performed at the restaurant or compensated additionally for assuming administrative work at the office. In this process, their domestic labor and dance labor converges. To further illustrate their multi-tasking roles, I would like to recall an event that was hosted by ToFA last year.

Last August, when the University of Malaya (U.M) conducted the Asia-Pacific International Dance Conference in K.L., ToFA agreed to host dancers from India. Dance artists of Bharata Natyam, Odissi, and Manipuri were offered slots to perform in an event, in which ToFA presented its own Indian classical dance performances. I coordinated the one-night show on behalf of U.M and liaised with the ToFA event organizers, Shyamala and another senior dance teacher, Malar Gunaratnam. Through direct interaction and phone correspondence, I gathered that Shyamala was responsible for arranging the schedule for rehearsals, organizing technical requirement meeting between dancers and ToFA lighting and sound technicians, and ordering refreshments for the event.

Besides coordinating events, Shyamala is consulted on matters pertaining to costumes for dance productions. As a person in-charge of costumes, she occasionally visits Indian textile stores to select and purchase suitable costume materials. She also offers recommendation on costume designs for dance performances as well as monitors the distribution of costumes for performances.

Priya Srinivasan (2012) has argued that female Indian dance *gurus* in the United States are entrusted with an authority to shape the minority Indian community's cultural identity and to perform it onstage through the disciplining of young girls. By disciplining the girls, these *gurus* perpetuate "notions of authentic cultural identity and ideal

womanhood” (124). At ToFA, students who prepare for *arangetrams* spend most of their time with female *gurus*, apart from several hours spent with the male *guru* (to learn new choreographies). An emotional bonding that emerges between the female *gurus* and their students from years of training is further developed during the *arangetram* training period. While disciplining the dancers’ bodies to acquire aesthetic accomplishments, the female teachers also inculcate appreciation for Indian culture and heritage. ToFA is the largest cultural institution in Malaysia. Its patron, the Hindu monk Swami Shantanand Saraswathi, had strongly instilled the notion of promoting spirituality via cultural practices. In line with Swamiji’s vision, the institution places emphasis on religion and spirituality. Students are invited to join *satsang* sessions¹⁶⁰ and *pooja* (prayer) on Sunday mornings. As an act of devotion, students who present their solo recitals are offered the opportunity to perform “*abishegam*”¹⁶¹ on the Lord Nataraja (Shiva as the King of Dance) shrine to attain the blessings from the deity. What I am trying to argue through this discussion is that the burden of disciplining students and instilling religious and cultural practices among female student and male students fall on the women *gurus* at the institution. This is a typical strategy of Indian nationalism to make women spiritual and dance as part of the process of performing tradition and spirituality.

While female *gurus* exert agency and power by performing multiple tasks from various less-visible spaces, the male *guru* executes major tasks that offer him visibility onstage. In this institutional context, the female dance *gurus* look upon Vishnu as

¹⁶⁰ *Satsang* involves listening to or reading scriptures, reflecting on, discussing their meaning and bringing their meaning into one’s daily life. It also involves listening to speeches and singing devotional songs.

¹⁶¹ It is an act of bathing the deities, an essential part of deity worship in Hindu religion.

artistically “superior.” He possesses the time, knowledge, and skill that the female teachers lack. One of the female dance *gurus* describes Vishnu as the “walking encyclopedia” (personal correspondence, 2011).¹⁶² As such, the female *gurus* deliberately pass on the tasks of choreographing dances, setting *jatis* (strings of rhythmic phrases), and performing *nattuvangam* to Vishnu at the advance level of *Bharata Natyam* training.

Appointed as the International Dance Director of ToFA since 1998, Vishnu took on various key responsibilities. Vishnu, who is in his mid-forties, was the chief examiner for advance levels of *Bharata Natyam* dance exams at ToFA. He standardized *Bharata Natyam* pedagogy at all ToFA centers. He emerged as the principal choreographer and *nattuvangist* for all the institution’s *arangetrams*. He travelled extensively within domestic and international dance circuits as a performing artist. He staged his works in India as a solo performer and as a choreographer of group works. Having been with ToFA K.L. since its inception in the early 1980s, Vishnu’s contribution to the development of *Bharata Natyam* is not a small matter. His artistic visions and strategies have significantly elevated the standard of this institution’s dance training. He created opportunities for ToFA dance graduates to tour with him internationally and stage *Bharata Natyam* repertoires, a phenomenon that only emerged after he assumed the position as international dance director. Besides his critically acclaimed dance works, Vishnu possesses a noteworthy academic background as the holder of a Master’s degree in *Bharata Natyam* from India and as a pursuant of doctoral studies in *Bharata Natyam*. His artistic and scholarly skills situate him in a very influential and reputable position at

¹⁶² Malar Gunaratnam, 2011.

ToFA. His power, acquired through honed expertise and knowledge, is exercised on a horizontal level, predominantly over his female dance colleagues.

While I am inclined to argue that female dance teachers are somewhat submissive, disempowered, and less-visible in the *arangetram* training process, I want to stress that they attempt to claim their agency and power by working along a male *guru* and performing supportive roles such as nurturers, motivators, trainers, consultants, and trouble-shooters without performing primary duties (choreographing, and conducting *nattuvangam*). Their labor at private spaces (offstage and backstage spaces) is extremely vital for the staging of an *arangetram* performance. In this phase of training, there is no indication of explicit marginalization or exclusion of female teachers, but rather a form of “voluntary withdrawal” which relinquishes power and visibility to the male *guru*. This withdrawal can be regarded as a strategy of resistance by female dance teachers to take on masculine, highly responsible, and risky tasks as well as an act of accepting their positions. This combination of resistance and submissiveness is what I posit as simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment of women teachers.

Questioning Power, Reclaiming Voice

“Besides performing backstage and offstage labor, what if a female dance teacher wants to be visible onstage?” “What if she complicates the gendered division of labor in ToFA?” “What if she wants to claim her power by assuming the roles of a choreographer and *nattuvangist* during her student’s *arangetram*?” “What sort of challenges and contradictions can this present?” To answer these questions, I bring to the fore the artistic career of a former *Bharata Natyam* dance *guru* of ToFA, Usha.

Usha hailed from a family of musicians in South India. She is the daughter of the veteran *mridangist*¹⁶³ maestro, Guruvayur Dorai. She learned *Bharata Natyam* under the distinguished *gurus* Pandanallur Srinivasa Pillai and Indira Rajan in India. She was also privileged to learn South Indian *carnatic* vocal, *veena*, and *tabla*. Her dance teaching profession began at ToFA in Singapore, but her marriage to the honorary secretary of ToFA K.L brought her to Malaysia in the early 1990s. As a *guru* who mastered the art of *nattuvangam* and choreography, Usha was commended by many artists in India and Malaysia for her prowess in reciting *solkattu* and composing *jatis*. Sharing her experience as a dance *guru* at ToFA, Usha says,

Institutional training was a constant challenge for me. There were just too many politics. There were attempts to oust me out of the institution and sabotage my artistic endeavors. This was because I was *not one to keep quiet*. I fought for my rights because I had the talent and expertise. I am a well-trained *carnatic* music singer. I have profound knowledge about *talas* and *nattuvangam*. I could choreograph any dances for *arangetram*. I questioned the dance directors and management why I should forego the opportunities to choreograph and perform *nattuvangam* for my students. I am equally as capable as Vishnu. Why am I not offered opportunities like him? My students insisted that I play a main role in their *arangetram* process. I proved my artistic capabilities many times through my students' *arangetrams* while I was in ToFA. I did so much, but at the end of the day, I did not gain any recognition, support, and respect. I am happy now that I have left ToFA. I gained all that I had lost. My dance school, Laasya Arts, brought out the best in me. Now, Indian dance artists recognize me for who I am. I am invited to sing and perform *nattuvangam* for other dance companies.¹⁶⁴ (emphasis mine)

Usha's recollection of her experience reaffirmed the power and agency that lied behind the role of a choreographer and *nattuvanar* as well as the tension it created when she was denied these positions. While the other teachers chose to submit to the demands of the

¹⁶³ *Mridangist* is a person who plays south Indian drum, *mridangam*.

¹⁶⁴ Usha, 2011

management, Usha challenged the authorities by opting to prove her talent and capability through *arangetram* performances. She argued that many female dance *gurus* shied away and were not prepared to do what she offered to do. Her discontentment hinted that the way *Bharata Natyam* training program operated was oppressive since it ultimately privileged the male *guru* by overshadowing the many years of female labor. Usha's confrontation troubled the gendered division of labor. Her struggle and resistance to comply with the division of labor expressed an unequal power structure. Despite prejudices and hardships, she conducted several *arangetrams* to make her ability known to the management, artists, and public. According to Usha, the conflict turned severe during those public performances and she made the decision to leave ToFA.

Usha's husband refused to support her since he was not happy with her decision to leave ToFA. She explained that their relationship turned bitter gradually and that they were now living separately. Her testimony demonstrates the consequences of leaving the "comfortable" teaching position at ToFA. Without economic support from the organization or her spouse, Usha struggled immensely to cover her living expenses. She described her situation as "suicidal."

Unwilling to subjugate herself to a pedagogical system that privileged patriarchy, Usha resorted to violating the prescriptions of the institution's ideology in order to gain equal rights and freedom. Most female teachers treated the ToFA *arangetram* recital as a collaborative effort despite gendered divisions of labor and each person located individual agency through the various roles played, like a "group choreography." However, Usha perceived the division of labor differently. As Spivak theorized, Usha

deemed “silence” as disempowering and defied attempts to “silence” her artistic choices by questioning her lack of access to certain positions of power and eventually, leaving the institution. Here, I recall Simpson’s and Lewis’s (2010) argument that visibility in organizations differed between gender groups, often constraining and detrimental for women. Drawing this argument, I stress that Usha’s claim for visibility onstage, agency, and rights placed her in a “harmful” situation where she had to sacrifice a comfortable/secured teaching position at the prestigious institution, ToFA, and her marriage. In other words, the consequences of resisting patriarchal authority and claiming access to “seemingly more masculine roles” also meant a separation from her husband.¹⁶⁵

Nevertheless, after Usha left ToFA, most of the students whom she taught there and the students who staged *arangetram* under her artistic direction pulled out from the institution. They urged her to open her own dance school. She garnered adequate support from her students and Abdul, a senior male dancer who also left ToFA at the same time, to establish her own company, Laasya Arts. Abdul, who was the assistant artistic director, taught classes for beginners, while Usha offered advance dance lessons. The classes were conducted at a temple and on the balcony of a sport’s complex located in Brickfields, K.L. Usha slowly attained financial independence. Meanwhile, the teachers of ToFA accused Usha of stealing the institution’s students. Usha explains that she did not feel remorse for her actions since she did not force or encourage the students to join her, but they came to her willingly.

¹⁶⁵ Usha’s husband was a secretary until the early 2000s. After that, he continued to perform voluntary work at ToFA while working outside the arts institution as an insurance agent. He was one of the ardent followers of the patron, Swamiji. This is the reason why he was so invested in ToFA and was not happy with his wife’s decision to leave the institution.

In the absence of her husband, Usha took responsibilities generally held by men and managed both domestic as well as her own artistic affairs. She pointed out that she gained the strength and confidence as a sole bread-winner, with administrative support from her assistant, Abdul. In Usha's case, family dissolution was not disempowering, but empowering since she gained more artistic and economic mobility. I have so far discussed the gender politics among female *gurus* in ToFA and will now focus on women who have emerged as onstage performers in another reputable institution, Sutra Dance Theatre.

Principal Female Dancers

Since it was established in 1983, Sutra Dance Theatre has produced several principal female dancers, whom the founder and artistic director, Ramli Ibrahim has called as “prodigies” and “stars.” These female dance performers primarily attained their “star” status by partnering with the international renowned dancer/choreographer, Ibrahim, in various dance productions. One of the key artistic visions of Sutra that distinguishes it from other Indian classical dance institutions in Malaysia is that, it aims to “promote Malaysia nationally and internationally through diverse and innovative performances” (program note, 2010). Since Sutra's focus is not just to educate and cultivate interest in Indian classical dance forms such as *Odissi* and *Bharata Natyam*, but also to promote those art forms through professionally created productions, Sutra opens up ample opportunities for its dancers to be featured on the stage. This is one of the main factors that attract dancers, from different ethnicities, to enroll in Indian classical dance courses (*Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi*) in Sutra.

Scholars of Indian dance (Gaston, 1996; Greenstein, 1998; O’Shea, 2007) have argued that *arangetrams* have terminated the dance careers of many dancers, particularly female dancers. This is because, according to the views of the above mentioned scholars, teachers and students characterize the recital as a “graduation,” rather than an inaugural performance that launches a dancer’s career. I have noticed a similar trend in Malaysia whereby female dancers appear on the stage as performers until they present their solo debut, *arangetram*, or until they are married. After that, they move away from the public performance milieu and assume teaching positions inhabiting less-visible or private spaces.

Due to women’s lack of dedication to become public performers, Malaysia has not been able to produce internationally recognized female performing soloists or iconic artists in at least the past forty years. Shangita Namasivayam, a well-known *Bharata Natyam* dancer/dance *guru* in Malaysia, who toured numerous countries as a performing artist before she started her family, gives several possible reasons for this conundrum including her suggestion that, “female dancers need continuous financial support and moral support from their family. They could not commit to the practice on a long-term basis since they see dance as a hobby. Moreover, it is difficult to capture the Malaysian audience’s attention as a soloist for two hours.” (personal correspondence, 2011). She points out that it is easier to present group productions in which female dance *gurus* perform with their students. Group work is considered a financially viable option since it facilitates the selling of tickets.

Shangita adds that having a supportive spouse is an advantage if the spouse is actively involved in organizing his wife's dance production, but then, she says, not everyone has this privilege. Although Shangita's explanation seems to highlight that women need patriarchal support and capital, I want to point out that women need not always be dependent on men since they are capable of handling their own artistic affairs. Usha, whom I have discussed earlier, is an example. Furthermore, I argue that those with a strong academic background (e.g. those who possess a professional degree) acquire more competencies in navigating ways to present their dance works. However, having a patriarchal support (support from husband) is an added benefit as it enhances the female dance practitioner's artistic mobility. For instance, such female dancer/*guru* could depend on her husband to use his influence to bring in sponsorships, to assist in promoting the production through various mediums, and for channeling his earning to cover the domestic expenses, while her earning from dance classes is invested into productions.

Furthering the discussion on female performers, reputable dance master, Sri Anandan, also emphasized on the lack of seriousness among female dance artists. He notes that he conducted between fifteen and twenty *arangetrams* since 1990 and these were performed predominantly by female dancers. Stressing that none of them continued dancing after their marriage, he expressed the situation as very distressing. While I could point out various reasons for the lack of serious interest,¹⁶⁶ I also intend to consider the relationship between female artists emerging as public performing figures and the notion

¹⁶⁶ Indian classical dances (*Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi*) are regarded as leisure activities, non-profitable endeavors, and expensive art forms (that involve high cost of production).

of “respectability.” “Is displaying of female bodies through dance after marriage disrespectful?” “Is it then more respectable to be *gurus* rather than public performers?” Although I am not able to provide clearcut answers to these questions, I do not want to dismiss the notion of “respectability” in relation to female sexuality in efforts to consider the decline in Indian female dancers’ involvement in public performances after marriage.

What I have outlined thus far is a general image of female dancing in Malaysia. I will now focus on two women who emerged as principal dancers at Sutra, Geeta Shankaran Lam and Radhimalar Govindarajoo (Rathi). Geeta left Sutra after five/six years and joined ToFA in the late 1980s. Last year, she became the artistic director of her own dance company, geethashankarandance. Rathi enrolled for *Odissi* classes in 1989 and remained as Sutra’s dancer to date. The reason why I have chosen these women is to demonstrate how their artistic affiliation with the “star” male dancer, Ibrahim, launched their own dancing careers. Ibrahim’s “star” status has not overshadowed these female dancers, but has implicitly and explicitly aided these women in forging networks abroad and securing opportunities for performances, advance dance trainings, artistic residencies, and collaborations. Furthermore, by accessing the various local and international performance spaces (low budget halls to grand auditoriums) with this illustrious dance company, Geeta and Rathi have gained popularity and visibility as performers.

Geeta, a Malaysian Indian, began her *Bharata Natyam* dance training under Krishnakumari, a prominent *guru* who graduated from Kalakshetra in South India. When Krishnakumari decided to learn *Odissi* from Ibrahim, Geeta also participated in the classes. Geeta’s enthusiastic skill at grasping choreography and exuberance presentation

caught the attention of Ibrahim, who then invited her to dance with him. Geeta and Ibrahim's dance partnership created a conflict between her and her teacher, Krishnakumari. Following the dispute, Geeta terminated her dance training with Krishnakumari and joined Sutra in 1986. Geeta was introduced and promoted as a principal female artist through the *Odissi* production, *Kusumanjali*, in 1987. Following the success of this dance production in Malaysia, she was then presented in Bhubaneswar, India. Between 1988 and 1989, she toured the world as Sutra's "star" dancer. She attained popularity by partnering with Ibrahim in all his dance productions. In a write-up on Sutra's *Night of Purnama* staged in 1988, there was a photo insert that featured Ibrahim and Geeta in an embracing pose. I asked Geeta about how the public responded to her dance partnership at that time and whether anyone objected or criticized the "intimate" embraces that characterized the dance. She said that it was an honor for her to perform with Ibrahim. She did not perceive the poses as erotic or vulgar, but saw them as depictions of divinity. Since Ibrahim was looking for a suitable dance partner, she explained that "everyone was delighted that Ibrahim had found a compatible dance partner" (personal correspondence, 2011). This response emerged because previously Ibrahim's dance partners were either male or older female dancers. The spectacle duet performances of Ibrahim and Geeta were very successful both in Malaysia and abroad. As she gained fame, Geeta gave up her academic studies to focus on dancing. She discontinued education after high school and did not pursue a professional degree. As a full-time dancer, she took up positions as an assistant trainer and an administrator at Sutra.

Geeta met Lam Ghooi Ket, a Malaysian Chinese, in Sutra when he was invited by Ibrahim to write performance reviews. Ket later enrolled as an *Odissi* student. Geeta's and Ket's casual encounters during *Odissi* classes turned into love and eventually, they decided to get married. The decision created a major turmoil¹⁶⁷ between Ibrahim and Geeta, which forced her to leave Sutra. After marriage, Geeta and Ket joined ToFA in 1991. She regarded the transition as a spiritual calling and pointed out that she was inspired by the leadership of ToFA's patron, Swamiji. She explained,

Swamiji offered me a space to nurture my children and at the same time concentrate on dancing and teaching. His approach was very different from Ramli who discouraged me about love and having family. I felt a deep connection between spirituality, divinity and dance. I wanted to explore that. Swamiji created opportunities for everyone to explore their talents...I loved that approach.¹⁶⁸

Geeta was appointed as the Head of the *Odissi* dance program at ToFA. She taught, performed, and choreographed *Odissi* dance at the institution for twenty years (1991-2011). She travelled extensively abroad to perform as a solo artist and to present group works. She put together sixteen full-length *Odissi* works and trained thirteen tutor teachers, who were chosen to teach *Odissi* at eight ToFA centers worldwide. Moreover, she regularly organized *Odissi* workshops inviting *gurus* from Orissa. Speaking about her dynamic artistic competency, she says,

My performing skills and teaching abilities were nurtured, honed, and stimulated by Sutra. Ramli inspired me to dance professionally. I could not deny the fact that I have learnt so much at Sutra. Ramli sent me to India to learn dances from his *gurus*. Those connections which were made with the *gurus* in Orissa were very

¹⁶⁷ Geeta's focus on dance was distracted by her decision to get married and to start a family. I suggest that Ibrahim was not happy with this move because at that time, Geeta was Ibrahim's principal dancer and his dance partner, a valuable investment to the company.

¹⁶⁸ Geeta Sankaran, 2011.

useful for me later on when I decided to embark on my own journey of choreographing dances and creating repertoires for ToFA. However, the *guru-sishya* relationship between Ramli and I has not been good, but I still respect him for what he has done.¹⁶⁹

Geeta emphasized that the name and fame which she attained as a principal dancer at Sutra and Ibrahim's artistic mentorship had undeniably launched her career. The performing and teaching experience which she acquired at Sutra aided her in developing the *Odissi* dance program at ToFA. The establishment of the *Odissi* program in ToFA and its popularity began to destabilize Sutra, which at that time, held the monopoly power as *Odissi* training institution. Unintentionally, the two institutions became competitors. Although Geeta gradually developed new *Odissi* repertoires in ToFA by introducing new choreographies learnt from different *gurus* in India, Ibrahim constantly accused ToFA of re-producing or re-staging Sutra's repertoires. More specifically, he accused ToFA of "stealing" his music, choreographies, and "hijacking his dance *guru*."¹⁷⁰ This competition involved the politics of cultural capital (threat to Sutra branding), economic capital (de-monopolizing Sutra), political capital (rivalry between two main dance institutions) and creative capital (issues of copyright).¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Geeta Sankaran, 2011.

¹⁷⁰ This was pointed out to me by Ibrahim in one of our conversations (personal correspondence, 2005). His *Odissi* dance *guru*, Durga Charan Ranbir, was invited by ToFA for a dance program and Ibrahim was threatened by the move.

¹⁷¹ Kraut, Anthea. "The Stakes of Authorship," in *Choreographing the Folk*. University of Minnesota, 2008, pp. 62-66. In her work, Kraut discusses choreographer Zora Neal Hurston's serious interest in authorship and the racial politics that surrounds Hurston's concern over artistic credit. Here, I discuss the ways in which the same *Odissi* choreographies that are taught in various dance institutions lead to personal conflicts and jealousies. My concern is when one does not choreograph dance pieces, how could he/she claim authorship or artistic credit? *Odissi* practitioners in Malaysia heavily depend on *gurus* in India to develop new *Odissi* music compositions and choreographies. As such, how could anyone claim copyright for those choreographies?

Sutra had played a profound role in initiating Geeta's dance profession, but it was not the only factor that contributed to her success. It was through Geeta's own effort, dedication, charisma, and creativity that she had further built a name for herself in the Indian dance scene in Malaysia. Under Swamiji's encouragement, she blended the three major *bani*s (styles) of *Odissi* – Pankaj Charan Das' style, Kelucharan Mohapatra's style, and Debaprasad Das' style (Ibrahim is trained in Debaprasad Das' *bani*). Geeta weaved together repertoires that encompassed choreographies from different *bani*s and by doing so, created a unique niche for ToFA's style of *Odissi*. Besides marketing purposes, I suspect that the construction of "hybrid repertoires" was a strategy that she employed to counter the allegations from her former *guru*, Ibrahim.

ToFA created an avenue for Geeta to grow as a performer, teacher, and choreographer. She held an authoritative position at the institution, unlike the female dance teachers in the *Bharata Natyam* dance program. "Then, why did she leave the institution?" Geeta explained that even though there were different divisions of dance programs at ToFA, everyone was part of the same institution. The collective decisions made by dance *gurus* during dance meetings or during production meetings affected her directly. She explained that "certain incidents and actions" that involved the teachers from different dance programs challenged her leadership. She felt that she was losing her freedom to make decisions and was being controlled, especially by one particular male dance *guru*. She resisted attempts to repress her artistic ventures, but when the disagreements went beyond control, she left ToFA and started her own dance company in 2011.

Geeta revealed that she went into a depression after she left ToFA. She could not focus on her art and considered ending her dance career. When she was about to give up, several of her former *Odissi* students, who now run their own dance institutions, offered her space to conduct classes and invited her to perform in their productions. The support rendered by her former male students (such as Parveen Nair and Ravi Shanker) gave rise to the performances such as the *Bharata Natyam* production, *An Adoration...Ganga*;¹⁷² and *Odissi* dance recitals in *Divas and Devas* as well as *Duet*.¹⁷³ *Duet* is a *Bharata Natyam* and *Odissi* collaborative project with a foreign artist, Uday Win Thang. She also presented solo *Odissi* performances for fund-raising programs at schools, cultural programs in temples, and dance festivals. Her corporeal ability to switch between dance forms, *Odissi* and *Bharata Natyam*, opened up more opportunities for collaborative ventures. She emerged as one of the most visible female dance artists onstage last year.

Geeta devised a strategy of survival outside of ToFA by increasing her fees (doubling and sometimes, tripling the fees charged by ToFA) for her *Odissi* classes. She rationalized this move by stating, “I have three children to feed. Ket’s income is not enough. We have to pay rent and utilities for our home. When I worked in ToFA, I received monthly salary. Now, things have changed. On top of that, I have to pay rental for the studio spaces where I teach.” (personal correspondence, 2011). Geeta’s explanation illuminates the importance of her labor as she contributes economically to the

¹⁷² In this production, Geeta played the lead role as river mother Ganga.

¹⁷³ In this production, Geeta collaborated with Uday Win Thang, who is one of Paris’ foremost exponents of *Bharata Natyam*. *Duet* was structured in a way that the program alternated the *Odissi* performance of Geeta with *Bharata Natyam* recital of Win Thang.

household. Her wage earning capacity in the formal sector (regulated and taxed) that allows her to cover domestic expenses disrupts the distinction between visible dance labor and invisible domestic labor.

By increasing the fees, Geeta also wanted to prevent her students at ToFA from attending her classes at private studios. She did not want ToFA to accuse her of taking away its students, as had happened with Usha. Nevertheless, she pointed out that her student recruitment continued to rise. In efforts to innovate through her teaching and draw in more students, she launched into a new project, an experimental class, in which she combined *Bharata Natyam*, *Odissi*, yoga, ballet, and modern dance technique. Geeta granted me permission to observe one of her classes. She began the class with warm-ups utilizing yoga poses and modern dance techniques¹⁷⁴ and then moved on to introduce gaits and movements drawn from *Odissi* and *Bharata Natyam*. She introduced this pedagogy to those with and without dance training experience and was confident that her project that combined different movement vocabularies would soon gain attention of the multi-ethnic public.

Another major factor that contributed to Geeta's visibility onstage is the artistic support she received from her husband, Lam. Lam continued to be part of ToFA's production team even after Geeta left the institution. While offering his services to ToFA as a script-writer, a production coordinator, an emcee, and a program book designer, he supported his wife by stepping in as the artistic director for the dance program, *Divas and*

¹⁷⁴ The warm-ups focused on coordinating movements with breathing and floor works by exploring relationship with the floor.

Devas, as the designer of the promotional materials and of program souvenirs for the dance works, *Duet* and *Ganga*. As a busy laborer both inside and outside the home (she was not dependent on her husband economically), Geeta noted that it was only through her husband's artistic and moral support that she was able to balance her domestic duties and a career in dance.

Geeta's artistic path took her in various directions that situated her as a "star" dancer at Sutra, a prominent *Odissi guru* at ToFA, and artistic director of her dance company. Meanwhile, Rathi, who was groomed as a homegrown principal dancer, explored new artistic ventures while maintaining her artistic root at Sutra.

Rathi comes from a mixed Chinese-Indian parentage. At the age of seven, Rathi started training in *Bharata Natyam* under the tutelage of Master Gopal Shetty and his spouse, Radha Shetty at ToFA. Rathi's mother wanted to promote her daughter as a dancer, so she arranged for her daughter to give mini-performances at restaurants and temples every time little Rathi has completed learning a dance item. Since Rathi was not interested in the traditional training that led to an *arangetram*, but rather wanted to be a performing artist, her mother and sister felt that Sutra was the best place to realize Rathi's desire to be a performer. As though rationalizing this decision, Rathi noted that, "in ToFA, one could only get to perform once a year." (personal correspondence, 2011) But on the contrary, Ibrahim immediately spotted her talent and offered her opportunities to perform in the company's productions as soon as she joined classes taught by her "new" master.

Once she completed her high school education, Rathi wanted to further her dance training. Ibrahim recommended that she attend a six-week School of the American Dance Festival (ADF) in Duke University North Carolina, in the U.S. She also took modern dance technique classes (Cunningham and Graham techniques) at the Alvin Ailey Dance Studio in New York and participated in several dance shows. Besides her dance training in the U.S, Ibrahim also sent Rathi to India. She pursued advanced *Odissi* dance training with *guru*, Durga Charan Ranbir and the accomplished dancer, Ileana Citaristi. As a dancer who specialized in *Odissi*, *Bharata Natyam*, and modern dance, Rathi emerged as Sutra's principal dancer and performed with the dance company from 1990-2002 (just as Geeta had left). Rathi was one of the few talented female dancers¹⁷⁵ whom Ramli groomed and supported, probably with the intention of replacing Geeta after her departure. In 1997, Ibrahim presented Rathi in a solo *Odissi* work entitled, *Tribanga*. According to Rathi, her mentor, Ibrahim, had confidence in her performance and believed that her vibrant stage presence and dancing were able to hold the attention of the crowd. The local press reviews described Rathi as "a dancer to watch now and in the future."¹⁷⁶

In 2003, Ibrahim again encouraged Rathi to audition for the renowned London based South Asian dance company, Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company (SJDC) after seeing an advertisement in an Indian dance magazine. Rathi got through the audition and

¹⁷⁵ The other female dancers were Chaandini, Gayathri Vadivelu, Thenmalar Kuppan, and Nisha. Presently, Vadivelu runs her own dance company and occasionally performs, but the whereabouts of the other dancers are unknown.

¹⁷⁶ "Sutra Babes." Entertainment segment. *The Malay Mail*. July 11, 2000. p. 3. In another article, Wilson Henry writes, "By making every *Odissi* move a natural part of her movement, Radhi would make the very stones of Konark cry out with joy....she was every bit one of those sensual temple sculptures come alive." *The Malay Mail*. July 11, 2000. p 2.

was accepted as a full-time dancer for its 2003 tour. Rathi explained that since contemporary dance was not her first language of movement and Jeyasingh's style was different, she struggled immensely. She was sent to numerous classes to become skilled in different modern dance techniques. She worked extra hard to keep up with the corporeal proficiency and flexibility of the other company members, who challenged and helped her through her dance training. Rathi toured extensively with SJDC throughout Britain, and Europe¹⁷⁷ over the course of five years with the dance company. Once her dance contract was over, she came back to Malaysia with the idea of rejuvenating the contemporary dance scene, while planning on reverting to Indian classical dance practices.

Rathi came back to Sutra, not only as a dancer and instructor, but also as co-artistic director¹⁷⁸ and an assistant choreographer. Prior to Rathi's appointment as co-artistic director, only the principal male dancer, Guna, assumed that position. I speculate that Rathi's transnationality and the cultural capital she gained as a dancer of Jeyasingh's company enhanced Rathi's artistic mobility in Malaysia and enabled her to attain the position as co-artistic director and choreographer in Sutra. Her dance labor was economically important to Sutra. She spatially reorganized or reconstructed several *Odissi* group performances for Sutra. She was paid for all the projects in which she participated as a performer and an assistant choreographer. The popular *Odissi*

¹⁷⁷ While in the U.K, Rathi toured SJDC's productions of *Phantasmaton & [h]Interland* (2002/3), *Transtep* (2004), *Flicker Transtep 2* (2005) and *Exit No Exit* (2006) throughout Britain and Europe.

¹⁷⁸ Rathi and Guna (the principal male dancer, senior dance performer, and *Bharata Natyam* dance teacher at Sutra) were the co-artistic directors for the spectacular *Odissi* production, *Odissi Stirred*, in 2011.

production, *Vision of Forever*, was Rathi's comeback performance as a principal *Odissi* dancer. This production premiered at the "star" space of Malaysia, Istana Budaya, and went on an international dance tour to India, Europe, and the U.S. Through Sutra and SJDC, Rathi entered diverse performance spaces, assuming an envious position as a cosmopolitan dancer. She was given the main roles in expressive *Odissi* dance pieces in Sutra productions that positioned her in the center of the performance space, attracting the attention of the audience. During a performance at Downtown Dance Festival in New York last year, dance critic, Alastair Macaulay writes,

...once my eye lingered on Ms. Govindarajoo, it kept singling her out, even when she took a supporting role in groups. Just an advancing phrase of footwork with alternating in/out arm gestures became captivating with her. In extremes, either of vivid rhythm or sculptural positions, she is spellbinding, with sharply percussive feet, wonderful plasticity and stillness, and a riveting facial beauty. Tiny inflections of the shoulders and head made her movement more complete than that of others. This is a dancer who casts the spell of the *Odissi* form by the fullness with which she performs it. (*The New York Times*, 2011)

The press review is a testimony to the extent of which Rathi claims visibility onstage. This write-up reveals that the performance of classical dance enables Rathi to harbor a certain degree of autonomy even when negotiating within the patriarchy of the dance circuit. More importantly, the review lends to an understanding of the importance of visibilising certain female dancers such as Rathi since it profits the patriarchy. In other words, Rathi stands out for a number of different reasons (her stage presence, sexuality, beauty, and dance prowess), but she stands out more specifically for the convertibility of her cultural capital to economic capital.¹⁷⁹ I argue that her labor as a talented performer

¹⁷⁹ I refer to Pierre Bourdieu's (1977/1986) theorization about how cultural/symbolic/social capital is convertible to economic capital.

contributes to the primary factors that enable Sutra to maintain its reputation, attract global audience, and secure future performance invitations.

Rathi also ventured into contemporary works through collaborative efforts with other dance companies. Her contemporary duet, *Rebel Without A Cause?*, was presented in a Ballet Base production in 2008 and was nominated for Best Choreography in a Mixed Bill at the Seventh Annual Boh Cameronian Arts Awards in 2009. *A Delicate Situation*, choreographed by Lina Limosani from Australia and performed by Rathi, earned three nominations at the same award ceremony. Her talent as a diversely trained performer facilitated the search for various dance projects. This year, SJDC extended another offer to Rathi to perform with the company in London.

Besides visibility on the stage, Rathi also gained recognition offstage. She was selected as one of Marie Claire's Women of Style and Substance for 2011. She was presented this award in acknowledgement of her significant contribution in the field of dance and for elevating the status of women in Malaysia. Since women from the field of science and business normally receive these awards, recognizing a female dance artist, especially an Indian dance practitioner, through the award presentation is an unusual phenomenon.

Sutra seemed to have its door open for seasoned homegrown dancers such as Rathi. It offered support and a place to fall back on for transnational dancers who remained "loyal" to the dance company. Rathi admitted that to survive as an Indian classical dance performer outside the renowned brand of Sutra was very difficult. For dancers working in Indian classical genres, performance opportunities were very limited

and rarely have funding. As such, she remained artistically affiliated with Sutra, while exploring opportunities elsewhere. The privilege of being trained in contemporary dance further enhanced her economic and artistic mobility as it opened up doors for collaborative ventures beyond the Indian dance circle.

From my own experience as an *Odissi* dancer who had been with Sutra for three years, I would like to stress that the glamour and fame attained by being a performer does not come without a dear price. The hectic rehearsal schedules make unrealistic demands on one's personal life, leaving absolutely no time for social interactions. Performing artists must endure pressure to learn and absorb new materials and present it "flawlessly" onstage on short notice. A Sutra dancer who is aspiring to become a seasoned performer must have a high level of tolerance to endure tantrums, yelling, and scolding from the company's artistic director. This highlights another form of labor, which denotes patience, persistence, and ability to work with patriarchy. Many dancers leave the company since they are unable to tolerate the pressures for a prolonged duration. Thus, to emerge as Sutra's "star" female dancer requires a tremendous level of focus, dedication, endurance, and passion besides making sacrifices in terms of one's time and pleasure, calling attention to the importance of this labor.

Geeta and Rathi have made different choices in crafting their dance careers. In the process, they have demonstrated that women are able to emerge as cosmopolitans, claiming visibility, agency, and power much the way men have onstage. By actively occupying a place in the public sphere through their dancing bodies, they disrupt the gendered spaces that attributed women with the private and men with public. I have also

noticed the intervention of ethnicity, Geeta's mixed marriage (Chinese husband) and Rathi's mixed parentage (Chinese parent) in my analysis. I do not intend to claim that mixed marriage or mixed parentage offers more flexibility and freedom to female dancers, but I am considering the possibilities it might present in enabling women to emerge as leading female performers in the public sphere.

This chapter has so far focused on women as teachers and performers to examine the gender politics in two main dance institutions in Malaysia, ToFA and Sutra. I will now focus on another female Indian dance practitioner, Meena Kumaree, who apart from being a dancer, emerged as a freelance dance producer who promotes male dancers. This discussion offers new insights into the exploration of visibility, labor, and gender roles in Indian dance.

Female Producer of Dance Recitals

From backstage, the emcee announces "the next piece is entitled Amma Ananda Daayini, the compassionate mother of divine bliss." A spotlight focuses on a male dancer who stands at the center of the stage. As the emcee delivers the essence of the piece through an English translation, she, the emcee, walks to the center of the stage and joins the male dancer who begins to narrate with his hand gestures and facial expression. She stands by his side and then moves around him while speaking into her headset microphone. She recites, "Grant us the bliss of your nourishing form, O Goddess; you are the very personification of spiritual bliss, ananda; you are the grace and power that activates Shiva himself; grant me your loving darshan; O Mother, I have surrendered myself at your lotus feet..." Moving gracefully through the space in her green silk sari,

she articulates the meaning of the words she utters with her hand gestures, improvising the movements as she performs with the male dancer. Her verbal explanation is rendered through various voice modulations. Towards the end of the narration, she disappears to the side behind a curtain, leaving the male dancer to conclude the gestural synopsis and to transition into the “actual” performance. The music begins...

This dramatic narration was part of a two-hour *Bharata Natyam* recital, entitled *Echoing Anklets – A haunting Rhapsody of Bharata Natyam*, staged by Ajith Baskaran Dass and his dance company, Suvarna Fine Arts in the year 2005 in K.L. “What is extraordinary about this performance? The emcee is a female and the dancer is a male, so what?” Normally, the emcee is hidden backstage and does not make him/herself visible by entering into the performance space. However in this performance, the emcee becomes visible by performing with the male dancer. “So what, how is this unusual?” It was not just a matter of reading the script, but the emcee and her expressive live verbal explanation were emphasized. The male artistic director used her dance movement and voice skills creatively by giving her a central role and integrating her into the visual presentation of the piece. Furthermore, she was not only the emcee for the production, but also its producer. Malaysia’s prominent male dancer, Ajith Dass employed her as the producer for this *Bharata Natyam* production. Here, I highlight the dancer and producer, Meena Kumaree, who is actively sought out by particularly male dancers for her professionalism in managing and producing dance recitals. Meena’s authorization as a producer/manager inverts the common practice in Malaysia of men being in charge of

women. Instead, by taking the role of a manager, Meena, assumes a masculine role, challenging the patriarchal hierarchy.

Meena learned *Bharata Natyam* from Krishnakumari, Geeta's former teacher. At the age of fifteen, Meena performed her solo debut, *arangetram*. Following this performance, she pursued two years of teacher training course under her dance *guru* and was then offered opportunities to teach *Bharata Natyam* at her *guru*'s dance school. However, Meena was not interested in becoming a performer or pursuing dance as a professional career. After performing in several productions under her *guru*, she moved away from the dance scene to concentrate on her career as a secretary in the corporate world.

Meena's aunt, Nesa Poobalan, inspired her to nurture her "voice to perform/dance." Meena enhanced her Tamil and English language skills in order to write and narrate performance texts. She developed a strong belief that there is "so much more to dance than dancing." She came back to the dance world as an emcee, a script-writer for dance-dramas, and a performer. Meena honed these skills through her own initiative and did not undergo any special training. She described the integration of different skills by recollecting her role in one of her teacher's dance-drama productions,

It was *Lalitha-Lavanga*. I wrote the script according to the scenes envisioned by my *guru*, Krishnakumari. I also performed in this drama. I played the role of Radha and Nada (Nadarajan Muniandy)¹⁸⁰ was Krishna. Everything came

¹⁸⁰ Natarajan Muniandy had his initial training in *Bharata Natyam* under Krishnakumari. He was then financially sponsored by his teacher, Krishnakumari to pursue advance *Bharata Natyam* dance training in Kalakshetra, India. He established his own dance company, Subraanjali Dance Theatre, in 1997 with the blessings from his *guru*. He was regularly featured in Sutra productions and had staged many collaborative works with other well-known Kalakshetra dance graduates in Malaysia such as Shangita Namasivayam, Apsara Ram Gopal, and Guna.

together in this production – dance, language, writing skills, artistic voice, and organizational abilities (administration and managerial). It was very stressful, but I learned a lot.¹⁸¹

After assuming a huge responsibility in this production, she withdrew again from dance. However, her dance colleague, Muniandy, approached her to be the emcee in his dance production and to conduct *nattuvangam*. She obliged, but was still disinterested in teaching or performing. Since she felt there was much more to explore in dance than dancing and teaching, she focused on the pre-performance script, particularly in delivering introductory narration for dance pieces. Meena pointed out that the verbal synopsis played a vital role in an Indian classical dance production since it imparted the essence of a dance piece and educated the diverse audience members. Indeed, she argued, pre-performance translation or narration should not be taken for granted.

Meena and I discussed the unpleasant experiences we encountered in listening to certain emcees' narrations. We recollected how certain introductions were either too soft or too loud or too monotonous and boring. I told her that I have made the emcees of my dance productions rehearse the narration several times with me before we performed it live to ensure that the narration sets the right mood. Meena agreed that some emcees make thousands of mistakes. She said, "They just read the script for the sake of reading it, there is no life, no emotion in the narration. I wanted my words to reach out to the audience, inspire the dancer, and have a life of its own. I write my script in a very creative manner and present it very expressively. I use different voice modulations to make the narration more dramatic. Yes, I agree with you, the emcee's narration is major;

¹⁸¹ Meena Kumaree, 2011

it must complement a dancer's gestural movement, and not do injustice to the dancer's non-verbal expressive synopsis. Many audience members have praised me for my style (of delivering narration). They said that they have enjoyed listening to me. In that way, I feel I have achieved what I set out to do." (personal correspondence, 2011)

Meena's view resonates with dance scholar Janet O'Shea's (2003) suggestion that when a dancer translates a piece before performing it, she bridges a perceived gap between content and perception, thereby enabling a broader range of spectators to access the piece. In her discussion, O'Shea focuses on the dancer as the interpreter or translator. But in today's performance climate in Malaysia, it is a common practice for dancers to assign an emcee to verbally translate the piece. As such, they look for an emcee who is potentially perceived as an experienced person in dance and who is able to deliver the synopsis in an effective and creative manner. By bringing the audience closer to the production, the emcee creates a space for the Indian classical dance production to be more marketable to the Malaysian audience. It is in this light that we should consider why male dancers are keen on employing Meena as an emcee for their performance.

Besides emceeing dance shows, Meena was hired as a backstage manager for several productions. She was in-charge of giving cues to the lighting and sound crew members, giving instructions to dancers, handling costumes, and coordinating with musicians. On the whole, she held huge responsibilities and key roles during productions. She took on tasks that lightened the burden of the artistic directors or the dance *gurus*, who could then concentrate on the performance onstage. She handled tasks that determined the success and failure of shows. As a backstage manager, she was

performing tasks that offered her the opportunity to give orders to the dancers, musicians, and production crew members. Thus, Meena enacted power from less - visible spaces.

Meena slowly transformed from a backstage manager to a producer/project coordinator. She describes this transition as “unconscious” and “un-thought of act.”¹⁸² She produced Dass’ and Muniandy’s collaborative dance productions for three consecutive years. Even though both the male dancers were Meena’s friends, she was hired for a professional fee to do her job. Having successfully produced *Ananda Absolute* in 2009, *Raghava Yadhava* in 2010, and *Vismaya Vrisksha* in 2011, she is scheduled to produce two separate productions for Dass and Muniandy in 2012. Dass runs his dance school in the southern city of Johor Bahru, while Muniandy teaches dance in K.L. Since each artistic director conducts classes in different cities, the distance has posed a major barrier in the preparation of Dass and Natarajan’s collaborative ventures. Their artistic focus and efforts were primarily directed towards training dancers and coordinating the performance sequences of both schools on the stage. While the male *gurus* looked into the artistic elements such as developing the concept or theme, training, rehearsals, booking auditorium, and hiring musicians, Meena’s labor was deployed to handle matters pertaining to funding, promotion and marketing, press releases, and ticket sales. However, in the latest production, *Vismaya Vrisksha*, Meena pointed out that she was involved right from the beginning through her inclusion in the process of brainstorming ideas to develop an appropriate theme and structure.

¹⁸² Meena Kumaree, 2011.

As one of the main producers of *Bharata Natyam* recitals in Malaysia, Meena points out that funding is the greatest obstacle. She declares that not only funding is very limited for Indian classical dances, unlike Malay and western dance forms, but that the process of applying for funding, especially state funding, is tedious, time-consuming, and frustrating. This is the reason why, Meena states, male dancers assign her the task of raising funds since they know that she writes good funding proposals and is very persistent with her follow-ups on the status of their funding. She adds that not all dance practitioners have the time and patience to do constant follow-ups¹⁸³ and hence, miss the opportunities to obtain funding.

Meena preferred to be “invisible” onstage although she held important roles in dance productions. She chose to be a “backstage performer.” All along, she requested not to be featured in the promotional materials. However, during an interview aimed at promoting the production, *Vismaya Vrisksha*, on the ASTRO Tamil channel last year, she appeared publicly for the first time as a producer. She said Dass and Muniandy, the artistic directors of the production, wanted her to share her perspective on staging the classical work. In the process of promoting the work of the male dancers, her female subjectivity, labor, and voice were highlighted in the public sphere. Their collaborative effort signified a mutual support between male and female dance practitioners and illuminated the dependence of male artists on female labor to promote and present their

¹⁸³ Follow-ups are done mostly through phone calls and e-mail correspondences and in certain urgent cases, by making personal visits to meet officials who handle funding matters. While follow-ups with private agencies are slightly less tedious, the follow-ups with the state ministries can be very traumatic at times due to the government bureaucracies. I say this because of the following reasons: proposals could be misplaced, proposals do not reach the right person, and delays in approving funds.

work. Thus, the artistic success of some male dancers explicitly depended on the contributions made by “invisible” or “semi-visible” women such as Meena.

Conclusion

As a female dance *guru* who runs a dance company in Malaysia, I argue that for dance practitioners to sustain artistic practices in a country that offers very little funding for Indian dance forms, the reliance of artists on each other, regardless of gender, ethnicity, and class is fundamental. This chapter has focused on gender identities, relations, and powers that constantly shift and lead to multi-dimensional gender politics.

In most cases, heterosexual women are reluctant to be “visible” in public spaces, which I intend to suggest is because of the policing of female sexuality by the pro-Islamic state, dance institutional settings, community, and family. This is the key point that explains why male artists are hypervisible in Indian dance in Malaysia. However, this chapter has demonstrated the ways in which women complicate gender, by moving fluidly between perceived masculine and perceived feminine roles. By focusing on female artists as dance *gurus*, public performers, and dance promoters, this chapter has examined the complexities in presumed gender roles and visibility of labor as well as the extent to which gender relations are reinforced, broken, tested, and renegotiated in silence, in defiance, and through mutual acceptance.

A study on ToFA female dance teachers and their roles in the preparation for an *arangetram* illuminates the way in which control and dependency are perpetuated in the *Bharata Natyam* dance pedagogy at this institution. The gendered division of labor – that is the male choreographer and female rehearsal directors - exemplifies how a male *guru*

controls and maintains a position of power as well as demonstrates the dependency of female *gurus* on him for conducting advanced training for recitals. Although these women rarely hold positions of power during *arangetrams*, in particular as choreographers and conductors of *nattuvangam* (seemingly more “masculine” roles), nevertheless, these female dance instructors asserts power from less-visible spaces through the supportive roles they play in staging the recitals. Without resorting to contestation, they find on the institutionally sanctioned ways or means to negotiate more authority within the organization. I theorize this “silence” and avoidance of public visibility as simultaneous women empowerment and disempowerment.

In contrast to the submission of female teachers, I show how women such as, Usha and Geeta, complicate the gendered hierarchy in dance by defying patriarchy which then enables them to claim greater agency than the power they negotiated previously. Usha challenged patriarchy by leaving ToFA and this move led to a loss of job and disintegration in the family. Geeta challenged patriarchy by leaving Sutra, but conversely, she went to ToFA with her husband. And even when she left ToFA many years later, her decision was wholly supported by her husband. These individual analyses demonstrate that female dancers disrupt the power of dominating patriarchy at different levels.

One of my main arguments in this chapter is also that although Usha and Geeta initially suffer from loss of wage earnings when they leave ToFA, regardless of whether they have spousal support or not, they subsequently develop financial strength by forming their own dance companies. Here, Indian dance complicates the distinction between visible and invisible labor since the female artistic directors become active

laborers who perform domestic tasks and artistic roles. They become risk-takers through self-employment and in the process, achieve greater resilience both economically and artistically.

This chapter has also focused on female performers who assume subordinate positions under Sutra's male artistic director, but emerge as powerful Sutra "star" dancers by working with the renowned male dancer/choreographer, Ibrahim. The female dancers' "star" statuses enable them to become cosmopolitans. They access global performance spaces, gaining more mobility and popularity. The female dancers' artistic prowess and visibility thus empower their dancing bodies and increase their competencies in navigating ways to access positions of power. In doing so, this study demonstrates how one female exponent (Geeta) emerges as a competitor to a male dance company and another (Rathi), secures performance contracts globally and transforming into transnational performing artist. I also discuss the way in which their embodiment of the cultural/symbolic capital enhances the pursuit of economic capital. The economic gains privileges the cosmopolitan dancing women, the institutions they work for, and the patriarchy (male dance *guru*, male artistic director, and in Geeta's case, her spouse).

Finally, this chapter illustrates that women are not always socially, economically, and culturally dependent on men, but are occasionally in positions of power and authority themselves through their self-devised strategies. I bring forth the artistic life narrative of Meena, the freelance Indian dance producer. The demand for Meena's labor emphasizes the dependence of male performers on female ingenuity in promoting and staging their work. Her contributions uproot the patriarchal hierarchy through collaborative artistic

endeavors. Indeed, Meena finds her agency through structures that require mutual support between male and female artists. As a person who fluidly moves between various roles – producer, emcee, backstage manager, and dancer – she blurs the boundaries between visible onstage labor and invisible backstage or offstage labor.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation, I have called attention to the rise of male dancers in the Indian dance scene in Malaysia. I have argued that a unique configuration of cosmopolitanism, ethnicity, global capital, and gender mobility have enabled the growth of male dancing phenomenon in the pro-Malay, pro-“Bumiputera,” and pro-Muslim country. However, my conversations with many male dancers/dance *gurus* during my fieldwork have led to a staggering finding that shows a decline in Malaysian male dancers, creating a serious concern about the future of male dancing in this country. In a recent interview, the artistic director of Sutra, Ramli Ibrahim, laments as follows:

There are no bloody male dancers (new generation male dancers) in Malaysia now, the ones we know have grown old and a few have become women. I do not find anyone in the current young generation of male dancers who inspires like Chandra (Dr. Chandrabhanu) and me or the batch – Mavin, Guna, Sooraj, Ajith, Umesh, and Shankar. The new ones are not quite interested...they do not possess sufficient persona..(personal correspondence, 2012)

Ibrahim’s lamentation raises much curiosity, propelling this dissertation to ask, “Is the rise of the male dancer a historical trend that could soon be over?” “Could the next generation be missing prominent “star” male dancers?” “Will male dancers in the future represent a minor component of Indian dance companies?”

Thus far, Malaysia has been famous for having manufactured and promoted internationally recognized male performers of Indian dance. Following Ibrahim’s pioneering effort in Malaysia to promote male dancers through *The Divine Encounters* series (2002, 2003, and 2004), interesting developments have begun emerging elsewhere in the world to promote male dancers. A festival aimed at creating opportunities exclusively to male dancers from India, and abroad called the Nartaka Dance Festival

was initiated in 2007 in Chennai, India. Commenting on the festival, the editor of Nartaki.com, Lalitha Venkat, reports, “There is so much dance going around the city through the year, but it is always showcasing women dancers. There are many good male dancers, like Kalakshetra dancers, who generally perform only in group choreography. Prema Satish, who initiated this festival, feels adequate consideration has not been given to male dancers and that's why she started this festival.”¹⁸⁴ Besides the Nartaka Festival, several other festivals such as Natraj Festival and Purush Festival came into existence in various states and cities in India. These festivals offered a platform for male dancers to present their works. This year, the Toronto-based Indian choreographer and the artistic director of inDance, Hari Krishnan, created two contemporary dance pieces, *Quicksand* and *Nine*, in Canada. *Quicksand* was, particularly, performed by a multi-ethnic all-male cast of nine dancers. Each dance piece showcased Krishnan’s different interpretations of the *navarasa*, the nine archetypal emotions that are popular in the Indian classical dance forms.¹⁸⁵

While worldwide efforts to boost male dancing look encouraging, the future direction of male dancing in Malaysia seems bleak. To what extent might global initiatives inspire the next generation of male dancers in Malaysia is unclear. Ibrahim argues that as an institution that has been known for having produced successful male dancers over the last two decades in Malaysia, Sutra now struggles to retain committed

¹⁸⁴ Extracted from the online report, “Fourth Nartaka Dance Festival.” October 28, 2010. <http://www.narthaki.com/info/rev10/rev952.html>

¹⁸⁵ For more details about these contemporary works, please refer to the websites, <http://www.torontostandard.com/culture/dance-in-the-city> and <http://www.mooneyontheatre.com/2012/04/15/review-quicksandnine-harbourfront-nextsteps-and-indance/>

male dancers. Although Sutra is offering special concessions to encourage male dancing, Ibrahim notes that the response is very slow. “What are the circumstances that could have led to this situation?” To answer this question, I recall some of the key discussions made in this dissertation.

This dissertation has traced the development of male dancing in Malaysia from the 1950s to 2011. In my analysis, I began by pointing out how the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s built momentum for the rise of male dancers in later years. I discussed how Indian dance first gained visibility in Malaysia through the performances of male dancers (V.K. Sivadas and Gopal Shetty) and their troupes in the 1950s. While the Indian dance performances of the 1950s and 1960s were mostly based on film dancing and commissioned semi-classical and variety shows, full repertoire *Bharata Natyam* performances emerged in the 1970s with the groundbreaking recital of a Hindu convert, Malay-Muslim male dance practitioner, Dr. Chandrabhanu. I argued that apart from Dr. Chandrabhanu’s performance, Tamil movies featuring male dancers inspired many male artists to enter the Indian dance circuit in the 1980s. This was a landmark decade in the history of male dancing in Malaysia. The strong presence of male dancers in Malaysian public performances gave rise to the emergence of multi-ethnic male “star” dancers such as Ramli Ibrahim, Mavin Khoo, and Umesh Shetty (discussed in Chapter Two).

Looking at Indian dance in Malaysia allows us to see how uniquely gender and sexuality are performed in relation to various discourses. I have shown the ability of men to perform gender and sexuality in a spectrum mostly onstage and in selected cases, offstage. In Chapter One, I discuss how Sivadas and Gopal Shetty construct masculinity

through heterosexual partnership on and offstage, but the multi-ethnic male dancers who emerged in the 1980s, whose sexuality variously situated between heterosexual and homosexual practices, perform, reform, and challenge masculinity. In Chapter Two, I demonstrate the ways in which men mask their “queer” identities and perform “cosmopolitan masculinity” to emerge as “stars.” In Chapter Three, I show that, although most male dancers attempt to “closet” their sexuality onstage due to the pressures of the state, community, and family, there are a number of male dancers who fearlessly stage “coming out of the closet” in various states of visibility. Chapter Four, meanwhile, illuminates how gender and sexual politics play out differently for male and female dancers. I argue that the artistic mobility and visibility of women are somehow restricted in the heavily policed pro-Islamic country, thus making way for hypervisibilisation of male dancing bodies.

Following the Asian economic crises in the late 1990s, the Malaysian government has placed much emphasis on the discourses or narratives of “Asian values” (discussed in Chapter Three) which have led to projects of capitalist modernity. The attention to national economic prosperity and pressures of global capitalism has made Malaysia, a global south developing nation, turn towards a formal economy in order to attain economic growth and become globally competitive. I stress that a desire to make money through professional careers (formal economy) has caused many people, particularly men, to move away from the arts. Limited arts funding and state patronage for Indian dances are also other major factors that contribute to the “lack of interest” dilemma. Furthermore, the increasingly Islamic state also exerts intense pressures on masculinity following the

highly influential sodomy case of the former deputy prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim. I stress that the gender policing by various disciplining structures (state, community, and family) has strongly disrupted the artistic mobility of male dancers in the country.

Examining further the relationship between Indian dance in Malaysia and global capitalism, I emphasize that global capitalism simultaneously disables and enables artistic growth. While on the one hand, global capitalism creates a polemic shift on what society expects of a dancing man and puts limitations on his artistic freedom and choice, on the other hand, it allows him to emerge as a cosmopolitan and a transnational dancer. It also enables transgendered people like “V” and Balan to change sex and seek comfortable lives through migration.

Although I have suggested that the hypervisible “star” dancers in Malaysia are predominantly men, I have also stressed that women dance practitioners significantly contribute to this phenomenon. They make vital contribution by performing labor from the sidelines (or below). I would now like to end this dissertation by discussing several recent artistic developments that involve female dancers in Malaysia.

This dissertation has not analyzed the “historic *arangetram*”¹⁸⁶ of a Malay woman, NorBaizura Ghani, but her artistic endeavor deserves some mention. This *arangetram* was staged in 2011 under the artistic collaboration of the state sponsored academy, ASWARA and the non-government organization, ToFA. Baizura began her undergraduate degree in dance in 2008 and chose to specialize in *Bharata Natyam* as part of the course requirement. She passed her final evaluation exam with two other Malay

¹⁸⁶ Joseph Gonzales, 2011.

students. The Head of the Dance Department of ASWARA, Joseph Gonzales, suggested that Baizura and another Malay student, Mohamad Yunus, present a duet recital, their joint *arangetram*. This *arangetram*, which was sponsored by ASWARA, was widely publicized highlighting the fact that it was the first publicly staged *arangetram* by a male and a female Malay dancer in Malaysian history.¹⁸⁷ Since the *arangetram*, Baizura has become the center of attention and has been featured in numerous Indian dance productions, mostly organized by ASWARA.

In another development, when V and I spoke on the phone at the end of May this year, she pointed out that she had been invited by her dance mentor to perform *Kuchipudi* abroad later this year. I asked her if she would consider presenting her solo work in Malaysia. Although she said that she had not thought about it initially, she said she would reconsider the idea upon my request.

For me, writing this dissertation has been a political and spiritual practice. It empowers my own subjectivity and contributes to my inner growth. While writing the Fourth Chapter on women, I developed a desire to challenge my own scholarship on women's lack of artistic mobility. I intend to do this through an attempt to stage a solo recital in Malaysia next year, something I have wanted to do for a long time.

Since Baizura is already being highly featured as the first Malay woman to stage *Bharata Natyam* dance performances in Malaysia and V and I have planned to do our solo Indian classical dance performances soon, I am curious to see which direction the

¹⁸⁷ Dr. Chandrabhanu and Ramli Ibrahim have not presented their *arangetrams* publicly in Malaysia (personal correspondence, 2011/2012). Dr Chandrabhanu's *arangetram* was conducted in his teacher's house before a small number of audience members, meanwhile, Ibrahim launched himself as a "star" performer the moment he started performing in Malaysia.

public performances of a Malay woman, a trans-woman, and a Tamil speaking Indian woman would take and how these performances might shape the future of the Indian dance landscape, following the conundrum of declining male dancers in Malaysia. “Would the female dancers emerge as the ‘stars’?” Or, “Would there be no ‘star’ dancers?”

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