

Art within Art: Embodying Dance-Drama into the Visual World of Cinema

Elizabeth Baby, M.A., PGDTE

Assistant Professor
PG Department of English
Yuvakshetra Institute of Management Studies
Palakkad, Kerala, India
eliza.ammu@gmail.com

A work of art or an art piece is an artistic creation. It is usually regarded as works from literature and music in a wider sense, but these terms also apply to tangible, portable forms of visual art. It includes painting, sculpture, photography, film, etc. Marcel Duchamp (1915) critiqued the idea that the work of art should be a unique product of an artist's labor, representational of their technical skill and artistic caprice. Theorists have argued that objects and people do not have a constant meaning, but their meanings are fashioned by humans in the context of their culture as they have the ability to make things mean or signify something.

Filmmaking is the process of producing a motion picture from an initial conception and research through scriptwriting, shooting and recording, editing, music work, animation and distribution to audience. It broadly refers to all types of creation like documentary, strains of theatre, literature in film or experimental practices. Cinematic images portray a particular world, the way in which objects and their backgrounds are put together for the camera are a crucial part of the aesthetics of cinema. There are many people who stoutly deny the possibility that film might be art. They say that film cannot be art for it does nothing but reproduce reality mechanically (Rudolph Arnheimer, 8).

Film can be seen as combining so many elements of different art forms to make one piece of art. What makes film great and exceed all other art forms is because it combines all of them in the amalgamation of which we call 'cinema'. It cannot be said that it is the best art medium, but the most potent art medium has to encompass the imagination of the person experiencing the art and film sort of gives everything there for you on screen and in your ears. The art of performance has the ability to elevate the written material to a whole new height.

Most traditional Indian performance forms are characterized by distinct modes of embodied knowledge that increase in intensity with the degree of systematization present in their

performative practices and also problematize the mind and body hierarchies that are inherent to most modern schemes of thought.

The instance of Kathakali, the traditional performance form of Kerala, is taken to consider how a repetitive training regimen that inscribes in the young student a comprehensive language and aesthetic of performance is employed to establish a distinctive 'body mind' and a 'body memory' that almost entirely elide the participation or intervention of the conscious mind (Mundoli Narayanan, 131). A performance relies both on the production as well as on the reception end on the presence of the human body and its specific sensorium while it is basically open to integrate all other media. It can thus provide this capacity for translation and thus function as an open, dynamic configuration of medial translations or even more precisely, transmissions.

In this paper I discuss about the Malayalam movie *PuthiyaNiyamam* starring Mammooty and Nayantara and the role that Kathakali plays in the character of Nayantara. I will look at the influence of the Kathakali character in the artist and the traits of the character that she imbibes. Nayantara portrays the role of Vasuki Iyer, a rare breed of female Kathakali artist and the wife of Adv. Louis Pothan played by Mammooty. She always displays extreme anger and inner conflicts of the character and is brooding, agitated and paranoid. She blasts at the caretaker of her daughter's school bus for toughing her the wrong way and makes Louis buy a car to just drop and pick up her from school. Post interval the real reason for the lady's change of heart is revealed. She has been a victim of a gruesome gang rape at the hands of drugged youngsters. The film goes on to show how she wrecks revenge on the perpetrators of the heinous crime with the help of the newly appointed Commissioner of Police. It is then revealed that Louis was informed by their neighbor about Vasuki being raped and that it was him who used mobile software and mimicked the voice of the commissioner and guided Vasuki to murder her rapists, and this is not revealed to Vasuki. The actress portrays the different phases of the character's life convincingly and with grace.

In the movie Vasuki takes up the costume of Ravana of Ravanacharitam. It is being said in the movie that usually a woman doesn't play the role of Ravana. In different re-readings of the epics, it is said that Ravana has got into conflicts with the asuras but sometimes he was defeated by them and had to be vanquished. The actress is seen to have imbibed some the traits which Ravana possesses such as the thirst for revenge. But her thirst for revenge is justified in the story. When she dresses up and puts up an act like Ravana who is seen to slaying the Asuras, she might have felt that she must accept this trait in her own self so as to defeat the asuras in her real life.

It is possible to see this culture of embodiment as one in which it is not an a-priori conceptual knowledge or experience of emotional states or of character states that are then

translated into bodily expression, but where it is the very bodily expressions and experience that constitute the specific emotional state or thematic content, first in the training and then in the performative context. That a person/ mind/ subject will come to inhabit this body, who/ which will inform and invest that body with a greater knowledge of the cultural/ aesthetic associations and supplement the training is thus an unspoken assumption, an assumption most often borne out in practice (Mundoli Narayanan, 135). It is an indescribable, almost ungraspable, presence of something that cannot be taught or trained, but which is still an outcome of that training; something that goes beyond it but is unattainable without it. It is also something that can never be repeated, or imitated, while the trained structures can be repeated and imitated.

From this we are clearly able to understand that the traits of Ravana have deeply influenced Vasuki and unknowingly she has decided to bring about destruction on the youngsters. The fire of revenge in her mind was fueled up due to this mental training and she has mastered up the courage to not to be silent anymore but to kill those people who have killed her soul. It is also being said by theoreticians that in Kathakali there occurs an erasure of the individual's own identity in the training period and the person completely transforms into the character he /she performs. Here Vasuki is into the character of Ravana at the time when her mind is a raging ocean. Even though Ravana is a *rakshasa*, his killing of asuras might have affected her inner mind. She is then seen to be stronger, and with a certain will power to finish off the rapists so that no other women will have to undergo what she has gone through.

A sense of justice is being prevailed in this sequence. She understood that she had to turn herself into a *rakshasa* to kill the asuras. Also, the reference of Kathakali can be seen in the scene where she is being raped. One of the antagonists is seen to wearing the *kireedam* (crown) when he comes in front of her which symbolically represents him as an asura. The notion of an asura can be seen in daily life where people wear a mask and pretend to be heroic in real life where they are really the ones who bring threat to the society. This depiction of asura is also clearly brought out in a musical album titled as *Asura*. Also, in the same scene when the perpetrators exercise their authority over her, different Kathakali faces keep on flickering time and again and in each shot, they have different *bhavas* on the faces. This can be symbolically interpreted as like showing the real face of the person who we haven't seen till now. This is because in Kathakali the real face is hidden with a mask and a different face is being shown to the audience. So, in such gruesome or tragic scenes the intervention of Kathakali *bhavas* kind of indicates that they have finally removed the mask that was being worn until then and their real face has been revealed to the world. This is also being repeated in the scenes where she takes her revenge.

Even though when we say that Ravana-dhahan is the burning of Ravana to symbolize the triumph of good over evil, in the narrative the actress imbibes the character of Ravana and

transforms herself into a *rakshasain* order to defeat the asuras and establish good. This symbolically states that it is sometimes necessary to bring in Ravana so as to destroy evil and it is not necessary to say that only Ram can bring good and peace because in the present world sometimes evil is needed to destroy evil.

Another important feature is that this erasure of identity of the performer becomes even more marked in the case of male actors playing female roles and vice-versa. That even the gender of the performer is effectively erased, and a typological façade of the other gender is assumed in such cross-role situations, that the social embodiment of one gender is suppressed and replaced by a simulated, performative embodiment of another gender (Mundoli Narayanan, 138). We can see that Vasuki portrays a male role which completely transforms her gender identity. She might have felt that she will be able to give justice to herself when she took upon the character of Ravana than being Vasuki herself. So, she suppressed her own self and put on the invisible cloak of Ravana that would help her to accomplish her task without any hesitations or second thoughts. She is then shown to have no regret or guilt in being a part of the murder of three people because a sense of justice prevailed over there.

The discussion about film as an art form did not start from the very beginning of the time when this medium appeared. It was considered as an entertainment or attraction which was divided into different genres. Walter Benjamin (1935) says, “Mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses toward art.” But Peter Greenway (1982) was not influenced by this instead he has brought in common characteristics between painting as an art form and the representation of it in *The Draughtsman’s Contract*. One of the specific characteristics of this film is the framing which is related to painting. But in difference to painting it is known that a film is a collective medium. It can effectively embody another art form in it and presents it to the audience and can touch upon their emotions. This is because visual medium always has a certain kind of impact on the feelings of the people because they are able to witness something and feel it rather than imagine what the feeling might be through reading or listening or seeing a painting and then trying to interpret it.

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