

THE SIGNS OF THE BODY: MODERN DANCE AND MODERNITY IN DANCE: REVIEWING DANCE AS A REFLECTION OF MODERNITY

Mahmudul Hasan, Asst. Teacher in English, Diara HNM High School, Msd, West Bengal

Abstract:

Dance, a paradigm of performing arts, is basically a mode of reflexive bodily transmission that creates meanings through its particular and peculiar form. That form, as Sheets-Johnstone has asserted, exists in its own space and time. Dance merges the convention and the contemporary changing the theoretical perspectives of modernity. Even the concept of classical dance, an umbrella term for various performing arts and whose theory and practice being traced to the ancient scriptures, can be reassessed in a new light. This paper seeks to find out how dance, as a whole, is represented as a reflection of modernity, and is the focal medium of all arts aiming to reflect the modern technological age as an era determined by motion and action.

Keywords: *Art, Dance, Modern Dance, Modernity, Movement, Signs of the Body.*

In his essay “Le peintre de la vie modern” (1863) Charles Baudelaire connects the features of the temporary, the transient, and the fugitive to his concept of modernity: “By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” (Brandstetter 21). This pronouncement not only recognizes the norm for a definition of modernity, but concurrently relates the art of dance: the transitory, the ephemeral is an elemental, distinctive feature of dance as an overall revealing example of the performing arts. Contingency becomes a certain criterion of free dance after escaping from the aesthetic pattern of ballet the priority on chance, on spontaneity and the display of motion imagery as unpremeditated manifestation of feeling. Accordingly, dance incorporates a foundational pattern of aesthetics in modernity and as a result rises from its location at the lowest point of art's hierarchy to the highest.

Rabindranath Tagore's creation of a completely new dance style freed from the formulaic choreography and renderings of classical Indian dance. Tagore championed naturalistic rather than stylized exhibition, with the specified purpose of producing an aesthetic medium for delivering the drama of human sensitive affair. This style, *Rabindra-nritya*, the first 'modern dance' of India, was and has continued to exist fully uncodified, depending on the inventive urge of the separate dancer explaining poetical works. This mobility, even so, has inclined to be accompanied by an absence of conventional strictness and codification, which may help clarify why Rabindranath's dance style has never attained favourable reception in India as a high-priority art beyond the Bengali artistic arena.

Tagore was born into a cultural world that considered itself as messenger of consistent artistic practice. Given the remarkable refinement of Indian classical music and dance, the traditionalist instinct is comprehensible. Tagore was one of a handful of Indians who, ahead of their time, refashioned conventional beliefs, and by pervading it with genuine and independent innovation devised a new cultural tradition that worked as the basis of modern awareness in India. As an instance of creative rethinking, Tagore's work on dance is distinctly striking, for, by differing in style and content from prevailing praxis, it emancipated dance from the formulaic choreography and accounts of classical Indian dance and thereby unfolded common consciousness to a modern aesthetic.

Graham's *Primitive Mysteries* (1931) is not a re-enactment of the ancient religious practices of the Southwest American Indians. The dance can be identified to fall under the division of primitivism. The

primitivism of Graham's *Primitive Mysteries* is created through the scheme of traditional ritual, the dignity of the procession, moving round in circles, and the use of whole body manoeuvre collocated with segmental movement. The dance grasps the essence of the rituals and converts them into the context of a choreographic format via distortion, stylization, rhythm and so on. Usual movement or sign is taken from its origin and is transfigured through a movement sense into the dance context and advanced into concentrated symbolic forms the signs of the body.

Dance does not simply provide itself to practicality, because of the transformative nature of movement incorporated. Although we might have complication in defining exactly what dance is, and of course, notions change over time, it is identifiable, nevertheless, as an encoded system which holds particular stylistic traits. As Margaret Llyod (1974) mentioned, if anyone strived to walk down the street using, for instance, a Graham walk, he or she would be looked upon as very strange by other pedestrians. Conversely, if dancers walked entirely 'naturally' in the dance context, it would not be assumed as dance. The concept of transformation, thus, stands for aspects of postmodern dance which emphasize 'natural' movement as well as deliberately generated figurative forms like modern dance.

Norman Bryson's *Cultural Studies and Dance Theory*, outlines a reflection of modernity within his exploration of dance history. Bryson employs the postmodern notion of dance as constituting social appropriateness in reflecting on dance in the nineteenth century. Here, Bryson declares that the female dancer in this historical reflection represented the complete concept of modernity with regard to modernity including the combination of the performance and its relationship to society. Bryson discusses an enclosed aspect of modernity as residing within "...the female dancer ... [who] ... came to embody social and sexual process..." (Chichón 7). In the essay *Dancing Bodies*, Susan Leigh Foster employs Foucault's conception of the body to the areas she cites which are needed to successfully exercise the body for dance performance. Foucault's notion of the body as a subject on its own contributed a path for Foster's probing in her examination of the body's reply to training processes. In relating Bryson's assertion that the female dancer encompassed modernity, there is reflection on Foucault's notion of a repressive supposition in Bryson's historical study of artistic works. Foucault applies the term repressive hypothesis to point out "... the nineteenth and twentieth-century notion that modern civilization represses the natural body and especially its sexuality" (Chichón 8).

The first half of the 20th century was the period of revolutionary wave, from which a new man - that of the modern times - was appearing. Women fashioning in modernist dance, e.g., Loïe Fuller or Isadora Duncan, broke with the fixed restraints of classical ballet forms and initiated freedom of expression into dance. The curiosity in body in movement transformed into experimenting its anatomical determinants in the early 20th century. A question was raised about the prospect to better justify human movements, so that the attempt put into a given activity would be equivalent with its effects. Concurrently, the traditional, cultural and social patterns, in which the female body was compressed at the beginning of the 20th century, were dismissed. On the one hand, this occurred in an unrepressed body, serving as a tool for highlighting social viewpoints and rebellion; on the other hand, in an exploited body, whose completely rationalized movement transformed into physical work, which was intended to result in maximal gains.

Skirt dancing, comprising the dancer's elegant manipulation of a full skirt, was an extensively popular genre in the U.S. when Loïe Fuller premiered her Serpentine dance in 1892. Fuller's costume for this dance included so much fabric that commingled with atmospheric lighting it almost totally obscured her human form. By transferring the focus from the dancer to the costume, she attached a new degree of abstraction to the skirt dance genre, foreshadowing many of the new methods of modern dance.



Figure 1: “Serpentine Dance” (Skirt dancing), 1892, by Loïe Fuller.

Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Ted Shawn were some famous choreographers who revolted against the two popular dance forms then *ballet* and *vaudeville*, and this was how Modern Dance was masterminded. A form of concert dance started in the late 19th century. This dance was termed Modern dance, which has a very fascinating history. This dance form developed as a reaction to traditional ballet, and has its places of origin in America and Germany. It is an advancement of choreography that arrived after ballet. The dancers had a prevalent point of view for modern dance, supposing that it could be enjoyed beyond the fixed ballet regulations, thus giving birth to modern dance. In contrast to ballet, this dance style was devised to show strong feeling and a more "human" side to the art.

Whenever we study something about Isadora Duncan, the term “pioneer of modern dance” is referred to. But the contribution of Isadora was much more than that. Her ascendancy transcended dance movements. She inspired a whole new lifestyle. She encouraged people to express themselves through dance, be it in a classical practice, or in any other style possible. She adamantly held that “every soul longed to express itself in dance, and that dance should be an essential part of modern living”. To thoroughly understand her ethos, and her impact in dance, we precisely need to glance at her wise words:

- The Dance - it is the rhythm of all that dies in order to live again; it is the eternal rising of the sun.

-Dancing: The Highest Intelligence in the Freest Body.

("Isadora Duncan ? The Beauty of Simple Movements")



Figure 2: Isadora Duncan *The Beauty of Simple Movements*

Isadora broke norms and traditions, and conceptualized dance as an art, finding the origins back to sacred art. Isadora advocated free and natural movements, and she drew her innovativeness from folk dances, nature, social dances, Greek arts, and much more. She seemed to follow the claim of the theorist J.G. Noverre that dancing is or should be “a faithful likeness of beautiful nature” (Cohen and Copeland 2). However, she led a whole new level and perspective to dancing, involving athleticism that included skipping, jumping, leaping, tossing, jiggling, and much more. She shifted from the rigid ballet style, and desired to modernize dance to a high art, not an arrangement of pleasure. As for American dancing, she commented: “... let them come forth with great strides, leaps and bounds, with lifted foreheads and far-spread arms,...” (Cohen and Copeland 278). Isadora Duncan became the architect of modern dance by comprehending that the solar plexus was the source of all movement, and she firmly supported the idea.



Figure 3: December 2015, Kolkata: The performance “White Lotus-Black Sand” by the dancers of LDTX Company and Rhythmosaic-Sengupta Company. [LDTX]

Though both China and India boast a great traditional culture, young artists wish to make breakthroughs. It wasn't until 1987 that China instituted modern dance into its art academies. After nearly three decades of art practice and discourse, the country has produced a comparatively free space for the expansion of modern dance. Today, modern dancers in China not any more concern about whether they should maintain traditions, and, are no more haunted with breaking traditions as they now have right to opt whether they want to maintain or break traditions. Obviously, Indian dancers remain in a transitional zone between tradition and modernity. Youngsters support modern dance's free expression, but at the same time, they cannot totally get rid of the sway of traditional dances. Consequently, Indian artists of modern dance cannot freely pick their manners of expression. In spite of that, young Indian dancers displayed the calmness in their body-gestures while performing “White Lotus-Black Sand”.

Datuk Ramli Ibrahim, a legend in his lifetime and the veteran Malaysia-based dancer, is well known to the dance devotees. Once he was in Kolkata to stage his outstanding ballet, “Amorous Delight” under the patronage of Sutra Foundation in collaboration with Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra. He was asked: “Is there anything like contemporary in classical dance style like Odissi? How do you define it?”. He answered: “In the wake of dance discussions in the last decade, one sense that the word contemporary dance is used basically to refer to 'contemporary modern' dance. Undaunted by the word 'contemporary', many practitioners of classical dance styles such as Bharatanatyam have claimed that what they are doing

are also 'contemporary', in the sense that they are engaging their followers in the 'now' as their works are being created in the present times. The confusion also happens when we define 'modernity' from a western perspective, which see 'modern' as antithesis to 'tradition'. Modern dance movement in the west was a rebellion against classical ballet. This is not necessarily so in Asia. In Asia, traditional dances are being created all the time and are evolving into the present modern age. Look at Bharatanatyam and Odissi, which are mainly reconstructed within middle half of last century. Indian modern dance was pioneered by Uday Shankar. He was part of the Oriental dance wave, which was looking at the East for inspiration." (Kumar)

Molmole is a remarkable demonstration of how the work of dance pays homage to other kinds of work or labour, and how the labouring, dancing body on the plantation must be looked at as more than a bearer of labels such as "African" or "Indian". This body is a shared inheritance and provision of modernity. The movement of the body with its fleeting and newborn character is represented in modernity. The body has the capacity to transform pain and humiliation into happiness, to scramble the codes by redoing and transcending modernity's fundamental master-slave encounter.

Unlike a painting or a novel, the dance work is never stable at any one point in space and time but is always in the activity of becoming the work itself, from the beginning to the end. In that faculty each and every dance is *sui generis*. The view perceived here is that dance merely does not reflect reality but, by choice, it designs its own life-world through its form; it converts reality into its own particular frame of reference by means of gesture of the body. It becomes the reflection of modernity which talks about an artistic-literary stage of progress since the late nineteenth century, a stage of programmatic self-reflection in art in its encounter with new media starting, for instance, with the photography. Thus, the dance, a combination of the performance and the signs of the body, is viewed as reflection of modernity.

Works Cited:

1. "12 Most Famous Modern Dancers We All Should Know About." *Dance Poise*, 22 Feb. 2018, dancepoise.com/most-famous-modern-dancers-to-know-about. Accessed 10 July 2018.
2. Ananya Jahanara Kabir. "Five Exhilarating Dance Moves That Celebrate the Traumas of Modernity." *Scroll.in*, 19 July 2018, scroll.in/article/801182/five-exhilarating-dance-moves-that-celebrate-the-traumas-of-modernity. Accessed 9 July 2018.
3. "The Beauty of Simple Movements." Photograph. www.documentarytube.com/articles/isadora-duncan-the-beauty-of-simple-movements. Accessed 5 July 2018.
4. Bose, Mandakranta. "Indian Modernity and Tagore's Dance." *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 77, no. 4, 2008, pp. 1085-1094, muse.jhu.edu/article/256408/pdf. Accessed 20 July 2018.
5. Brandstetter, Gabriele, et al. *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image and Space in the Historical Avant-Gardes*. Oxford UP, 2015.
6. Chichón, Kasia M. "The Impact of Cultural Studies on the Field of Dance." *Google Books*, books.google.co.in/books?id=p8YIBgAAQBAJ&pg=PA6&dq=dance+reflection+modernity&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwio36uFj7jcAhWJbisKHXG-CA8Q6AEILjAB#v=onepage&q=dance%20reflection%20modernity&f=false. Accessed 8 July 2008.
7. Cohen, M., and R. Copeland. *What Is Dance: Readings in Theory and Criticism*. Oxford UP, 1996.
8. "Isadora Duncan ? The Beauty of Simple Movements." *Documentary Tube*, 29 Mar. 2017, www.documentarytube.com/articles/isadora-duncan-the-beauty-of-simple-movements. Accessed 8 July 2018.
9. Kumar, Rane. "Modernity Can Exist Within a Tradition?" *The Hindu*, 13 Apr. 2017, www.thehindu.com/entertainment/dance/modernity-can-exist-within-a-tradition/article17981432.ece. Accessed 6 July 2018.

10. "Loïe Fuller's Serpentine Success." *Bibliolore*, 26 Apr. 2018, bibliolore.org/2013/05/20/loie-fullers-serpentine-success/. Accessed 8 July 2018.
11. "Loïe Fuller's serpentine success." Photograph. bibliolore.org/2013/05/20/loie-fullers-serpentine-success/. Accessed 8 July 2018.
12. "Modern Dance in India From Tradition to Modernity." *China India Dialogue*, 9 May 2016, chinaindiadialogue.com/modern-dance-in-india-from-tradition-to-modernity. Accessed 6 July 2018.
13. "Modern Dance in India From Tradition to Modernity." Photograph. chinaindiadialogue.com/modern-dance-in-india-from-tradition-to-modernity. Accessed 6 July 2018.
14. "Moved Bodies. Choreographies of Modernity." *Muzeum Sztuki W Łodzi*, msl.org.pl/en/exhibitions/archive-exhibitions/moved-bodies--choreographies-of-modernity,2173.html. Accessed 10 July 2018.
15. Thomas, Helen. *Dance, Modernity, and Culture: Explorations in the Sociology of Dance*. Routledge, 2005.