

Kathakali an Aesthetic Mime or Not?

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Abstract

The Indian foundation of the classical art forms is built with the stones Natyasastra, where the theory of Rasa is an inevitable entity. Kathakali being a dance drama is no exception. It shares several of its attributes to other Indian religious and literary traditions. Kathakali is considered as a dynamic tradition of art that acceded several of the already established traditions of art into it which was passed down orally and is currently imparting the same to the coming generations as well through "entertainment, enculturation or written records". Bharatamuni's Natyasastra speaks of how normal affairs are presented in art by the means of imitation which he called *anukarana*. Natyasastra makes use of *anukarana* which is either a 'physical imitation', (external appearance of a person or an object gets directly imitated), where it directly inculcates the tradition of mime into it or, if the external object is not available for a direct imitation, then an 'equivalent model' is identified whose behaviour is observed and reflected upon and is further open for interpretation.

When it comes to Kathakali, it either adopts the form of *anukarana* where there is no external object or 'equivalent model' and therefore adopts the aspect of 'conceptual creation' which is built on the notion of thorough imagination which is entirely dependent on the person judging or enjoying the art form or, it takes up the facet of 'meta-creation through imagination' based on what is observed and reflected from the same. One of the prime examples to be quoted is of the mythical creature- 'Hamsa', the swan. During the Kathakali performance, the bird is portrayed like any other hero figure with its marks of identification like the beak or the wings but, when it comes to a dance performance, it is represented before the spectators with the help of hand gestures called *mudras*, devoid of any costume specifications.

Keywords: *rasa, natyasastra, anukarana, mime*

The Origin of Kathakali as an Artform

The word kathakali is derived from two words, 'Katha' means tale and 'Kali' meaning performance or play. Kerala in the mid-17th century comprised several major and minor kingdoms. One of the early forms of the present-day Kathakali was the *Ramanattom*. Over the years the art form evolved and went through several phases to achieve its current form and structure. It was Kottarakkara Thampuran who introduced *Ramanattom*. It was a counterattack to King Manavedan's *Krishnanattom* and several other temple arts including *Padayani*, *Mudiyettu*, and *Astapadiyattom*. *Ramanattom* was composed based on the theme of the life of Lord Rama and was modeled on *Krishnanattom* in terms of its structure. Unlike *Krishnanattom*, *Ramanattom* is a bit

more rustic and vigorous also, the costumery and makeup were comparatively gross. Later the art spread throughout the territory of Kerala that local performing groups called the *kaliyogams* came into being for the exclusive performance of the same. Later the notion of *rasa* gained prominence in the art form and thus more importance was given to the aspects of expression. Most of the performances are of the stories from Indian epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* and also from the Indian *Puranas*.

'According to Phillip P Zarrilli, the 'role patrons in the artistic tradition' is divided into four with respect to his analysis of the history of kathakali:

The formative years from the origins of kathakali in the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, by

which time the genre had evolved into what we recognize as kathakali today. The mature years from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, during which time there was further refining of the expressive possibilities of the genre. The early modern period from when a resurgence of interest was sparked by poet Vallathol's establishment of a new institutional form for teaching and preserving the genre beginning in the late 1920s. The recent past in which some of today's connoisseurs have defined the quint essential experience of kathakali as a 'non-worldly' 'theatre of the mind.' (Zarilli 34)

1860s was a period of transition as far as this dance drama is concerned. It was a period when the English education took up a prominent role in the colonial society of India. This prompted the young Nayar generation to give up on the artform. They often considered it to be 'dumb'. In 1861 was the demise of UtramTirunal Maharaja. With him the royal patronage of Kathakali too came to an end. His successor, AyilyamTirunal was more absorbed towards Carnatic music and dance. As a result of this, the palace *kaliyogam* was disbanded and thus the involvement of Kathakali in Travancore court got limited. The fluctuating socio-economic and political aspects of the society became an eminent factor for the decline of the artform in the twentieth century.

It was then the Malayalee poet Vallathol Narayana Menon who realized the need to find methods to sustain the artform from further deterioration. He called kathakali to be the "greatest treasure of the Keralites". It was him who laid the founding stones of Kerala Kalamandalam and later served as its president. In the initial stages the non-profit organization suffered from funding issues and later succeeded in recruiting the doyens of the field including Guru KunjuKurup, Sri Ambu Panikkar, Koppan Nayar, Pattikkamthodi Rammunni Menon to name a few. As quoted by Zarilli:

By founding the Kerala Kalamandalam, Vallathol sought to establish a new institutional and patronage framework to support traditional kathakali teaching and performance, and to bridge the gap created by a decline in patronage by wealthy landholding families. (Zarilli 47)

Later the organization was taken over by the Kerala government with Vallathol continuing to be its president

and art director. Following Kalamandalam came up several other institutions including the Sri MuthappanKathakaliYogam by P M Kunji Raman. This institute focussed more on the northern style of Kathakali training. This was followed by P S V Natyasanghamby Vaidyaratnam P S Varier which was funded using the profits from the leading Ayurvedic sphere of Kerala called the Arya Vaidya Shala. Then came The Unnayi Warriar Samaraka Kalanilayam and FACT Kathakali School in the years 1955 and 1965 respectively. Both of these institutes focussed on the training styles which they adopted from the early Kalamandalam model. In 1969 the Margi was established under the leadership of D Appukkuttan Nair. Earlier this non-profit cultural organization limited its publications on cultural art forms and the performances to the capital city. It was in 1974, Margi began expanding performances and then established its own teaching and performance troupe which focussed on the 'southern Kerala style.'

Margi received a major grant from the central government of 5 lakhs rupees in 1991, it redefined itself as operating as a *kaliyogam*, and has been able to support full-time kathakali and kutiyattam troupe [...] Also during 1995, Margi revived three of the original eight *Ramanattam* plays no longer in the active repertory, including *Vichinnabhishekam*, *Kharavadham*, and *Sethubandhanam*. For some scenes detailed performance scores (*attaprakaram*) were prepared. The results were twelve nights of performance for *Vichinnabhishekam*, ten for *Kharavadham*, and ten for *Sethubandhanam*. (Zarilli 51)

Kathakali as an Epitome of Rasabhinaya

'*Abhinaya*' or expression depicts the artistic mode of communication. The expressions portrayed in dance or '*natya*' are extremely different from the artistic representation as viewed in Kathakali, both in terms of theory and practice. *Abhinaya* and *rasa* are closely associated and defines one another's existence. *Rasa* contributes to the artistic and aesthetic pleasure of an art form. Bharata in his *Natyasastra* has stated the same in the form of an aphorism which goes:

*Vibhavaanu bhavavya bhi charisamyogad rasa nisa
pathihi*

The *sutra* simply means that *rasa* originates from the amalgamation of *vibhava*, *anubhava* and *vyabhicharibhava* where *vibhava* defines the stimulating emotions or the aspects which evoke *Rasa* or which contributes to the creation of *Rasa*. *Anubhava* defines the response to the stimulation of emotions. In other words, it is the effect or consequence generated after the rise of emotions. *Vyabhicharibhava* on the other hand stands for what is called fleeting emotions. These are the emotions that differ from person to person and are of thirty-two varieties.

The emotion of a reader or *sthayibhava* to be apt is closely associated with the aspects stated above. These three notions form the soul of a creative work of art or literature. This close association further contributes to the revelation of *rasa*. *Sthayibhava* or the permanent emotion is the one innately present in all human beings but remains dormant or latent. They can only be acquired in completion through thorough training. *Sthayibhava* is therefore a product of labour. The *sthayibhavas* reveal themselves into the following corresponding *rasas* when expressed in a piece of art:

- Rati- Sringara [erotic]
- Hasa- Hasya [comic]
- Suka- Karuna [compassion]
- Krodha- Roudra [wrath]
- Utsaha- Veera [heroic]
- Bhaya- Bhayanaka [terrifying]
- Jugupsa- Bibatsa [odious]
- Vismaya- Adbhuta [surprise]
- Nirveda- Santa [tranquil]

Natyasastra projects on the importance of '*vachikaabhinaya*' or the vocal expression. Here, the artist makes use of the words and tunes called '*saptaswara*', '*tristay*' and '*chaturvarna*'. But when it comes to Kathakali, the words and tunes are avoided. Instead, all that could be heard by the spectators are certain loud words, shrieks, and cries. The story of the performance is enumerated through the words uttered along with music by the singers in the background. The performance expresses the story before the audience by employing 'gestural representation' of the songs sung. As far as the

hand gestures or '*mudras*' are concerned, the ones used in Kathakali are extremely different from the ones enlisted in *Natyasastra*. *Mudras* of Kathakali are 'stylistic and symbolic'.

Aharyabhinaya deals with costumes- *pushta* (model work); *sandhimam* (jointed objects); *vyajimam* (indicating objects); *chestimam* (wrapped objects). These do not find a place in the practice of Kathakali. One can spot the excessive use of pieces of jewellery and costumes in a Kathakali performance unlike what is observed in the common performances of the classical art forms. The facial makeup of this artform is quite complex and detailed. The person in charge of the costumery and makeup is 'chouttikaran' who also has a major role when it comes to training and performance.

According to Dr. Ayyappa Paniker, there are several aspects of *abhinaya*. Kalamandalam Ramankutty Nair in the work *Kathakali, The Art of Non-worldly* states that

Only a master performer who has complete supremacy over the technical virtuosity in *abhinaya* can indulge in *rasabhinaya*. Being the soul of *abhinaya* it is far above the level of others and permeates all his actions and expressions. In its absence, *abhinaya* loses its essence. In the same manner, it is only a master connoisseur who can have *rasa* which may range from simple enjoyment to unalloyed happiness or rapture. (Nair, 86).

There are different colours used which define a specific 'mood and sentiment' aimed to be portrayed in the artform. Kathakali is not an entirely imitative art. The elaborated use of makeup, costume, ornaments, headgear is not meant to 'cover the body but to portray the body itself'. For example, while enacting the character of Prince Bheema on stage, the artist is meant to be in disguise as a brahmin as how the story demands. But unlike the stipulations of the story, the artist is seen representing the character by wearing heavy makeup and elaborate costumes which stands as a complete contrast to the Brahminical appearance. Therefore, 'anything worn to cover the body is indicated only by gestures and is never worn'. Characters in Kathakali never speak but instead it is through the kinesis, oculosics, postures, gestures and grunts the performer conveys the message

to the spectators. Therefore, Kathakali is an artform where the non-verbal communication adopts the supreme role. *Kalyana Saugandhikam*, *Kiratham*, *Baalivadham*, *Keechakavadham*, *Utharaswayamvaram*, *Dakshayagam*, *Baanayudham*, *Narakasuravadham* are some of the prominent Kathakali plays.

According to Arjun Raina: In a traditional Kathakali performance, after finishing his makeup and costuming, when a Kathakali actor looks into a mirror, he sees looking back at him the precise image of a god, a demon, an epic hero or heroine. This specific image or social presence has taken the performer four hours to create, and six to eight years of actor training to embody. The performer has learnt this art from a guru or a master practitioner. He has worked for years as a shishya or disciple. (Raina 114)

Questioning the Imitative Spectrum of Kathakali

Makeup accentuates the expression of a Kathakali artist. The principle focus of expression includes facial features like the eyes, lips, and cheeks. These facial features are therefore depicted by emphasizing the contrasting colours. *Paccha* or the heroic form red is the colour used to outline the eye against a black background. This makes the eye stand out especially when expressing the emotions of compassion, love, and wrath. The lips are written in an elongated fashion again using the red tint called '*chayillyam*'. The rest of the face is painted with light green and thus even the slightest facial movement is visible for the audience. The whole face is then outlined with a '*chutti*' which is usually made from thick white paper.

For the character of *katti*, or the anti-hero the facial expressions are a bit more exaggerated, unlike the stern silence practiced in *Paccha*. *Pacchahas Kitathakitam* which is a graceful sequence of steps using which the character enters the scene. It makes use of a slow tempo and this is followed throughout. *Katti* usually breaks the silence when the emotions like anger or love reach their zenith as the story proceeds. Here there is less emphasis on the facial features. Many more designs are marked on the cheeks to lower the expressions that are made using the facial muscles. Next is the character of *chuvannataadi* where the artist is embellished with a huge headgear. This

headgear is deliberately made large to make the face appear small and to give an image of the artist possessing more height. This character expresses more violent expressions both in terms of face and body. The entire face is painted red and the lips are written thin and black. The character tends to give an overall impression of violent emotions. The character gets its name from the red beard that is attached instead of *chutti* as seen in the characters of *paccha* and *katti*.

Next is the *vellataadi* or white beard which represents the character of Hanuman. The facial features are least emphasized to give out a clear image of the pious member of the monkey clan. The makeup is done in such a manner to give the artist a total appearance of a monkey. Then comes the character of *kari*. There are both male and female counterparts for the same. Male *kari* is used to represent the 'primitive tribals'. The face is painted in complete black including the eyes, has red lips, eyebrows and moustache to depict the crude and gross personality for which they stand. These characters are seen shrieking on stage. Speaking of the female *kari*, they have almost the same facial makeup as the males but they stand different since they showcase white eyebrows and black lips which merge completely with their black face to give an idea of them being devoid of their lips. There is a red round painted on their chin which stands as a symbol of their tongue. They also have exaggerated, pointed and extremely protruding breasts. The reason for the same is that a female *kari* is a representation of a female who is as crude as the male but also indulges in the act of vulgar love. Their movements in the act of love 'appear repugnant'.

The *minukku* represents the females or *strivesha*, the characters of sages, fighters, and messengers. As far as the *strivesha* is concerned there are no exaggerated facial expressions. Therefore, the face is painted in flesh colour and is devoid of any facial border. Their presence on the stage appears to be passive and meek, in other words, a typical female character as per the normative standards of society. The headgear worn is in the form of a long cloth. For the sages with beards, they 'are not supposed to betray emotions.' When it comes to the characters like a carpenter or a mahout who represents the normal human

form they are often categorized as comic characters. In the 'non-worldly' air of Kathakali, human beings are perceived as comic characters.

Usually, many characters have the same makeup with slight variations on their facial features with which they are distinguished. For example, the characters of Bali and Sugriva are represented using *chuvannataadi* with slight variations in their facial makeup. The characters of Arjuna, Nala, and Krishna follow the makeup routine of *Paccha*. But Krishna stands different from others since he has a smaller *chutti* and conical headgear. He also wears a blue jacket and a yellow skirt, unlike the others. The entire costume and makeup are arranged in such a manner to enhance the aspect of abhinaya which can be *sattwika* (good), *rajasic* (aggressive), and *tamasic* (evil).

Kathakali gives importance to *angikabhinaya*, which is the 'movement of face and limbs of the body with support from other parts like chest and sides, and the body as a whole'. According to Kalamandalam Gopi:

While the face is principally used for a reflective expression of emotions, the hand is the principal organ that uses gestures for the interpretative expression of ideas and objects. While facial expressions in Kathakali are either exaggerated or reduced stylized simulations of natural human facial expressions, the hand gestures are technically stylized and difficult to comprehend. (Gopi, 111)

The gestures used in the art form are specifically linked with the rhythm used. Rhythm is the 'visible manifestation of ideas and objects.' The mudras undergo an 'aesthetic transformation'. Gopi further remarks that

They could be imitative of appearance of behavioural traits, yet, employed in Kathakali, they become stylized. They could be Vedic (used during the chanting of Hindu Vedas), or Tantric (ritualistic) with great divine potency, but when applied to Kathakali, the Vedic and Tantric mudras are refined to suit delicate aesthetics. (Gopi, 111)

These mudras are compared to the letters of the alphabet since these gestures represent individual or combined movements as per the demand of the situation. The word or an object is conveyed using hands or fingers and thus the gestures are exclusively called Hasthamudras. In Kathakali there are twenty-four hasta

mudras which are used to express about five hundred or more objects. These mudras are formulated based on *Hasthalakshanadeepika*, whose author is still anonymous. The mudras are again classified into two: *Samyutha mudras* and *Asamyutha mudras*. Former category are the ones which make use of both the hands while the latter make use of just a hand. Following are the main mudras made use of in Kathakali:

1. Pathaka (Flag)
2. Mudraakhyam
3. Katakam (Golden Bangle)
4. Mushti
5. KarthareeMukham (Scissor's sharp point)
6. Sukathundam (Parrot's peak)
7. Kapidhakam (The fruit of a tree)
8. HamsaPaksham (Swan's wing)
9. Sikharam (Peak)
10. Hamsaasyam
11. Anjaly (Folded hands in Salutation)
12. Ardhachandram (Half-moon)
13. Mukuram (Mirror)
14. Bhramaram (Beetle)
15. Soochimukham (Needle's sharp point)
16. Pallavam (Sprout)
17. Thripathaaka (Flag with three colours)
18. Mrigaseersham (Deer's head)
19. Sarpasirassu (Serpant's head)
20. Vardhamanakam (Seedling)
21. Araalam (Curved)
22. Oornanabham (Spider)
23. Mukulam (Bud)
24. Katakaamukham

Before the depiction of an object, the artist expresses the same using his eyes. Eyes become an inevitable part of the expression. To master in the formulation of expression through eyes, the performers are made to undergo the delicate rigorous practice involving eyeballs and eye brows. This is called *Kannusadhaka*. The time which they consider to be apt for the eye training is 3.30 in the morning. The students here are made to apply pure ghee into their eyes after which they are bound to stand with their eyes open by holding the lids using their hands, after which they engage in dynamic eye movements.

During this they are meant to apply "mental strength to eyeballs" which is called *Vayukodukkal*. After the eye, the object is further specified using the jump associated with the mudra which is later followed by the corresponding posture and finally the gesture itself.

The non-verbal aspects in the artform of kathakali is depicted thoroughly through *Cholliyattam* and *Elakiyattom*. The former is all about *Padarthabhinaya*. Here, the whole text is sung by the singer and then the performer performs it word by word. The latter involves no singing. The whole situation is enacted using silent language complemented by actions jumps and even expressions.

Regarding the jumps, they are nine in numbers focussing on various expressions and gestures. They are:

1. Jumping backward: this is used to represent the concept of bravery or might. They are usually employed while portraying the character of a god, hero, elephant. Forty mudras follow this stance.
2. Jumping to the corners: this is used to represent a command chariot etc. around 8 mudras use this stance.
3. Jumping forwards: this is used to represent an enemy or a situation of destruction. Around five mudras are associated with this stance.
4. Jumping up: this is used to represent a demon, anger, battle. Around ten mudras follow this stance.
5. Jumping and stamping: this is used to represent a sibling, horse, etc. around fifteen mudras are used in this stance.
6. Stepping sideways: around thirty-four mudras make use of this stance to represent a start, world, etc.
7. Special steps: this is used to represent a snake, curse, prostrate, dance, wave, etc. there are thirty-six mudras associated with this stance.
8. Legs held together: this represents a blessing, weapon, jealousy, sleep, eyes, friend, and so on. There are two hundred and six mudras associated with the same.
9. Lowered body: it stands to represent mother, sun, embrace, hair, cupid, etc. around one hundred and twenty-eight mudras are associated with it.

Then comes the concept of *Sattwikabhinaya*. As stated by Sudha Gopalakrishnan, abhinaya is an

"aesthetic communication of abstract idea which needs to be transformed into a state in which it is communicable". At first, there is a composition of an epic which are read out for the 'mental assimilation' of the story. After this, the theme is chosen from the epic and is then converted to an *attakatha*. *Attakatha* forms the 'literary textual base' of Kathakali which is then performed on the stage. This cycle from the formation of the epic to its presentation on the stage involves the process of what critics call aesthetic communication. The visual and auditory senses perceive what is presented before them- *sabda*(sound) and *rupa*(form). These elements are born from *akasa* (sky) and *agni*(fire). Therefore, the kathakali stage too has these two elements in the form of void space representing the sky and the lamp symbolizing the fire.

According to Gopalakrishnan, The aesthetic communication through body transformation (*aharyabhinaya*), through body kinetics (*angikabhinaya*), and sound consisting of melodic music and rhythmic, together form the body of abhinaya. Though they involve movements, they are mechanical. Performance needs to be enlivened, and this is done only in Kathakali and Kudiattom, in both of which life is infused into the various components of aesthetic communication channelizing prana, or life-breath, through various parts of the actor's body at varying pressure.(Gopalakrishnan,146)

Therefore, the art of Kathakali does not merely imitate what is seen in front instead, the elements are perceived via senses and then the same is reflected upon by the observers and then gets interpreted. While the character is portrayed on stage there is no mental involvement of the artist. All the emotions are given gestural expressions using mudras. The element of suspense stands no chance in Kathakali since the spectator already has an idea regarding the story that is about to be performed. According to D Appukkuttan Nair,

The real merit of the actor lies in him being able to give a fresh twist to what has already been decided. The beauty of the performance often lies in the actor's use of his creative imagination in descriptive interludes between the strictly codified acting sequences. (Nair, 156)

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