

## THE RHETORIC OF CHOREOGRAPHY IN MOHINIYATTAM

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### ABSTRACT

This article looks at the few possibilities of choreography with respect to rhetoric in Mohiniyattam, the feminine dance form of Kerala. Performed nowadays by both men and women, the representation styles of the dance form have changed over the decades. Unlike other dance forms, this dance form thrived in the matrilineal system of a patriarchal society and it cannot be studied like the other dance forms of India. It had a secular purpose and over the years, the representational styles have become unique. From different schools of practice to different practitioners, the dissemination and delineation also varies. The article looks at the different elements of choreography that the artform has adapted.

**Keywords:** Mohiniyattam, Lasya, Rhetoric, Choreography.

### INTRODUCTION

Mohiniyattam, unlike the dance forms of Bharatanatyam or Kathakali is more a perspective of different symbols than a structured conclusive system built through centuries of schools of practice called sampradāyā-s. Despite all the changes and derivations, the dance form has endured. It did have various practitioners even prior to the arts institution Kerala Kalamandalam where the artforms were revived and nurtured post-independence. They performed a technique and a repertoire very different from what culminated as a derived repertoire in Kerala Kalamandalam in the 1950s. This is evident because we have had statements of practitioners who studied under various naṭṭuvanār-s or dance teachers, and each had a different formula for the artform. The training imparted by famous yesteryear trainers like Ayyappa Panikker āśān was very different from that of Krishna Panikker āśān. It is also believed that Ayyappa Panikker āśān was very unhappy with what he saw in Kerala Kalamandalam and what had been reconstructed under the guidance of the pioneer Mahakavi Vallathahol. He felt it was the residual of the dark age that had existed previously.

### Dark Age

It would be worthwhile to bring to one's notice the cartoon published in the year 1940 by Viswaroopam Magazine illustrated by M. Bhaskaran in which the Mohiniyattam dancer is seen dancing amongst men (See Plate 1). The illustration, which caught public attention after researcher Justin Lemos published it in her thesis 'Bracketing Lasya', was a criticism against Mahakavi Vallathol who was trying to revive the dance form during the period. It was a period in history when the dance form was also considered 'dis'graceful. The woman in the picture, from her attire and ambience to the body deflection and raised legs, was everything that a dancer was not to be. Vallathol took upon himself the responsibility to reconstruct Mohiniyattam. He discarded everything that would remotely suggest immorality. What one sees today is this resurrected dance and it is less than seventy years old.



Plate1: Cartoon in Viswaroopam Magazine 1940  
Author: Sanjayan, Illustration: M. Bhaskaran



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The caption is roughly translated from Malayalam as: It is unfortunate that while Mahakavi Vallathol congratulates the Cochin Government for re-implementing dasiyattam, he fails to see the lecherous men who hide behind each dancer.

Evidence shows that nair women who performed in upper-caste households to find themselves suitable marital alliances practiced Mohiniyattam in the Palakkad- Trissur belt. There are references to it being nurtured in the background of facilitating the sambandham or an informal matrilineal alliance, which could be broken at will. The system promoted polyandrous behavior. With the rise of English-educated social reformers, laws were enforced to establish monogamy through the reframing of Nair Marriage Act. The dance in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries thus connoted notoriety and dancers having become symbols of a dark socio-political milieu, receded to anonymity. There is also an incident of dancers being pelted with stones in the 1940s in Trissur. Therefore, Vallathol at the Kerala Kalamandalam chiselled out a new artform with new objectives and symbolisms. And by doing so, little did he know that he had not only liberated the dancer but had amplified the potential of the dance form.

### The Dancer and her Narrative

The dancer's function also changed greatly from what she did in the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century. If she had to entertain then, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century her role was more of being a proponent of an evolved artform that had the many layers of Indian-ness or the indigenous in it. The prosceniums changed too. Art enthusiasts and intellectuals replaced the former audience. Connotations of dance as a profession changed too. The purpose changed with the spaces. Secular pieces like mukukkutti, chandanam and ēśal were replaced with the repertoire dynamic of Bharatanatyam like chollukettu, kīrtanam, jathiswaram, varnum, padam and thillāna. Three decades later the dances like kaṇḍuka nrittam and dramatic performances were revived. The poets like the Thirunals, Thambis and Acchis ruled the roost with their compositions of padams and varnums soaked in sringāra. The delineation was more first handed and padārtha than getting into nuances. If the previous dancers were participants in a voyeuristic objective, the new Mohiniyattam dancers were in pursuit of an artistic discipline without the setbacks of a previous social subtext. Restraint became a requisite tool for body kinesics and emotional delineations. Sringāra was reinterpreted as divine love. The compositions of Maharaja Swathi Thirunal and Irayimman Thambi had enough tapestry to weave love and longing. They incorporated the aspect of complete surrender of the woman for her man albeit in the garb of the devotee for the divine. The woman continued to exude beauty. Only this time lāsya or 'grace' replaced the term 'seduction'. In conclusion, the dancer had the distinctive freedom to be sensuous without being sensual.

### Simultaneous Repertoire

With the awareness that there is an extensive acting technique that exists in Kerala, practitioners didn't want to lose out on the opportunity to build the artforms taking clues from the indigenous forms. From first hand narrative, the dancer also brought in acting elements and adapted epic literature and poetry into Mohiniyattam other than the usual repertoire very early on. The dance form was newborn and the transmission of knowledge was not therefore based entirely on replication and there was scope to probe forwards and backwards in time. Towards the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars like Kavalam Narayana Panikker chose to veer towards primitivism by adapting folk rhythms and images. There was urge to return to the pure and natural and yet what was pure no one knew for lack of concrete data prior to 18<sup>th</sup> century. People searched for inspiration from elsewhere. Although misrepresentation was a part of appropriation, dancers still reveled in the uninhibited sways and created new content, movement and pedagogy. Others strengthened the artform on the foundation of ancient knowledge systems. Proximity to teachers and practitioners nurtured students who imitated them even if they didn't study directly under them. One saw myriad versions of the dance form, and every dancer was a modus operandi herself. Women are now celebrated as dancers and men have taken interest to practicing the artform. Mohiniyattam dancer still tries to follow usual intelligible designs however avant-garde she may be.

### NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN TRADITIONAL CHOREOGRAPHY

The narrative techniques are determined by the structural semantic rhetoric of a composition through a process of addition, deletion, editing or amplification. Rhetoric is the art of effective dancing through the exploitation of words or idea in the text or music or both and designing a compositional technique. The narrative technique of Mohiniyattam has been stylized and adapted from other dances, rituals and theatre. Most of our textual traditions and their background are older than the dance form itself. In dance we don't have a manual unlike the acting manuals called āṭṭaparakarām-s in the ritualistic Koodiyattam. Initially what was found in choreography in the early repertoire of Mohiniyattam was a choreography that was focused on the dance movement and the structural aspects of choreography vis-à-vis music rather than on the articulation of a story. So, if you had a ślōka or a padam or a varnum, it was more on a dehumanized focus on movement not very divorced from meaning but without a plot. But with time, there was increased awareness in musical nuances and in the aesthetic analogies of poetry and metaphor that was so vibrant in the other dance theatre forms of Kerala. One can observe below what has basically triggered narratives in Mohiniyattam.



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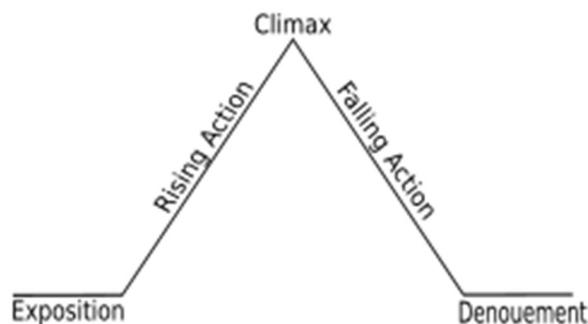
## Music Triggers

This is when the choreography is entirely based on the structure of the song or composition that is taken for choreography. The movements itself are organized in the same manner as the musical structure and whenever there are lyrics there is representation of lyrics. In music, the location of the narrator, and the nature of the narrative act, is complex and potentially ambiguous unlike something that is written in a novel. If in compositions like cholukettu or jathiswaram, one moves with the exact song, the dancer also has the freedom to further add her own rhythmic patterns juxtaposed to the rhythmic phrases already in the composition. Also, the variety of music involved also has dictated the elaboration and expression of gestures and movement. If one has taken Keralite rhythms, then the narrative again is different. The dancer decides on repetition and elaboration either taking cues from the music or from her own aesthetic compulsions.

## Poetic/Dramatic Triggers

These are narratives dictated by the poetic quality of the lyrics. Here the dancer not only explicates through mere representation but goes further ahead in explicating the suggested meaning or vyangyārtha of the poetry. It includes an element of aesthetic consciousness into our literary appreciation. It is a perfect blend of linguistics and semiotics. And it could determine whether the dancer would need to go for a linear, fractured, framed or circular narrative. As the repertoire of Mohiniyattam widened to include poetry and verses from epics, the dancers became more aware of their position as mere narrators to being conscious actors also. Yet in character parts, the performer has to be imaginatively and critically aware of the dance in terms of dramatic and narrative aspects. The basic canvas still has to be dance. The dancer here has the freedom to absorb the literature and perhaps even bring in new narratives. Dancers examine the psychological and social nature of the narrative process.

The dancer can choose if she would like to follow diegetic or a mimetic narrative. Diegetic means to report and mimetic is to perform and show the character. The dancer can choose either or both. The narrative techniques that she may use are myriad. She can choose to build stories within the frame story. Can choose to start from middle or start from the end going to flashbacks. She can choose to be talking in active voice or passive voice in her characterization or pakarnāṭṭam. For example, she could use the imaginative manōdharmic language, “he betrayed me”, or “I was betrayed.” Basically, there is a language other than the written language. Let’s see for example in a composition that has lyrics of a conversation between two people that happened in the past as a result of which a very crucial story unfolds. The dancer can choose to directly start with the conversation or bring in an element of introduction to the story as a narrator with new sub-text. It may not be in the lyrics, but she builds it. Just as the narrator in Koodiyattam called the cākṃyār does, she could play the audience surrogate or the author surrogate. And in every performance where dramatic action is at the fore there is a structure. Let’s see the structure from a pattern called Freytag’s analysis of dramatic narration.



Every story enacted must follow the above sequence. Exposition is what is conveyed through gestures, through dance dialogues, flashbacks or a backstory. The rising action builds it to the point of great interest resulting into a climax or the turning point of the incident after which there is a final outcome of the conflict in the falling action to something called denouements which creates a sense of normalcy to characters or catharsis or release or realization in the spectators. Just like drama in literature, the dancer creates a narrative technique with the text available. She can even create her own sub-text and music.

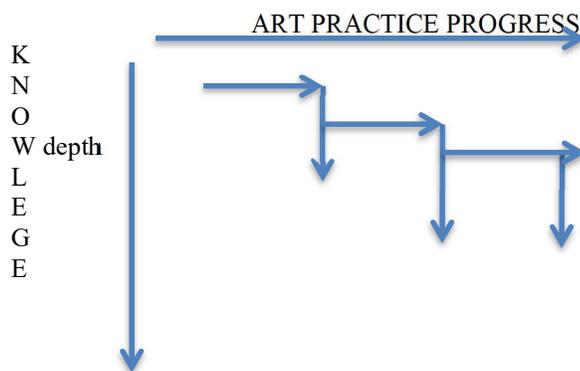
Some of the common narrative techniques used or that can be used in Mohiniyattam taking influence from Koodiyattam and Kathakali are the following:

- Frame story or the main story.
- Framing device or a single action, scene or event that bears significance to the entire story.
- Deciding the narrative hook as to what glues people on to the story.

- Starting the story in the middle of something.
- First, second- or third-person narration.
- Multiperspective narration, which is when a story is told from the perspective of various characters.
- Distanced or involved acting
- Stream of Consciousness voice as in what is done in manōdharma or imaginative acting. Also, when the character voice is the view-point voice.
- Narrative tense as to whether it is narrated in the historical present.
- Flashbacks and flash-forwards.
- Breaking the fourth wall as in when the character talks to the audience.
- Anthropomorphism, personification or pathetic fallacy of characters.
- Allegory, alliteration and amplification of the representation.

### Knowledge Triggers

Knowledge triggers are those where the choreography is based also on the wisdom a composition emits. The penchant for philosophy, aesthetics and social perspectives determine choreography. For example, in a padam, the dancer can choose to narrate in first person or choose to enter as the nāyika or even bring the second person sakhi onto the stage. In a kriti like Hiranmayīm which is a composition in praise of Goddess Lakshmi, the dancer can either bring in a story of Mahalakshmi or even better, the incident of the composer Deekshitar himself in what lead to his breaking into the song. The dancer can choose to be a philosophical narrator, audience narrator, author narrator or a social narrator. She can be satirical, or keep questions open ended. And when art practice is pursued with knowledge, it not only becomes deeper but it becomes more expansive.



### Experiential Triggers

These are choreographies that are an outcome of the dancer's experience and the response of what famed art authors like Philip Zarilli calls the 'lived body' to the content. Here it may not strictly adhere to norms, but is the natural response of the body to act or enact. What if one wanted to digress the fundamental concept of what is taught in class into terms like lāsya or srīngāra? What if one wanted to do themes that are not usually done in the repertoire? Tradition is ever changing and it has to incorporate and be inclusive. The narratives can be different yet sticking to what incorporates tradition.

### Semiotic Triggers

These are choreographic ideas based on what one wants to finally represent. What does the dancer want to represent through her work individually or in totality? It is greatly dependent on the platform where she performs. The semiotic of the dancer who danced mukkutti is not the same as the dancer who dances in temples today. It is different in different festivals and different spaces. The semiotics change with age, experience and knowledge also. What is the final message she wants to portray of herself and her dance is what matters? Her training, upbringing, familial background, support systems and all the background comes to fore. Traditional choreography may initially seem like an isolated phenomenon but there is relationship between the environment and choreographic work and the interrelationship of the dancer and society.

Just as in drama, narrative transportation takes place in Mohiniyattam also. For example, immersion in a kīrtanam, flow in the jāvali, being absorbed in a varnum each has a variety of experience. According to post-structural research, language's articulation in narrative format is capable not only of mirroring reality but also of constructing it. As such, stories could cause profound and durable persuasion of the transported story receiver as a result of his or her progressive internalization. When stories transport story receivers,



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not only do they present a narrative world but, by reframing the story receiver's language, they also durably change the world to which the story receiver returns after the transportation experience. Sleeper Effect is to describe this paradoxical property of narrative transportation over time, which consists of a more pronounced change in attitudes and intentions and a greater certainty that these attitudes and intentions are correct. Dance should not merely become a virtuoso technical exercise.

The dramatic experience is to come out of not only the solo dancer but the entire ensemble including musicians and audience. It reflects an inner reality to the outside world. It philosophises others and after a point the dancer. The dancer portrays her philosophy. And this keeps changing. The dances construct or shape the dancer's identity. The dancers discover themselves through the stories. And when they change them, they discover new stories.

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