Finding the Truth in Fiction

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John Berger states that 'art makes inequality seem noble and hierarchies seem thrilling' ("Ways of Seeing," 29). Watching bharata natyam[1] today and being moved by the beauty of the art form provides that thrill that Berger is pointing out, of inequalities and hierarchies. We notice the characteristics of the dance form that heighten its status as elite, refined, promoting high caste tastes and values – the expensive silk and jewelry of the costumes, the music, with lyrics that emerge from a mainstream Hindu Brahminical world view, and the notably 'classical' aesthetic.

But by the same token, it is art that is able to highlight the oppressive nature of hierarchies we take for granted and art that imagines and presents other possibilities for organizing the world. In considering the history of bharata natyam, before it had stratified so clearly, we can notice how it presented a series of inversions of the prevailing hierarchies – gender, caste, status – to audiences. I will be looking for the signs of these inversions in the past to which we have some access: in the padam repertoire of Kshetrayya, in some films of that time in which women from the devadasi community acted as devadasis in stories that centered devadasis, and the novel *Web of Deceit*, written by Muvalur Ramamirtham, a woman from the devadasi community about devadasis.

Truth in Poetry

The padams defined with the signature motif of Kshetrayya form a corpus of about four hundred songs that can be traced to the seventeenth century. They continue to find a place in the modern performance repertoire of bharata natyam. While very little is known about the historical Kshetrayya, what emerges from his hagiography is a poet intimately connected to the devadasi community. In fact, it is his love for a devadasi in Muvapuri whose deity was Gopala that inspired his own devotion and his poetic signature, muvagopala. The padams attributed to Kshetrayya are both knowledgeable and sensitive to women and their concerns. The songs treat erotic love using explicit terms. In the insightful essay by A. K. Ramanujan in "When God is a Customer" he points out one crucial inversion of the hierarchy: as the bhakthi tradition changes over time, the god becomes so human that he is at the mercy of his sensual desire for the devadasi. Even when he is being unfaithful, it is with another woman, and he is in the thrall of one or the other. So the balance of power has shifted to the courtesan/devotee who must be won over and the god is sometimes the one doing the begging (19).

In performance by devadasi women this reversal of roles can become the first step into a seductive persona somewhere between the real and the fictional. The devotional aspect, or bhakti, comes as an inference, not as the predominant expression, which can be her own emotional truth. As part of the repertoire of women for whom artistic labor and religiously sanctioned sex work were defining qualities, the words were interpreted using gestures – the rati hastas – that are precise in meaning, referring to sexual positions like sixty-nine, or the woman on top. Performed in front of an audience of men familiar with the tropes and conventions of the dance form, in a salon setting, these erotic padams were both art and foreplay, "fundamentally linked to the capital of an erotic and (at least theoretically) available body" (Morcom 129). As philosopher Ronald de Sousa put it in conversation, "a metaphorical strip tease is nevertheless a tease".

Many of the padams reference the skills of music and dance as one part of her command of the art of love-making, as in this *sankarabharanam padam*, where the nayika asks her lover, 'Is she (the other woman) really so much more enchanting than me?

1 As a political strategy of anti-assimilation and marking our postcolonial social reality, I have chosen to write non-English terms in plain English language without italicizing or using upper-case. I have used italics to emphasize a certain character or a situation especially at the cusp of being and performance.

Does she offer her lips to you, dance and sing love lyrics to put you into the right mood? In another padam in raga *pantuvarali*, the *nayika* describes preparing sandalwood paste and rose water to welcome him, and massaging his feet, along with singing fully immersed in the music. Her attitude to her lover is never one-dimensional. In one song the woman expresses jealousy over the lover going to another woman. In another it is more curiosity as to what quality or skills the other woman has that make him want her. She freely expresses anger, resignation, indifference, amusement, over his infidelities. She may be sarcastic and say at first, 'Don't touch me!', while in the last verse, she may end up describing his love-making. This openness to a range of emotional interpretations is perhaps why these padams survived the journey from salon to proscenium stage and remain popular with dancers and audiences today.

The padams feature many reversals of norms. In one collection of about a hundred and fifty Kshetrayya padams collected and translated by Rajanikanta Rao, we find a woman who is not only unfaithful to her husband, but requests her lover to ignore the injunction in the Shastras of not having sex while she has her period (Rao, 72). In another song, explicitly describing how she (by mistake) kissed and caressed this mysterious other woman, she asks her lover, 'Who was that woman you brought into our bed? (Rao, 60); she is amused but not angry when he makes love to both her and another woman at the same time' (Rao, 79, 82); 'she has to tell him to stay away after just having given birth' (Rao, 17); 'he dresses as a woman in order to seduce her' (Rao, 51, 90); 'he forces himself on a young girl' (Rao, 57); 'she asks him to find a drug for abortion' (Rao, 32); 'she is willing to make her infidelity known to her in-laws' (Rao, 46).

Without much other evidence from the seventeenth century – no living women we can talk to, no written first person accounts - these padams, can help us form a picture of the life of devadasis, their concerns and tribulations.

While the padams do conform to a prevailing heterosexual, male-oriented view of sexuality – they are after all a male poet's constructions of female desire, the padam form itself, in performance, gives the female performer great freedom of interpretation and control over the emotional content, through elaboration of her own preferred subtext. For example, take the padam *manchi dinamu*, the words translated as 'Ask him to come like a king, (or without hesitation), it is the auspicious day'. The crucial line, where the nayika says, 'Is my body not his property, after all?' can be interpreted to highlight her courtesan status, as one beholden to the man who maintains his right to go to other women without provoking her anger. Or she can use that line as purely devotional, as one who has completely surrendered herself to god. The erotic/devotional nature of the padam gives the dancer plenty of scope to make the words express her own emotional truth. It is this quality that gives the padam form continuing relevance, while also leading to claims of Bowdlerization/Brahminization (Ganesh, Feb 2020).

Truth in the Moving Image

Theodore Bhaskaran states that all the films made during the very early years of Tamil talkies were based on stage plays, and that the female leads came from the devadasi community, as actress/singer/dancer (Sivakumar, Aug 2015). When viewing a film we are closest to having the women themselves before us, a physical presence, their embodiment, however mediated by the screen.

Moreover, in some films, what we are witnessing is a devadasi in real life taking on the role of the devadasi as a character. In the 1937 Tamil film *Chintamani*, the devadasi plays a benign role, bringing the debauched hero to realization and sainthood through the strength of her own devotion to Krishna. The film is available for viewing on *YouTube*, where at the one hour mark we can see a few minutes of the actress Aswhathamma, seated, performing a Sarangapani padam still popular in bharata natyam performances, *mogaduchi pilache*. Though she is very modestly dressed, and the song has no overt eroticism, this version being purely devotional, Bilwamangal, played by M. K. T. Bhagavathar, can't stop thinking of her, and once he goes to live with her, he is so infatuated that he can hardly bear to leave her even when his father is on his deathbed.

The film *Haridas*, from 1944, tells a similar devadasi story. The hero, again played by M.K.T

Bhagavathar, is seduced and ruined financially by a devadasi before realizing the error of his ways and devoting himself to god. In this case, the devadasi Ramba, played by T. R. Rajakumari, herself from the devadasi community, and the first 'dream girl' of Tamil cinema, exudes charm and sex appeal before revealing her heartless, mercenary side. She is the one who lures Haridas into alcoholism and gambling, winning his house and promptly kicking him out of it.

The song '*Manmatha lilayai vendrar undo?*' was a resounding hit, with the words 'Who can overcome Cupid?' becoming a well-worn cliché in Tamil. T. R. Rajakumari dances in a revealing sleeveless blouse wrapped with a sheer upper cloth. The camera shows us close-ups of the looks exchanged between the two characters, emphasizing the provocative nature of their glances.

The two dances are a study in the development of the genre of film dance. The first one shows virtually how a dance piece might have been performed at the time when it was filmed: the dancer is seated, singing herself, for a small audience seated around her. The hand gestures are simple and easily understood, interpreting the meaning of the lyrics without elaboration. The sari Chintamani wears is not ostentatious or showy, the pallav pulled over her shoulders very modestly in a manner that wouldn't attract attention in a real life setting. The song has not been composed especially for the film, but is one that is already part of the repertoire.

The second dance is choreographed and shot taking into consideration both the strengths and the constraints of film as a medium. T. R. Rajakumari as Ramba is dressed in clothes too flashy for real life, appearing first frozen in silhouette carrying a bow and arrow. She then aims and shoots an arrow at a heart above Haridas, which showers him in flower petals. Standing, walking and using hand gestures, she expresses the meaning of the words as if addressing, not a god, not the audience seated on either side, but Haridas directly. Haridas and she sing to each other accompanied by tabla and sarangi, not traditional instruments for a Tamil dance form. Close up, mid and long shots are used strategically to heighten the choreography.

Certain conventions of film dance are already seen as well established in the years between Chintamani and Haridas: from a sari that the actress might have pulled out of her own almirah to a costume that is sexy without being from any particular place or genre of dance; from movements of the prevailing regional dance form to movements borrowing freely from any form; from regional music that was already part of the dance, to hybridized music composed for the film; to the choreography as it was in performance to choreography placing emphasis on the frame as defined by the camera and its movement.

As Ramba's dance nears the end, the wife sees what is going on and uses the word *thevaradiyal*, the Tamil version of 'devadasi'. It clearly has a derogatory connotation, conflating 'prostitute' and 'dancer'. The wife chases Ramba from her house, which is what provokes Ramba to seek her revenge, in turn casting the wife out.

The films reveal the changing sphere of dance and dancers: both were highly successful, and T. R. Rajakumari was a star. By taking a prominent place in the newly minted art form, the devadasi, while called a prostitute in the film, in real life was establishing herself with money and status. This was happening at the same time as the fight for abolition of the devadasi system was going on. So as one manner of livelihood and place in society was being taken away, the beautiful, talented and ambitious women of that community were finding new, more acceptable and lucrative avenues for making money and taking respected roles in the changing social order.

Truth in Stories

While the padams and the above-mentioned films have devadasis as central to the story, the implications of that role are only made explicit as necessary to the story of the male character. In contrast, Muvalur Ramamirthammal's novel, *Web of Deceit* sets out with a clear agenda, to reveal the dark side of the devadasi system and make the reader understand why it should end.

Ramamirthammal wrote from her own experience. At

the age of five, she was sold by her mother to a devadasi for ten rupees and an old sari. The devadasi educated her in music, Telugu and Sanskrit, but when Ramamirthammal was seventeen, and about to be fixed up with a sixty-five-year-old man as her patron, she ran away with her music teacher and established herself within the Self Respect movement as a radical activist for devadasi abolition. *Murasoli*, the newspaper published by M. Karunanidhi, described her in her obituary as "fiery speech, silver hair, bold walk and blazing eyes that sought to burn injustice" (Pon Dhanasekaran, 2022).

Modern day Western-educated scholars are often patronizing and dismissive of the position of women within the Devadasi Abolition Movement, characterizing them as "middle class, upper caste, feminist" (Hubel 128) or "English educated, Catholic-influenced *bhadralok* (genteel) community of Indian intelligentsia" (Chatterjea 294). Given that the two most prominent women in the abolition movement came from the devadasi community, it is surprising to read that "devadasi women were largely absent" from the debates about the devadasi system (Soneji 115). Their legitimate concerns over the exploitation of young girls who had no choice in the matter of their dedication are minimized and research and academic writing rarely addresses the horrific abuses this engendered.

In the novel *Web of Deceit*, two devadasis enter a first class compartment on a train taking them to perform at a concert in Chennai. They flirt with the young man who shares their compartment, and eventually divest him of his watch. While some things in this scene we can take for granted as being reliable for that time, for instance that train travel existed, what are we to make of certain other aspects of the story being revealed to us? The plot is convoluted and hinges on unbelievable tricks and coincidences. One of the characters, the zamindar's young wife, disguises herself as a man to trick the devadasis who have seduced her husband into kicking him out, and then disguises herself as a devadasi to show him that a wife too can be an enchanting companion. But the plot is merely a vehicle for the author to express her views on hegemonic Hinduism, paternalistic attitudes in marriage and inequality in relationships between husband and wife. As characters argue and manage the various situations, they give a nuanced and complex picture of the many kinds of exploitation and power dynamics, not only within the devadasi system, but within Hindu marriage as well.

For example, the brother of the two devadasi sisters is shown being pushed around and abused by the mother, because sons had little value within that system. The various subtle tricks that the mother instigates her daughters to play on the men who come to them are shown in detail. The infatuation of men with devadasis is taken to extremes, and their artistry and skill become the most important tools within a repertoire of seduction.

The atheism of Periyar is put into the mouth of Gunabusani, a reformed devadasi who, I imagine, stands in for Ramamirthammal herself, and articulates her position on the supposed agency, or more realistically, lack of agency that the devadasi had within the system. Gunabusani expresses a powerful argument against caste, patriarchy and religion, and for the egalitarian ideal of the Self Respect marriage for love.

As presented in *Web of Deceit*, the devadasi system is an oppressive arm of Brahminism, a servitude imposed on low caste women by high caste men. But in the novel, neither male nor female reaps any reward from the unequal relationship. In fact the infatuated man becomes the dasi's slave, while she loses her authentic self and must constantly prevaricate in order to maintain his desire for her. That is the web of deceit in which both sides are caught.

The end of the novel brings equality across the board, dissolving the most oppressive hierarchies, such that the rich zamindars spend their money to bring education and health to their subjects, the devadasis voluntarily give up their vocation, and marriages become equal partnerships between husband and wife.

Conclusion

The excitement of art, and its transformative power, lies in the potential of the artist, in the words of Berger, "to turn the tradition against itself" and "wrest its

language away from it”112. The hierarchies that may in one context be what the art form celebrates – kings, zamindars, patrons – may become the hierarchies that are subverted using the very same forms and language. The padams that were used to titillate a male clientele can be stripped of sexualized imagery and connotations to meet the needs of the dancer who no longer depends on her sexual availability to find an audience. The devadasi actress can perform a devadasi on screen to raise her economic and social status. The woman faced with the oppressive conditions of the devadasi system can break free of it, and use her own story to fuel the activism that brings the system down.

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