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Dancing Refractions, Dancing Disjunctions: Indian *Devadāsīs* in Marius Petipa's *La Bayadère* (1877)

Afreen Sen Chatterji

The opening of Ramsay Burt's *The Male Dancer* always moves me: "Had I been younger I might have tried to become a professional dancer; I have ended up writing about dance instead" (1995, 1). Every time I read this, I think, "Well, this is it. This is the story of my life."

But mine isn't a question of *when* I started dancing as much as it is about *where.*

As a child living in New Delhi, my fascination with ballet was initiated by a performance my mother took me to watch. I joined the ballet classes at the Russian Centre of Science and Culture in 2007. Since then, I embodied many characters on stage: flowers, fairies, snowflakes; a Hungarian shopkeeper, Spanish chocolate, a Russian maiden; swans, princesses, once even a pumpkin. And yet, in fourteen years of learning and subsequently teaching ballet in India, I had never played an Indian character on stage. Not even a *bayadère.*

The recognition and acceptance of being steeped in a form that was rooted in patriarchy and imperialism was one that came slowly. Upon further consideration, another realization dawned upon me: If I were to play an Indian character from a canonical ballet, would I even want it to be from *La Bayadère*?

Introduction

The figure of the *bayadère*, a word that has canonically come to mean "Indian Temple Dancer," has long been a familiar trope especially in European travel literature. Joep Bor (2007, 40) mentions Venetian Marco Polo's thirteenth century account of India's temple dancers as the first of its kind. But the word *bayadère* does not actually exist in India: "essentially a corruption of the Portuguese *bailadeira*, a female dancer… became the European word most identified with Indian dance for nearly two centuries" (Warren 2006, 99). P. Sonnerat has been credited with this change in his *Voyages aux Indes Orientales et à la Chine* (1773), which was such an influential work that by the nineteenth century, *bayadère* was thought of as an Indian word (Mehta 2002, 112).

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German polymath Goethe's ballad, *Der Gott und die Bajadere* (1797) had provided inspiration to librettists of the nineteenth century by narrating the story of a temple dancer who throws herself onto the funeral pyre of her lover, Śiva the god in human disguise, and is rewarded in heaven.[1] The *bajadere* of Goethe's imagination, though based in reality, drew together two titillating Oriental feminine figurations for western consumption: the ritually licentious dancer and the monogamous, self-immolating *satī* who follows her husband even in death.

The practice of *satī*, widow immolation, is one of the most egregious acts of patriarchal violence in Hinduism where the bride must burn herself alive on her husband's funeral pyre. The history of this practice is often framed through the narrative of a British rescue mission and its abolition in 1829 which marked a complex change from mercantile and commercial venture to territorial and administrative British presence. Goethe's presentation of "a Christlike Indian god who descends the earth," and the "act of selfless love [that] redeems her otherwise unworthy existence" (Figueira 1994, 59) could be read as a foreshadowing of the British move to abolish the practice and ideologically justifying its material project of imperialism: "White men…saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1988/2013, 92).

While Charles-Simon Catel's *Les Bayadères* (1810) was the first opera inspired by Goethe, F. Taglioni's 1830 opera-ballet, *La Dieu et la Bayadère*, was perhaps the most successful rendition predating Petipa's ballet: "the ballet was specifically designed for Marie Taglioni to display the spirituality of the heroine, a *bayadère*, who was an exotic stereotype of the sensual and mysterious Oriental dancing girl" (Bor 2007, 55). In this process, the female ballerina playing oriental characters, a woman aware and assumed to be in control of her own sexuality, was juxtaposed with the chaste, docile ballerina of the earlier tradition to construct an "un-Christian" image:

> Skirts rose, revealing greater expanses of the leg and the prowess of "steel" toes… Finally, unlike the sylphs and other romantic emblems of eternal girlhood, the ballerina of the closing decades of the nineteenth century was a full-bodied woman, wasp-waisted, corseted and glamorous, fully cognizant, when she stepped on stage, of her star power. (Garafola 2007, 155).

Both these icons of the feminine were, however, contoured by men. While ballet in the nineteenth century was recognized as a feminine enterprise, direction and choreography remained men's domains. The western fantasy of Oriental female characters, synecdochally representing the East as sensuous and feminine, thus resulted from a cohabitation of imperial and patriarchal politics at a time when western imperial power had colonized half the earth: "in 1800, western power claimed 55 per cent but actually held approximately 35 per cent of the earth's surface and that by 1878, the proportion was 67 per cent… By 1914… Europe held a grand total of roughly 85 per cent of the earth as colonies, protectorates, dependencies, dominions, and commonwealth" (Said 1993, 8). It was also the same period in which Russia and Britain competed for dominance over Central Asia, euphemistically referring to it as "the Great Game."[2] Imperialism copulated with patriarchy as male directors choreographed the ballerina's staging of Oriental female sexuality.

Marius Petipa, French ballet master of the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatres, choreographed his version of *La Bayadère* in 1877. Set in a timeless Royal India, the ballet follows the romance of temple dancer Nikia and warrior Solor who are separated at the hands of powerful men of the religio-feudal Indian society: the High Brahmin and the King. *La Bayadère*'s reduction of an Indian tradition to a mythic representation may be true as a generality in classical ballet. But what is disquieting is that while many of the narratives of ballet have been infused by contemporary concerns and social understandings, *La Bayadère* remains popular and persistent in its static representation of the Temple dancer, especially in terms of the stereotyped context and closure.[3] The decadent customs of the "Orientals" continue to be communicated, from 1877 to the present,

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through the potent mix of strange props and familiar movements of classical ballet despite the postcolonial awareness that "movement knowledge is intertwined with other kinds of cultural knowledge" (Sklar 2001, 31). In an attempt to modernize *La Bayadère*, Angel Corella's restaging, with the Philadelphia Ballet (formerly known as Pennsylvania Ballet), included Indian dance gestures. And yet, Phil Chan, has reflected in his important work, *Banishing Orientalism: Dancing between Exotic and Familiar*, on this inclusion:

> It was clear that simply restaging a historical Orientalist fantasy with the inclusion of a few culturally accurate and specific Indian dance gestures was not the right way forward. The end result felt neither here nor there, and the inclusion of Indian mudras felt like flimsy scaffolding to hold up an otherwise teetering tower of ballet canon… so why haven't we seen more tweaks of "Bayadère?" (Chan and Chase 2023, 243)

I had begun this project with a reading of the ballet through the prism of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978),[4] in which he illumines imperial persuasions and material underpinnings of cultural re-presentations of a constructed East, "based… upon a sovereign Western consciousness" that are rooted in the epistemological construct of western textual tradition and propelled by material resources of colonization (1978, 8). This foundational thesis of postcolonial consciousness has been used—perhaps even overused sometimes, in a reductive narcissistic manner in whereby all 'texts' are marked as either White or its Other—to reveal the cultural capital of colonial enterprise. It has subsequently been contested, most importantly because of its paradoxical essentialism of both the Orient and the Occident. Therefore, in my reading I find it necessary and urgent to also pay attention to structures of oppressions that predated or colluded with imperialism in the colonies that are refracted, albeit unintentionally, in the libretto written by Marius Petipa and Sergei Nikolaevich Khudekov.[5]

The Orientalized figure of the *bayadère* must be read and understood intertextually alongside a study of the heterogeneity of Indian temple dancers that feeds this imagination. I argue that the curtailed agency of the temple dancer as a subject of a ballet ironically ties in with her dominant scripted history in pre-colonial, colonial, as well as post-colonial India; a constructed presentation of "the 'pan-Indian-transhistorical' *devadādsī*. Her history is a linear deterioration of aesthetic quality and personal agency from temple to courts and from courts to streets… from where the dancer and the dance must be rescued" (Coorlawala 2004, 50). This "rescue," too, is only in terms of her re-presentation through elite enactments of the constructed classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam or ballet. The empowered use the temple dancer—her art and her agency—as "raw" material extracted and labor erased, to produce "classical" art both in India and outside.

Ballet is a living form despite its perceived stability. It is performed and re-performed by contemporary bodies in our contemporary moment through which it takes on new shapes and new lights. The difficulty of writing about dance—an ephemeral, corporeal, kinesthetic form—is that it cannot quite be captured in words nor still images. A close reading of the libretto, then, provides a way forward as it helps grapple with a ballet that is hundreds of years old: to first understand the original for its merits and its slippages, before one can begin to imagine alternate possibilities.

This article is divided into four sections which loosely follow the structure of the ballet. I begin by looking at Petipa's staging of the Orient in his ballets, where he ideologically maneuvers a certain reception of the constructed East. In this section, I also look at "the Festival of Fire" through which the audience is introduced to the locale and the primary characters of the ballet, and "the Two Rivals" where we meet secondary antagonists (Act I Scene 1 and Act II Scene 2). In the next section, I bring Nikia's death and the Kingdom of the Shades (Act II Scene 3 and Act III Scene 5) in conversation with the history of the Indian temple dancer in an attempt to demystify her fetishized representation. This is followed by a specific analysis of a "modern" insertion in *La Bayadère*, the Bronze Idol solo, to

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foreground the pervasive Orientalizing tendencies even in revisions. I layer the orientalist framework by bringing together two seemingly disparate histories: Petipa's envisioning of the *Bayadère*s and the Temple Dancer who fed his imagination. I urge that they must be read in tandem with one another. In the final section, I reflect on a conversation I had with Phil Chan about his *Star on the Rise: La Bayadère… Reimagined!* (2024) as we explore the emancipatory possibilities of re-presentations and reconstructions of *La Bayadère.* The intersecting networks of power and desire that shape performance narratives are, thus, the focus of this study.

I. Petipa's Ballets: Staging the Orient

The Festival of Fire; The Two Rivals

In this section, I begin by providing an overview of Petipa's orientalist perspectives which is followed by a closer look at the first two acts of *La Bayadère.* Ballet, arguably the principal form of theatrical dance in western tradition, was initiated with the marriage of the French King, Henri II and Florentine noblewoman Catherine de Medici in the sixteenth century, who "made her Italian legacy of court ballet… a permanent part of French culture" (Lee 2002, 39). Rising from the alliance between French and Italian culture, it eventually spread from France to late Imperial Russia and, eventually, to the rest of the world as an elite form of western art. Historically, ballet has played a "central role in the expression of French identity and cultural pre-eminence… performed by the nobility and served above all as a spectacle through which to glorify the state" (Karthas 2015, 11). Marius Petipa arrived in St. Petersburg from Paris in 1847 and inherited the French Romantic tradition from Lyon-born Jules Perot (1810-1892). The tracing of origins is a slippery task, but what is recognized as 'classical ballet' today, from conception to choreography, is critically credited to Petipa. Arriving in Russia more as etiquette than art, ballet was not initially a theatrical show but a standard of "physical comportment to be emulated and internalised… inextricably bound up with [Russia's] Westernising project" and Petipa was said to have made ballet "more, not less, Imperial" (Homans 2010, 247, 266).

Significantly, the shaping of ballet by Petipa coincides with rising tensions between Russia and Britain (and other European powers) as they fought for economic dominance over Central Asia's lucrative exports and port cities. The Russian forces under General Cherniaev had occupied Tashkent in 1865 and used it as a base both for further conquest of Central Asia and to help spread Russian culture (Sahadeo 2007, 36-41, 120). Russia's conquest of Khiva and advance towards the Oxus/Amu Darya led to the apprehension that "Russia is the rising power, that she is destined to advance still further, that England is afraid of her…" (Sir Douglas Forsyth 1875; Huttenback 1975, 3-4). The visual spectacle of the parade of Asian people during the coronation festivities of 1856 and 1883 in Russia marks both its imperial ambition and achievement. The borderlands of British India were strategically crucial to this colonizing power-play in Central Asia and the Russo-Turkish War of 1877, was followed by another Russian movement in the direction of India. Euphemistically referred to as "the Great Game," Britain and Russia's imperially motivated sparring in Asia and the Indian subcontinent quickened Petipa's artistic and administrative identity. Petipa was Czarist Russia's opportune foreign-born son, a prize diplomat whose luscious ballets became powerful media tools for the colonial ambitions of the Russian oligarchs.

Petipa's imperial vision is apparent in many of his works. His first successful ballet, *The Pharaoh's Daughter* (1862), was "opulent" (Wiley 1980, 12) with an exotic Egyptian setting. It was inspired by the French writer Théophile Gautier's story set in Egypt, *The Romance of the Mummy* (1857). While Gautier's imagining of Egypt was based on complete fantasy, French general Napoleon had already invaded Egypt in 1798 with his army of soldiers, scholars and artists, authorizing in the process the European knowledge of Egypt and Egyptians.

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Petipa anchors the ballet in terms of a western textual tradition rather than any experienced reality or Egyptian knowledge. An English Egyptologist is the male protagonist of *The Pharaoh's Daughter*, who enters the mummified world "orientally" in an opium haze:

> *A desert in the east. It is night. The sky is clear and filled with stars. To the right a group of palm trees… At the back of the stage a pyramid… On the horizon mountains are visible, and a road along which a caravan is making its way into the valley.*
>
> Tableau I
>
> A caravan of Armenian merchants approaches to the sounds of a march. Black slaves lead camels loaded with wares; young female slaves and bayadères, some on camels, others on foot, accompany their masters, merchants taking them to be sold into Egyptian seraglios…[6]

Landscaped with deserts, dust storms, palm trees, pyramids, camels, lions and monkeys, the best of Egypt is represented as being in the past world of pharaohs. It was an enormous commercial success even though, "the historical and cultural inaccuracies were probably blatant," argues Nadine Meisner, but then she draws a veil over it by saying, "but this was the language of ballet, in itself unreal and audiences did not worry too much" (2019, 104).

Petipa's *The Nutcracker* (1892), based loosely on E. T. A. Hoffman's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (1816) and sometimes catalogued as a *ballet-féerie*, combined court culture with commercial venture. The Land of Sweets, with its oft-performed divertissements ordered by the Sugar Plum Fairy, presents a series of 'commodities' meant for pleasurable consumption within the performance and its reception as such by the audience. But this aesthetic experience is also a reification – "a form of social consciousness in which human relations come to be identified with the physical properties of things, thereby acquiring an appearance of naturalness and inevitability" (Burris 1988, 22). In this, the Arabian Coffee and the Chinese Tea variations signal Petipa's further appropriation and representation of eastern cultures. Fetishized, the Orient dazzles in the ballet with the lure of consumers' delight. Petipa's instruction to composer Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), regarding the Arabian dance, was apparently, "Coffee. Arabian, the kingdom of Yemen… 24 to 32 bars of cloying and bewitching music" (Wiley 1984, 12) which contrasted with the "homophonic opening of the immediately preceding Chocolate" from Spain (Mahiet 2016, 148).

The Nutcracker, as the canonical Christmas production that is performed annually by one company or another, continues to repeat this consumption of a reified East even though the choreography has undergone several revisions. The Arabian variation, for instance, continues to range from the "innocuously cute to irresponsible and denigrating with all kinds of *Arabian* vamps slinking along… while the Spanish (Chocolate) and the Russian (Trepak) don't depart much from established traditions within their respective countries" (Fisher 2003, 96-97). Indeed, the Russian Trepak's male energy is a sharp contrast to the movements choreographed for the Orientalized Arabia and China. The pattern of Othering that can be seen in *The Pharaoh's Daughter* and *The Nutcracker* is rooted in an epistemological construct of unequal ideational binaries: mind and body, rational and irrational, masculine and feminine, order and chaos. This pattern becomes even more apparent in *La Bayadère*, particularly in its representation of its eponymous central character.

Petipa's *La Bayadère* dramatizes the narrative of temple dancer Nikia and warrior Solor who fall in love but are separated at the hands of powerful men: the High Brahmin and the King. The High Brahmin, the primary antagonist, in his attempt to prevent the union of the two lovers, tells the

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King—whose daughter, Hamsatti, is betrothed to Solor—about them so that he may have Nikia for his own gratification. The King and Hamsatti, however, plot the murder of Nikia instead which interferes with the High Brahmin's desire. Her death is avenged finally as the gods set the temple on fire where the marriage of Solor and Hamsatti was to take place, and the two lovers are reunited in heaven.[7] Apparently, the Prince of Wales's 1875-76 visit to India provided inspiration, directly connecting colonization with 'creative' inspiration (Wiley 1990, 292).

La Bayadère demonstrates all the distinct dimensions of an opera that exhibits an oriental theme as described by French musicologist Hervé Lacombe: "the visual spectacle (costume, stage sets, and production); the libretto (not only the plot but also its characters and literary form); and the music" (Lacombe and Glidden 1999, 135-36). The stage directions with which the 1877 libretto begins, indicate that *La Bayadère* is set in India, perhaps satisfying the desire to visit 'strange' and 'exotic' places from the comfort of one's seat in the theatre:

> *The stage represents a consecrated forest; branches of bananas, amras, madhavis, and other Indian trees are intertwined. At the left is a pond designated for ablutions. In the distance, the peaks of the Himalayas.* (Act 1, Scene 1 – The Festival of Fire)

But the specific historical context of impossible desire has been erased in the ballet by invoking transcendental, essentialized stereotypes. Specifically, in the context of the tradition of the temple dancer, the collusion of *Brāhmaṇical* Hinduism and feudalism that was crucial in propagating and sustaining this caste-gendered norm, is only used as a trope to indicate the setting and no more. The King and the High Brahmin are presented to the audience as "The Two Rivals." They represent, respectively, feudal and religious power and the binary conflict between the two drives the plot. However, this struggle veils the elite collusion that dominated the material reality of the world which *La Bayadère*, however superficially, gestures at. *La Bayadère* thus continues to melodramatically exploit the romantic possibilities in the figure of the essentialized Oriental 'public' woman. Nikia, the Temple Dancer, articulates her transgressive agency in rejecting the socially and religiously powerful suitor, the High Brahmin.

The specific location of *La Bayadère* is made apparent in the libretto from Act I Scene 1 itself through a vocabulary of caste:

> The wealthy Kshatriya Solor (a famous warrior) enters with a bow in his hand… The doors of the pagoda open and from the temple the Great Brahmin emerges triumphantly; behind him follow *munis* (monastic wise men), *rsi* (seers), *bramacarins* (Indian priests), and finally *gurus* in long linen garments. The priests wear [pendants made of] cords on their foreheads—a sign of brahminesque rank. From the pagoda also emerge *devadasis* (bayadères of the first rank).[8]

And as Roland John Wiley (1990, 291) notes, Marius Petipa was assisted by "Sergei Nikolaevich Khudekov… in the formulation of the libretto of *La Bayadère* and who may have been responsible for the inclusion (and possible misuse) of Indian lore and Sanskrit terms." Caste, a stratifying social system propagated by arguments of its divine origin, justifies material and hierarchical extraction of land, labour and rights which still dominate 'modern' India despite increasing Dalit and feminist assertions.[9] The male and self-defined 'upper' caste *Brāhmaṇ* has emerged as the hegemonic custodian of *śāstraik*/official avatar of Hinduism, propagating caste-hierarchy and validating his power on the strength of Sanskrit texts that were forbidden to women and the *Śūdras* (the *Brāhmaṇically* oppressed 'lower' castes). The elite *Savarna* groups – the *Brāhmaṇs* and those who accept *Brāhmaṇical* Hinduism – argue that the four castes (*varnas*) were created by the great god *Prajāpatī*: the *Brāhmaṇ* (priest), the *Kṣatriya* (ruler/warrior), the *Vaiṣya* (peasant and trader) and the

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Śūdra (serf). Upholding the *varṇāśrama dharma* (the order of caste) and land grants to *Brāhmaṇ*s who in turn ideologically strengthened the rhetoric of kingship, were popular material practices of the monarchical system. The relationship between the supposed sacral and material realms of power was not a simple one, but one of negotiations and contestations—though they usually came together against the Other: women and *Dalits*. This collusion was also instrumental in propagating the tradition of temple dancing.

Produced at a moment when Europe, and Russia, was invested in defining the nation as part of its political aspiration. Like other cultural genres, "regional dances and dance types were selected, stylized and developed into symbols of the 'national character' of a given country in order to serve ideological unification… according to the ideology and aesthetics of the urban elite" (Giurchescu and Torp 1991, 2). Boundaries, in the process, were drawn between cultures and nations. Imperialism, patriarchy, class, and heterosexuality that define culture in this context is mediated through the signifying practice of persuasive movements whereby power is inscribed in the body.

II. Cast(e)ing Reform: Indian Temple Dancers and the Kingdom of the Shades

The Bayadère's Death; The Appearance of the Shade; The Kingdom of the Shades

In this section, I look at a brief history of the Indian temple dancers and the reconstruction of their dance *sādir* to the "classical" Bharatanatyam. Through this, I argue, *La Bayadère*'s reductive figuration of the temple dancer refracts the reality of its Indian world in a way that was perhaps not intended: *La Bayadère*'s King and the High Brahmin too try to suppress the subaltern agency of the Temple Dancer, seeing her only as an object of non-consensual sexual gratification sanctioned by religious tradition. But the fate of the temple dancer contested over by a King and a *Brāhmaṇ* draws a veil over their collusion in the oppressive system, an "ambivalent and creative moment of encounter that [ultimately] renders its object unrecognizable" (Clayton and Zon 2007, 2).

The writing of South Asian dance history has undergone many shifts within the last few decades. Dance scholar Prarthana Purkayastha (2018) has identified the three major trends that resulted in a new kind of writing of dance history: its treatment as an interdisciplinary project; engagement with transnationalism by looking at dance as a melding of cultures as opposed to arguments of "authenticity;" and the questioning of ideological constructions that leave out certain bodies from the writing of history itself. It is in this context that I focus on the checkered history of temple-dancing and its polyphonic resonance. It gestures at the changing custody of dance forms, the caste, class, gendered connotations of performance, and the ideational re-cognition as well as practices of dance pressed in the service of defining a nation's present, as well as its past. In the context of dance in India, it is "commonly acknowledged in South Asian scholarship that the classical dance forms of India are actually early twentieth-century reconstructions of indigenous movement forms" (Purkayastha 2014, 6). The reformulation of *sādir* of the *devadasī*s into the Bharatanatyam and the *tawāif*'s dance from the feudal courts of North India, with traces of the Sufi dervish influence of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, into Kathak are two representative examples of elite appropriation and re-form.

The commerce between the *śāstrik* and the *laukika* realms is always a mark of the politics of the period and this trafficking that constructs elitism and sanctions legitimacy in society, crucially impacting its caste-gendered norms. The terms *śāstrik and laukika* approximate the concepts, in Anglophone lexicon, of the classical and the folk. The *śāstrik* derives from *śāstra*, as in an order or a precept associated with a body of teaching in general but more commonly with the Sanskrit scriptures from whose scholarly pursuit women and those labeled as *Śūdra* were systematically prohibited. In

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contrast, the *laukika* traditions are understood as temporal, secular (as against scriptural or sacral) or pertaining to the quotidian life of the *lok*, or the people. However, "the terms do not refer to stable and hermetically sealed practices" (Sengupta 2013, 10). Selected *laukika* practices, rituals, deities, dances have also been usurped and given *śāstrik* sanction within culture and thus what is considered *śāstrik* today may have had the *laukika* as its original impulse. Hence, they are not reductive binaries but rather "a continuum of forms, the endpoints of which may look like terms in opposition (Ramanujan 1991, 33). Theoretical concepts such as Hinduization, Aryanization and Sanskritization are partial attempts to understand these processes of insidious, often *Brāhmaṇical*, coercions. The problematic of caste becomes crucial here.

While temple dancers were written about by Europeans from the thirteenth century, the Sanskrit term for them, *devadāsī*, made its first appearance in European literature in "one of the *Lettres Édifiantes et Curieuses* (1713), in which a Jesuit missionary mentions that he baptised such a divine slave" (Bor 2007, 45). Embedded in the phrase 'temple dancer' is the social reality of a particular systemic class, caste, and gendered oppression. This system is sanctioned through the religious authority of the *Brāhmaṇ*s in collusion with the Kings who wielded feudal power, and not collision as Petipa's ballet suggests. The classically static representation of *La Bayadère* prevents the exposure of the tradition of Hindu temple dancers as hegemonic investment by caste-patriarchy. The hyphenated equation is important as gender and caste hierarchies within Hinduism are intertwined—the ideology of caste purity is premised on birth and thus the need to place the wombs of 'upper' caste women under strict surveillance even as the wombs of the 'lower' caste women are held to be porous, justifying the play of 'upper' caste male libido (Chakravarti 1993, 579). The oppressive linguistic connotations, upper and lower, indicate the ideologically embedded exploitative nature of these relationships.[10]

The temple dancer—the *devadāsī* or the female servant/slave of a god—is a generic term for "the female temple ritualist in India, who, among other duties, entertains the temple deity through music and dance" (Shah 2003, 125). The word *devadāsī* signifies a wide range of practices pertaining to gender, class, and caste hierarchies that sanctioned sexual exploitation of women, especially from the deprived sections of society. Though one must acknowledge that it did indeed also grant them a limited degree of recognition as a professional in the name of Hindu tradition.[11] The agency of the *devadāsī*s is ambiguous. Products of sexual exploitation embedded within the ideological and material practices of *Brāhmaṇical* Hinduism, they existed outside the domestic economy of normative conjugality and yet received, with sharply varying degrees, economic recognition in terms of payment and patronage from their male, often 'upper' class and caste, patrons. They were not bound by the norms of patrifocal kinship and lived in quasi-matrilineal communities; they "had non-conjugal sexual relationships with upper-caste men, and were literate when most South Indian women were not. On the other hand, records from centres of political power… document the fact that courtesans were commodities regularly bought and sold through the intercession of the court" (Soneji 2011, 3). Yet at the same time their incorporation into temple service also committed them "to the rigorous emotional and physical training in the classical dance, [as their] hereditary profession; their legal rights also entitled them to adopt daughters and pass property on to their female descendants" (Srinivasan 1985). The association with temple rituals also earned the *devadāsī*s some modicum of respect.

The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act was enacted in October 1947, two months after India's independence. Abolishing the *devadāsī* custom, the Act drowned the voices of the members of the *devadāsī* community whose 'rescue' also meant the removal of the only section of the oppressed communities given traditional entry in the *Brāhmaṇ* dominated temples. The *devadāsī*s were marginalized even in the revival of the temple dance, or *sadir*, that debuted in the 1930s, reinvented as the classical and traditional dance form of Bharatanatyam in the custody of the national elite. This is a significant moment of transition in Indian dance as the chastised dance of the *devadāsī*s, the *sadir*, mutated into the classical Bharatanatyam in the hands of its new custodian:

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the caste and class elite of the new nation, that edged out and estranged the *devadāsī*s further from their own art.

It is this removal that also traumatized the *devadāsī* community. Unfortunately, in certain cases, the men of the oppressed caste groups from whom many of the *devadāsī*s were drawn also disowned their passionate attachment to dance and music to safeguard their caste honor, as the restrictions imposed upon women is a crucial mark of caste hierarchy and mobility. The effect of democracy and modernization in the Indian decolonized state, as it relates to the *devadāsī*s, thus has tragic overtones. On the one hand, they have been rescued from sexual exploitation at the hands of temple priests and male patrons, but, on the other, their lifestyle has been criminalized on the basis of their non-conjugal sexuality. The hereditary and traditional artistic abilities of the *devadāsī*s were taken over by the elite and bourgeois practitioners of classical Indian dance forms in yet another instance of exploitation and extraction of subaltern groups. As Anusha Kedhar succinctly argues, "[t]he reinvention of bharata natyam in the 20th century was a casteist project. It was based on the exclusion and erasure of hereditary dancing women and the extraction of their dance forms from their bodies. Only after hereditary dancers were removed could Brahmin women take their place as surrogates and, eventually, knowledge-bearers of the art form" (2020, 17).

The closure of Petipa's ballet of 1877, across more than a century of the productions, mystifies the *devadāsī*s' integration in society, occludes the possibility of romantic relationships across class and caste boundaries, and erases the contribution of the temple dancer to the vibrancy of an art form.

In the context of *La Bayadère*, Act II Scene iii begins at the King's palace:

> *The stage represents the façade of the rajah's palace from the side of a garden, with masses of huge flowers and broad-leaved trees… In the background, the light blue of the heavens themselves. The Himalayas are thinly covered with silvery snow.*

> At the rise of the curtain the great procession of Badrinata is in progress. Brahmins pass, then four classes of bayadères… finally pagoda servants, various Indian cases, and others… The rajah, his daughter, Solor and other rich Indians are brought in on palanquins…

The *mise-en-scène* of the betrothal celebration of Solor and princess Hamsatti (known popularly as Gamzatti), as staged by Bolshoi 2013, Mariinsky Theatre 2014, Classical Ballet and Opera House of Mari El 2021 for instance, is still filled with *divertissements* that try to show all things 'Indian': palanquins, tigers, elephants, parrots, and "natives," the staple representation of an undifferentiated and exoticized East. It has been argued that "the realism of ballet action is in the realm of poetic generalizations" (Petrov and Scholl 1992, 45) but surely generalizations, selections and marginalizations are always an effect of the power/knowledge nexus. Petipa's ballet "shares with magic and with mythology the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are *because* they are for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter" (Said 1978, 70). The world of the temple-dancer in *La Bayadère* is, in short, a world without history and agency. It is the Orientalized eastern world of essences where the temple dancer is held as an object of the male gaze in perpetuity: "At the end of the dances, the rajah commands the beautiful Nikia to come in, and orders her to entertain the public…" It is during this dance that Nikia is "gifted" a basket from Hamsatti. From the basket emerges a snake, its venomous bite kills Nikia, who even upon death declares her love for Solor, "'Farewell Solor! I love you! I die innocent!' These are the bayadère's last words, after which she falls and dies. The rajah and his daughter triumph." In this, Nikia articulates her transgressive agency in rejecting the socially powerful suitor and in her final expression of love for Solor. It is after this that the lovers are

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ultimately reunited in heaven in Scene 5, The Kingdom of the Shades: "*An enchanted place. Soft, harmonious music is heard.*"[12] Many performances use the hookah as a tool to explain Solor's entrance into the Kingdom of the Shades. In the original libretto, Fakir's "comic" dance precedes Solor's grief ridden dream, in which he meets Nikia again.

The Kingdom of the Shades is recognized as emblematic of Petipa's then emerging style, drawn from "Gustave Doré's illustrations of *Paradise* from *Dante*'s *Divine Comedy*, with groups of ethereal angels" (Anderson 2015, 45). The dance takes from French Romanticism and transforms it into a formal Russian idiom, like the Sylphs and Wilis, with women in white tutus. The *corps de ballet* presenting the Kingdom of the Shades, originally sixty-four dancers, enter one by one and follow the motif of repeated linear choreographic compositions. Using the simple *arabesque*, the *corps* transforms the stage to one of solemn interiority. Moving away from the tropes of 'exotic' India, we witness a more formal Russian and "Christian" idiom: no longer earthy, 'lowborn' or oriental but "completely classical… as if the classical dance style is what stands for goodness" (Siegel 1980, 412). The base alloy of the Indian/eastern context and images are thus transcended to the paradise of western understanding through the movements of classical Russian ballet. Thus, Nikia and *La Bayadère* are cleansed of Oriental "sinuous curves" and become completely western and classical (Siegel 1980, 412).

The project of modernization, as it touches the *devadāsī*s, in colonized and later independent India, is complicated by the conflicted interests of those who spearheaded the project. The surveillance of sexual morality in British India formed a major part of the reform movements from the nineteenth century. This was shaped from a wide range of interests: the missionary's zealous proclamation of Christian spirituality over the way of all Indian flesh, the Victorian values of separate spheres and the English educated Indian indoctrination of the same, the emerging nationalist Indian claim of the purity of the Hindu woman representing the cultural superiority of the colonized over the colonizers. Collectively, in the context of the temple dancer, it led to a bitter battle between tradition and modernity: "Of all the Hindu practices that the British invoked to mark their moral superiority to their Indian subjects, 'temple prostitution' may well have been the most notorious after the predations of the so-called 'thugs' and the self-immolation of widows" (Spear and Meduri 2004, 437). The Anti-Nautch Movement (a corruption of the Hindi term *nāch*/dance), urging the abolition of all ceremonies and procedures by which young girls were dedicated as *devadāsī*s to Hindu temples, was later led largely by educated and elite Indians.

The expression of her love for Solor insidiously suggests the dominant notion of feminine 'virtue' as available to women outside of their socio-historical conditions. Yet, the closure of death and the subsequent dream sequence mystify her agency and integration in society. Appearing untouched by history, the characters of the ballet continue to be arrested in iconographic Orientalist manner of patriarchal persuasion. The reform and reinvention cast shadows upon the lived reality of a social group who were essentialized as either pious protectors of culture or as unchaste, sexualized creatures. Petipa's Shades, too, refract this representation. The reality of the *devadāsī*s and their orientalist representation in *La Bayadère*'s, a justified *telos* of removal, reveal how "all transcendental cultural logic is, at its heart, imperialistic" (Spivak 1999, 334).

III. Vakthang Chabukiani's [Orientalist] Insertion

The Bronze Idol

In this section, I look at the insertion of the Bronze Idol made by Vakhtang Chabukiani (1910-1992), for many contemporary renditions of *La Bayadère* follow his revised structure. The insertions, made in the 1940s, open the semiotic field for an Orientalist Other, revivifying it in terms of misdirected religious symbolism. The Bronze Idol (sometimes also referred to as the Golden Idol), was danced

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and choregraphed by Nikolai Zubkovsky. Interestingly, this addition was made in 1948—one year after India gained Independence from British colonization of over 200 years. This male solo, a prelude in Act II to the final Kingdom of the Shades, has been retained in most subsequent productions. The solo is an exemplar of male virtuosity in ballet with high jumps, *grand jétés en manèges*, *pirouettes* and *entralacés*, "poses [that] closely resemble Ted Shawn's *Siva* from many years before…" as has been pointed out by the scholar and musicologist, Daniel Albright (2009, 183).

A discernible shift from the ballet's orginial lexicon is how the soloist's fingers seem to be imitating *mudrā*s that are central to Indian classical dance forms where the symbolic enactments are part of *āṅgikābhinaya* or representational physical motion. *Mudrā*s, marked and well defined, communicate meaning. Their rigorous codification is indicated by the devotion of four chapters, VIII to XI, to gestures of which Chapter IX is devoted to those of hands alone in the Sanskrit dramaturgical treatise *Nātyaśāstra*, redacted in its present state possibly by the second century CE. In the inserted Bronze Idol variation however, the fingers remain static; predominantly the thumb and index finger are joined as opposed to the customary ballet gesture in which the thumb is closed towards the palm and the middle finger is slightly more forward than the other three. But the introduction of this hybridity in a postcolonial world, remains superficial as its fault-lines are still the sweeping, indifferent, and ideologically suspect generalizations.

In productions as recent as 2019, accompanying dancers/children appear in black/brownface to represent the Indian Other. The Idol himself, whose skin is covered fully in golden paint, follows the entry of "native" children, often called the "Dance of the Blackamoors." Dressed brown or blackface, children wearing dark-colored costumes and stockings present an image of dark arms and legs to introduce the solo. The Bolshoi Ballet had their dancers dressed in blackface and shared a photo on their Instagram page as recently as 2019. The photograph was reposted by Misty Copeland, principal dancer of the American Ballet Theater, Misty Copeland with the simple caption, "🤦🏾‍♀️ And this is the reality of the ballet world…" indicating how work remains to be done.[13] And yet, in the response to criticism, Bolshoi Theatre director Vladimir Urin and ballet dancers defended the decision:

> "Finding some sort of deep insults in this is simply ridiculous," Mr Urin said. "No-one has ever complained to us or saw… an act of disrespect." Russian ballerina Svetlana Zakharova told broadcaster Moscow 24: "There is nothing strange here, it's absolutely normal for us… this is art."[14]

This use of blackface is steeped in centuries of racism, peaking in popularity in the United States during the Civil Rights Movement of the post-World War II era. Blackface, the tragic reminder of slavery in the United States, was used as a theatrical method, to repeat, reinforce, and rationalize racial segregation throughout the Jim Crow era. The fact that this so-called "theatrical method" has been recycled by Russian classical ballet directors in the twenty-first century signals ballet's coercive relationship to state-sanctioned hatred, and reinforces the continued exclusion and stereotyping of Others, in this case of 'Hindu' India.

Though initially inspired by the Hindu god *Śiva*, *in* many contemporary productions of *La Bayadère*, the Bronze Idol appears to be based on the Buddha, apparent from the huge image that towers over the dancers. The invocation of Siddhartha Gautama, who founded Buddhism sometime between the late sixth and early fourth century BCE, is an anachronistic choice for a ballet whose location is the Hindu temple. This conflation of religious imagery is especially misleading given that Buddhism began as a religion that critiqued the authority of the *Veda*s, the expensive and elaborate rituals of *Brāhmaṇical* Hinduism, and its discriminating regulations of the caste system. Despite contradictory perceptions regarding female nature and sexuality, Buddhism also envisaged female lives outside subjugation in marriage and permitted their ordaining as nuns. This is in stark contrast to the seminal caste-Hindu argument that "a woman cannot sacrifice or undertake a vow or fast; it is

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because a wife obeys her husband that she is exalted to heaven" (*Manusmriti* V: 155). On the subject of Buddhism, Romila Thapar, a foremost historian of ancient India, points out "that women could be lay followers and patrons which allowed them a more assertive role. For example, the cities of the Ganges plain, boasted of accomplished courtesans, some of whom gave munificent gifts to the Buddhist Sangha/order" (2002, 169-70). Āmbapālī/ Āmrapālī of Vaiśālī, the court dancer—a sister figuration of the temple dancer in some ways, across the secular-sacral divide—is cited as a legendary *ganikā* (public woman), a state-appointed institutionalized position different from the *veśyā* (ordinary sex-worker), in the Pali *Vinaya Piṭaka* (4 BCE-1 CE). She is popularly remembered, and celebrated, as having loved the emperor Ajātśattu/Ajātśatru (492-460 BCE) and taking refuge finally in Buddhism as a courtesan-turned-*bhikṣuṇī* (woman monastic). The court dancer's life, with this *telos*, has been told and retold in the popular Hindi films by Nandlal Jaswantlal in 1945 and Lekh Tandon in 1966. But in the world of *La Bayadère*, the temple dancer continues to dance, and die, erotically performing an orientalist persuasion. Ironically, this happens in the presence of the Buddha, as intimated through the Bronze Idol, who had critiqued *Brāhmaṇical* Hinduism.

IV. Closures, Challenges, Continuity

Alexandra Carter's argument about the role of the historian in *Rethinking Dance History*, provides an encouraging insight: "'History is a shifting discourse constructed by historians and… from the existence of the past no one reading is entailed: change the gaze, shift the perspective and new readings appear' (Jenkins 1991: 14). This is what can make the study of dance history so vital; it is not just that new sources are found which lead us to reformulate our accounts, but new ways of looking, 'shifting perspectives' which can offer new readings of old sources" (2018, 117). As an Indian ballet dancer, I have not had many opportunities to access texts that spoke to both parts of my identity. It is in this context that I found it necessary to look at the past in an attempt to move forward and bring together worlds that seem more disparate than they perhaps are.

The cognition and evaluation of dance is embedded in the social histories of thought and culture. How should diverse identities, agencies, and trajectories be performed today? A conversation with Phil Chan, co-founder of Final Bow for Yellowface, in September 2025 was revealing. We talked about *Star on the Rise: La Bayadère… Reimagined!* which premiered at Indiana University in March 2024. Chan, along with Doug Fullington, removes the ballet from royal India entirely and brings it to Hollywood's Golden Age. Leading me through his creative process, Chan spoke of how possibilities can emerge when starts to imagine alternate worlds in which we live and dance:

> The question became is it possible for this work, that is inherently Eurocentric, is it possible for this work to be set in India? My answer, as a creative was no. So, then the question to me was *what else could it be*? [emphasis mine]

The ballet, reconstructed from Petipa's 1900 notations, is now a romantic comedy instead of the original tragedy and follows rising stars, backstage of musicals and casting studios; "the Golden Idol is now an Oscar award… Kingdom of the Shades becomes an Art Deco fantasy à la Busby Berkeley" (Sims 2024). The creative formulations and cultivation of a movement vocabulary that can still be *La Bayadère* without being a caricature of Indian culture presents a powerful mode of postcolonial performance with dance as the interface between history, ideology, and representation. The politics of differences, embedded in dance, alerts one to inequalities and in the process the estranged margins of our own societies are illumined; revealing the networks of power, desire and interest that sanction the extraction of subaltern labor in worlds colonized *and* decolonized.

The cultural field of dance, thus, requires constant rewriting of narratives and characters, constant revisioning of sets and costumes, and constant re-engagements with both form and content. And

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while they may continue to be embedded in residual practices and significations, newer works can—must—discover and give rise to new modes of representation.

I return to my initial question: if I were to play an Indian character on stage would I want it to be from *La Bayadère?*

Perhaps it is time to start looking elsewhere…

Notes

1. Diacritical marks have been used for words in Indian languages. I have retained the spellings as used in quotations and of character names in non-Indian texts (e.g., I will be using *Brāhmaṇ* as the appropriate spelling when referring to the caste group while the character 'High Brahmin' will remain spelt the way it has been intended).

2. Apparently first used by British Officer Arthur Connolly, "the phrase was found in his papers and quoted by a historian of the First Afghan War. Rudyard Kipling made it famous in *Kim*… Rival intelligence services are what some writers mean by the Great Game; others use the phrase in a broader sense… to describe the whole of the Anglo-Russian quarrel about the fate of Asia." David Fromkin, "The Great Game in Asia," *Foreign Affairs* 58 (4): 936-51.

3. For instance, Matthew Bourne's 1996 reinterpretation of the original *Swan Lake* where both the Prince and the Swan are male, addressing the conceptions of hetero-normativity and masculinity within classical ballet.

4. Premised on Gramscian Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Adorno's argument of culture as a product for mass consumption, and the Foucauldian nexus of knowledge and power.

5. In this my reading, foregrounding historical relationships of power differs significantly from those who argue for the "the superficiality of the colonized/colonizer binary" in favour of "the heterogeneity of the imperial encounter" (Engelhardt 2014, 510).

6. All references to the libretto of *The Pharoah's Daughter* are from Vernoy de Saint-Georges and Marius Petipa, *The Pharoah's Daughter* (1862), English translation by Roland John Wiley in *A Century of Russian Ballet: Documents and Accounts, 1810-1910*, 1990: 220-33.

7. Act IV "The God's Wrath" is often left out of contemporary renditions that are derived from Vladimir Ponomarev and Vakhtang Chabukiani's redacted version (1941).

8. All references to the libretto of *La Bayadère* are from Marius Petipa and Sergei Nikolaevich Khudekov, *La Bayadère* (1877), English translation by Roland John Wiley in *A Century of Russian Ballet: Documents and Accounts, 1810-1910*, 1990: 291-304.

9. The self-defining term Dalit meaning downtrodden, oppressed, and exploited, is used with political consciousness instead of "lower" caste.

10. The emerging usage is *Savarna* and *Dalit* but 'upper' and 'lower' are still used, and indicate the persistent oppression.

11. There is no absolute certainty as to the original moment of the emergence of the temple dancers though the religious sanction for the sexual exploitation of women is ritually and textually evident from the ancient Indian period onwards. The religious ritualistic vow, *Anaṅgadānavrata*, for instance, involves the 'public' woman's offering of herself to a *Brāhmaṇ* and the *Atharvaveda*, a layered text of eleventh to ninth century BCE, is cited as one of its sources (Kane 1958/2006, 256). Sukumari Bhattacharji, an eminent scholar of female lives in ancient India, has pointed out that while by the later *Vedic* age (eighth or seventh century BCE, approximately) there are references to a more regularized form of prostitution, "temple dancers do not appear before the last few centuries BCE and are mentioned frequently in the early centuries A.D. in some regions" (1987, 35). In the medieval period, the emergence of monarchy helped consolidate the colluding forces of religious-legitimation and feudal-state power and there are increasing instances of royal patronage for temple dancers from across India. A.L. Basham summarizes that "in the Middle Ages the god in his

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temple was treated like an earthly king; he had his wives… and… his attendant prostitutes. These were often the children of mothers of the same profession, born and reared in the temple precincts, but they might be daughters of ordinary citizens, given in childhood to the god as pious offerings" (1954/2004, 185).

12. According to [Greskovic 1998/2005, 374], "Petipa called for a more shadowy, moonlit realm in 1900."

13. https://www.instagram.com/p/B5zGh5cjbmI/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=dcfa99f8-c233-4adb-b105-ad6fe0c1ba6b&img_index=1

14. No byline. "Russia's Bolshoi rejects Misty Copeland's 'blackface' criticism", (16 December 2019), BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50807742

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