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The Interface of History, Gender, Politics and Aesthetics of Mohiniyattam: A Cultural Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper "The Interface of History, Gender, Politics and Aesthetics of Mohiniyattam: A Cultural Analysis"is an attempt to study the classical dance form of Kerala - Mohiniyattam, from an interdisciplinary standpoint and with a Cultural Studies slant. It is generally maintained that Mohiniyattam is the classical dance form of Kerala. The word 'Mohiniyattam' means the dance of the enchantress. Customary consensus holds that it evolved from the dance the *Devadasi*s performed in the temples as an offering to God. This paper intends to make a semiotic and discursive study of the emergence, evolution, and the current significations that one can discern in Mohiniyattam. And also, to discuss on the Culturalimportance of the dance form Mohiniyattam, along with the gender issues faced by the so called 'Devadasis' or dancers.

Key Words: Male gaze, arts, Performance, Gender Politics,Devadasis, Namboothiri

INTRODUCTION

A cursory look at Mohiniyattam will reveal that the art-form has its own codes, conventions and assumptions. However, the intention of this paper is not to study the art form from within this intrinsic codified structure.This study seeks to achieve such a broadening of the understanding of this art-form; it is aimed at analyzing the various meanings that are communicated when it is performed in front of an audience who perhaps does not know the codes and conventions of this art-form, and even for a researcher who would want to historicize it.

This study hopes to problematize the 'politics' behind 'viewing' and 'seeing' a Mohiniyattam performance. It seeks to explore the interference of the 'male gaze' not just during the evolution of Mohiniyattam, but also as a frame that 'frames' the performance itself. The study also seeks to analyze how the positioning of Mohiniyattam as the 'Classical State Art' of Kerala primarily occurred in connection with the Indian National movements. Also, the theoretical insights from Judith Butler's *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* would make possible a reading of Mohiniyattam not just as a gendered performance but also as the site where the 'sex' of the woman is tamed/trained to conform to the gender of the female figure.

Mohiniyattam: Origin, History and Evolution

Mohiniyattam is considered to be the classical dance form of Kerala."Mohiniyattam can be literally interpreted as the dance of Mohini" (Nayar 115). In mythology, Lord Vishnu who worshipped 'Devi' transforms into Mohini- the most seductive/ enchanting dancer. The myth of Mohini is as follows: during 'Palazhimadhanam' ie, the churning of the Milky Ocean, Lord Vishnu assumed the form of 'Mohini'- a charming enchantress. It was to enthrall the demons who had taken away the pot containing 'Amruth'- the elixir of life and immortality, and get the pot back. Mesmerizing the demons, the Mohini succeeded in recapturing the pot with the divine brew (*KeraliyaKalanikhandu*

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268). Another story in the Hindu mythology about Mohini is related to the demon Bhasmasura. Lord Shiva granted Bhasmasura the power to burn up and immediately turn into ashes (bhasma) anyone whose head he touched with his hand. Bhasmasura thereupon attempted to touch the head of Lord Shiva himself with his hand. While Shiva was fleeing away, Lord Vishnu appeared in the form of Mohini in front of Bhasmasura. Enticing the asura to join the dance Mohini tricked him into touching his own head, thus turning him into ashes (*KeraliyaKalanikhandu* 268).

The regional variations of the myth of Mohini can be seen in different areas in South India. As an example, in the article *MohiniyattathileMargiyumDesiyum*(The Margi and the Desi in Mohiniyattam) Nirmala Panickersays that in Tamil Nadu, dancers were designated using the common-name 'Mohini' and the money paid to these dancers was termed 'Mohinippanam.'

Here, it has to be mentioned that the evolutionary history of Mohiniyattam cannot be confined to Kerala, but encompasses a broader area called 'Tamilakam'. It is believed that this art form evolved from 'Devadasiyattam'- a ritualistic dance performed by the Devadasis (Panicker 13). Kalyanikkuttiyamma gives an account of the mythical origin of the Devadasi tradition in her book *MohiniyattamCharithravumAttaprakaravum* (47). It was a practice among the primitive human communities to sacrifice the lives of young girls or boys to appease the Gods, when faced with adverse circumstances. Since men were required for hunting, majority of the scapegoats were young girls. Once, when the community faced a great famine, they decided to give the life of a beautiful young girl as an offering to God. When the ritualistic dance prior to the sacrifice reached its peak, the girl disappeared leaving behind only the garland that she had worn for the occasion. That night, people saw with naked eyes the sudden appearance and disappearance of their God in all his glory. They built a shrine at that particular place; this space may be speculated as the first temple *per se*. Consequently, instead of taking away their lives as sacrifice, young girls began to be offered as the life-long servants of God.

During the pre- Christian era, the people of the area that is now Kerala too were within the Dravidian cultural spectrum. A. Sreedhara Menon in his work *A Survey of Kerala History*says:

The people of ancient Kerala followed Dravidian practices which were not based on any particular religious philosophy. Their way of life was an incongruous mixture of primitive rites and practices. The people worshipped totem Gods and innumerable spirits inhabiting rivers, trees, hills, etc. They had also many local deities guarding the borders of their villages and demons that caused diseases. The Dravidians worshipped these Gods and Goddesses by offering the food to the accompaniment of music and dancing. (83)

Kalyanikkuttiyamma infers that the Devadasi system existed in its primitive form in the small shrines that existed in that Dravidian civilization (48).

The advent of Aryanisation brought about significant changes to the above-mentioned practices of worship. As A. Sreedhara Menon observes, "The Aryanisation of Kerala was a slow but steady process which was effected in a subtle manner 'not by the force of arms, but by the arts of peace'" (88). The dissemination of the Aryan culture influenced the lifestyle and the beliefs of society. The culture stressed the primacy of Chaturvarnya, thereby foisting a caste system on a casteless society (90). They also established temples and the concomitant rituals according to the Vedas with a view to popularize the Hindu religion; several temple arts and festivals were also introduced with the same motive (91). Under these circumstances, dance and dancers acquired more importance. Many girls became dancers in temples where (and when) the everyday pooja (ritualistic offering accompanied by prayer) came to be accompanied by song and dance. They were known as 'Thevadichis' or 'Devadasis' and their dance was called 'Thevadichiyattam.' The word 'Thevadichi means 'Devante adiyudeachi' (the servant of God) or 'devapadadasi' (Kalyanikkuttiyamma 49). They had to confine their lives to within the premises of the temple. All relations with their family

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were cut- off. Marriage was forbidden for them. They were considered equal to God and were respected by all people. They sang the hymns of God and danced with devotion (Kalyanikkuttiyamma 48).

A detailed curriculum was designed to make these performers experts in various arts; from the age of five they were given training in music and dance. The Devaswombuilt huge bungalows exclusively for the Devadasis and their opinions were considered with due respect even in the matters of the temple administration. Even the Royal families offered their girls as 'thevadichis' because of these reasons. They were provided with palanquins to travel and servants to accompany them. In those days they never performed anywhere else other than the temple. Kalyanikkuttiyamma observes from the stone scriptures at the Suchindram temple that the various structures that exhibit architectural excellence such as the Vasanthamandapam, IlayanayinarMandapam, etc. were built under the initiatives of Devadasis. She also identifies the statues of the Devadasis Sitamma (who built the IlayanayinarMandapam) and her mother Malakkutti near the sanctum sanctorum (Sreekovil) of the temple. Though the Devadasis became administratively and economically a powerful community, what followed was a period of falling fortunes for them.

The Devadasi system, in other words, later became a kind of 'sacred prostitution.' Because of the moral deterioration that gripped the community, royal families no more offered their girls to the temples as Devadasis. By the thirteenth century, the Devadasi system became an inheritance since the children born to the Devadasis were forced to follow the tradition and get initiated into the profession.

The moral deterioration of the Devadasis was also reflected in the art form of Devadasiyattam. "In their dance, they imported more and more of the erotic, ignoring their spiritual and aesthetic values"- says M. K. K. Nayar in *Classical Arts of Kerala* (111). The evidence of this shift can be found in the 'Manipravalakavyas'/'Manipravalakritis' such as *Unniyachicharitham*, *Unnichiruthevicharitham*, *Unnuneelisandesham* etc. of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It contains detailed descriptions of the sensual and amorous performances and movements of the Devadasis. It has been mentioned in *Unnichiruthevicharitham* that the Namboodiris visited the Devadasis to fondle them (Kalyanikkuttiyamma 55). *Chandrolsavam*- a sixteenth century poem composed by a Namboodiri poet (Menon 326) "is a gut splitting satire of the society that played slaves to the courtesans"; says M K KNayar (*Classical Arts of Kerala* 111). He adds, "It describes a galaxy of the elite of Kerala getting together in the palace of Manakulam Raja to celebrate the festival of the moon and their ridiculous conduct to please their favourite Devadasis" (111).

In the course of time, Mohiniyattam began to acquire recognition through Kalamandalam. It underwent a standardization process by the deletion of the erotic elements inherent in its structure. The Nattuvan who moved through the stage along with the dancer was given a dignified position at the right side of the stage. The instruments that were compatible with Carnatic music were used: Mridangam replaced ThoppiMaddalam (both are percussion instruments); Violin (a string instrument with four strings) and Idaykka (An hourglass shaped percussion instrument used in the temples of Kerala played with a stick curved at the tip) were also introduced. It has already been mentioned that Mohiniyattam is widely accepted as an evolved form of Dasiyattam. However, there are differing opinions regarding this 'sense of an origin.' K S Narayanapillai in an article *MohiniyattathinteCharithravumSwaroopavum*argues that Mohiniyattam is not the metamorphosed form of Bharathanatyam or its predecessor Dasiyattam. Mohiniyattam has elements of Nritha and Abhinaya. Nritha is pure dance that does not convey any meaning; Abhinaya is the art of expressing the mood or emotion in a dance or drama composition. Just like every other art form in India, the 'abhinaya' of Mohiniyattam is based on *Natyasasthra* (a detailed compendium of technical instructions about the performing arts believed to be written by Bharatha). Hence it may have similarities to other art forms such as Bharathanatyam. But the 'Nritha' of Mohiniyattam is unique

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to this form of dance; it is circular in nature where as the body movements of Bharathanatyam are stiff and rigid (13). He also says that Dasiyattam was a social phenomenon that existed in the temples of almost all the provinces of Tamil Nadu, but in Kerala, there are no records that prove the existence of Devadasis as a major community in all places. Majority of the temples in Kerala are not known to have Devadasis. Even if they existed, it was only in a limited number of places like Palakkad and Sucheendram; both these places have proximity to Tamil Nadu. The practice of offering girls to temples did not exist in Kerala (14). He also says that it is a wrong notion about Mohiniyattam that it emerged during the reign of Swathithirunal. Historical records prove that prior to his reign Regent Maharani had brought an Ashaan (teacher) from Ambalappuzha (in Madhya Kerala), not from Tamil Nadu to teach Mohiniyattam (15).

These arguments point to the fact that there are problems even in the originary claims of Mohiniyattam. As Foucault says "The origin always precedes the Fall. It comes before the body, before the world and time; it is associated with the gods, and its story is always sung as a theogony. But historical beginnings are lowly: not in the sense of modest or discreet like the steps of a dove, but derisive and ironic, capable of undoing every infatuation" (*Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*143). This would imply, in a nutshell that Mohiniyattam cannot be traced back to a transcendental origin; it has been shaped by the various competing and divergent forces of socio-aesthetic history, with the cultural 'polis' as its base.

'Past(e)ing the Nation': Mohiniyattam as Cultural Imaginary

Mohiniyattam today, regarded as the indigenous dance form of Kerala. A start-up question that emerges here is this: How did Mohiniyattam and Bharathanatyam which evolved from a 'claimed' common prototype Dasiyattam to emerge and sustain themselves (differently) as indigenous dance forms of Kerala and Tamil Nadu respectively? What are the stakes of these sub-nationalities in such a signification? Here, it may be argued that the cultural positioning of Mohiniyattam as 'classical State Art' in Kerala primarily occurred in connection with the consolidation of India as a nation. As Benedict Anderson says, Nation, Nationality and Nation-ness are 'cultural artefacts of a particular kind'; they are innovative, recent concepts, created in the late 18th century (*Imagined Communities* 48). He says:

The creation of these artefacts towards the end of the eighteenth century was the spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces; but that, once created, they became 'modular', capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations. (*Imagined Communities* 48)

This modern concept emerged in India during the 19th and 20th centuries. In many ways, it was the product of colonial modernity – the ideological environment created by a complex of forces including capitalism, nation-state, individualism, rationalism, humanism, industrialization, colonialism, democracy, etc. (*KaliyarangileDesa/BhoothaBhavanaka*l 34) Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (*Imagined Communities* 49). Ernest Gellnerin *Thought and Change* says that 'Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist' (Anderson: 49).

From a slightly overarching and broader (Indian) historical perspective, one can discern that there indeed was a pressing requirement to 'unite' these linguistic states or linguistic nations, to facilitate the formation of the 'imagined community' that is the Indian Nation. In order to assimilate them to a common national imaginary, various aspects (such as dance, music, literature, myth, etc.) had to be presented as tradition. According to Eric Hobsbawm,"Traditions which appear or claim to

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be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented" (*Inventing Traditions* 1).They try to establish continuity for the emergent community with a suitable historic past. Many political institutions and ideological movements such as nationalism have invented even historic continuity "by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity" (*Inventing Traditions* 7).

This 'cultural-political move' was evident in Kerala in the 1930s - a time when the nationalist movements (Pertaining to a pan-Indian dream) were gathering momentum; it was also a time when the idea of "AikyaKeralam" (Unified Kerala) was gaining prominence.

The classicization of Mohiniyattam occurred at a time when the Indian National Freedom Movements were acquiring momentum. The period was also marked by the promotion of the participation of women in the independence struggles. Perhaps the earlier-mentioned metamorphosis of the image of Durga/ Kali into 'BharathMatha' was also a conscious move to probe and clinch the possibility of invigorating (and inspiring) sub-continental women to become a part of the struggle for Indian independence; thereby emphasizing an inclusive conception of nationalism. It may be argued that in a trajectory that closely mirrors this inclusive urge, the establishment of Kalamandalam and the commencement of systematic training in Mohiniyattam 'created new spaces' for the dance form, in the wake of an emergent Modernity. It also provided new opportunities for women to come into the limelight by developing their artistic talent. But, if analyzed critically, these openings which are perceived as 'liberatory' are also 'closures' in another sense. As has been observed, "Religious politics has created opportunities for women's activism while simultaneously undermining women's autonomy" (*Appropriating Gender* 4). This is reflected in the sustenance of *lasya*(tender graceful dance) in Mohiniyattam even after it underwent various reforms. "The steps and movements in Mohiniyattam were chosen to bring out an exquisite exposition of *lasya* that would, in an imaginary manner, compare with the concept of the celestial dance performed by seductive charmers like Urvasi" (*Classical Arts of Kerala* 116). The soft enticing movements displaying *lasya* associates the dance form to the meek and fragile image of a woman. This can be interpreted as the intervention of the "unconscious of patriarchal society" in structuring the dance form.

Perhaps even during the 'prehistoric' times and the circumstances that led to the emergence of the Devadasis, it would be safe to assume that women were the scapegoats whose lives were sacrificed to appease the Gods. Again, by means of a reiteration, let us recall that in the Namboodiri dominated society of the twelfth century, the Namboodiri men, in order to safely maintain their relationship with the Devadasis, declared that entering into relationship with these damsels was divine. Even the Namboodiri women were made to believe that it was a virtue if their husbands had an extra-marital relation with the Devadasis. The formulations of Laura Mulvey become significant in this context. She observes: "Woman then stands in the patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning." (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* 834) She adds: "Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle…" (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* 837).

The insights provided by Mulvey in her essay *Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema* are relevant in the case of Mohiniyattam too. Mohiniyattam is an expression of lasya in all its fullness and sensuousness**.** The circular, swaying movements in Mohinyattam give full scope for the display of the feminine form (as it exists in the Male fantasy) in all its curves and contours (*Classical Arts of Kerala* 116*).*

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But Mulvey also says that the 'woman exhibited' also evokes the castration anxiety in men. The male unconscious has different avenues of escape from this anxiety. One among them is fetishistic scopophilia, which is by building up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself (*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* 840). This concept of Fetishistic Scopophilia can definitely be regarded as one factor that shaped the 'aesthetics' of the Devadasi system. Girls were dedicated as Devadasis, when quiet young, even before puberty, to the deity. They were perceived to be auspicious, as they were conceived to be 'nityasumangalis' (eternally married women) who could never be widowed. This group of women was manipulated by the patriarchy through deification; tied to their place as bearers of meaning.

In short, one can perhaps sum up with the following formulation put forward by KapilaVatsyanan: "The classical dance styles of contemporary India are the reconstructions of the fragments of antiquity. On one level they have great antiquity which links them with the past; on another they are contemporary and recent…. Each time recasting the past, but not the past" (*DesabhavanayudeAattaprakarangal*113). Like every other classical dance form in India, Mohiniyattam was also shaped by the forces of (Sub)Nationalism. It was used as an effective tool to create a socio-cultural imaginary called 'Kerala.

Politics of Enticement: Mohiniyattam as a Gender(ed) Performance

In a certain specific sense, dance, specifically Mohiniyattam (in Kerala), becomes a site for gender(ed) performance. It disciplines and orders the female body into certain performativities that is itself based on acquired notions of gender. As is evident, Mohiniyattam is performed exclusively by women. Consequently, it would be an informed guess that, in the process of evolution of the dance form, the female body has acquired numerous layers of meanings. All along, the performance and the prescriptive assumptions as to its 'staging' have influenced the constructions, structuring and sustenance of gender identities. One of the key interventions that various versions of feminist thought has sought to bring about is the assertion of the insight that a human being is not born with a gender, but it is a prescriptive/ascriptive (these poles or axes in fact overlap and over-write mutually!) identity acquired over time. As Simon de Beauvoir says, "One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (Butler: 519).

The above-mentioned insight would lead us to the obvious fact that 'Gender' is not a stable identity. It is an identity repeatedly constructed through time, and it is always constructed through the body. And it is in the 'making of the body as the site that makes it necessary that the 'body' be tamed, groomed and molded in such a manner that the 'body-memory, both from the perspective of the 'self' as also from the 'outside, acquires the desired function in terms of semiotic transactions. To cite Judith Butler again, "What is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo" (Butler 520). Gender does not precede performance; rather, gender is created by the act of performance. This performance is informed by what is already historically constituted as gender. To go back to Simone de Beauvoir, she claims that any gender is a historical situation rather than a natural fact (Butler: 520). Here, the material or natural dimensions of the body is not denied, but is "reconceived as distinct from the process by which the body acquires cultural meanings." (Butler 520). This claim is put forward on the basis of the distinction between "sex as a biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity." (Butler 522). This process presumes a certain innate dichotomy that is usually 'glossed over' by traditional formulations of the man-woman dialectic, which is propped up by what can be called the Patriarchal Unconscious (to adapt the insight of Frederic Jameson); and it is this gloss that the feminist seeks to 'uncover.'

To cite Butler yet again:

To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but

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> to be a woman is to have becomea woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (522)

The theoretical insights from Butler illuminate a reading of Mohiniyattam not just as a gendered performance but also as the site where the 'sex' of the woman is tamed/trained to conform to the gender of the female figure. A girl or a woman who learns Mohiniyattam is forced to wear either the *saree* or the *salwar kameez* during training; an act which typifies visual and attire-based notions of femininity. Also, one has to learn to 'act coy' in order to perform the female characters in Mohiniyattam. Moreover, one who learns Mohiniyattam has to discipline her body through rigorous facial and bodily exercises to acquire an 'essentially' feminine body shape. The Mohiniyattam costume with its sandal-coloured hue and its golden border (which resembles the 'traditional' golden bordered 'mundumneriyathum' [set-mundu], an iconic attire-index with respect to how one should 'dress-up' in the 'true' Malayali Fashion) and the adornment of the hair with jasmine flowers (though not a 'bounded' feature of Kerala-ness) are associated with the image of the definitive (and in turn 'ever defining') 'Malayala Manga' (Kerala Dame). Seen this way, it may be asserted that Mohiniyattam constructs the notion of an 'ideal femininity' or an image of the ideal Kerala woman. It also compels the female body to conform to the constitutive idea of emerging as a 'woman.'

The image of ideal Kerala woman constructed through Mohiniyattam is sustained through advertisements in the visual media as well as through films. The advertisements released in Kerala make use of various cultural signs (set mundu, pulikali, thiruvathirakali, mohiniyattam, kathakalietc) in order to reach to the audience.These signs can be recognized by any member of an imagined community such as Kerala. The signs when incorporated into advertisements having duration of a few seconds become mere indexical references which invoke nostalgia in the viewer (*NagaravrikshathileKuyil: ParasyajingilileVamsheeyasangeethangal*63).
The transplantation of Mohiniyattam from the stage to the domain of advertisements and film songs is based on a 'negative post-modern rationale'; it is just a citation or quotation of certain chunks of the art form without any anchorage.Using a variety of cultural signifiers such as Mohiniyattam, chenda, landscapes etc. as indexical references merely become a seductive pastiche (*NagaravrikshathileKuyil* 59).

A curious re-hashing/contraction is the next issue under scrutiny. What is being referred to here is the stage-presence of Mohiniyattam performances, today, at competitive Youth Festival at school and university levels in Kerala. Girls selected from the respective schools or colleges compete with each other in performing the dance form. Their performance is graded or rated by judges who have expertise in the field. The time allotted for the performance is ten minutes. As has already been hinted, what is performed on the youth festival stage is a miniature/truncated version of Mohiniyattam. What usually takes hours to enact/display with its myriad elaborate intricacies and attributes is presented in a very limited time. This presentation is different from the performance at temples and at concerts (as designed and standardized by Kalamandalam). At temples the dancer performs for the Gods, in concerts, the dancer performs for the audience; and at the youth festival, the dancer performs ultimately for the judges. The (performer) competitor is awarded grace marks in the SSLC/ Plus Two board exams for securing an 'A' grade in the State School Youth Festival. At least for some people, performing Mohiniyattam at youth festivals is only a means to receive grace marks thereby improving the result of the Board exam.

Classical/Popular is a duality that exists in the realm of art. 'Classical' is a status that is attributed and artificial (*KaliyarangileDesa/BhoothaBhavanakal* 36). When a 'classical art' (which represents the wide canvass of the 'Nation- State) tries to become centralized and singular, the internal presences of its regionality try to split the same art form into different entities. The use of Mohiniyattam which is a classical dance form in the realm of 'popular' such as films, advertisements and youth festivals (to a certain extent) is a process in which the classical art is

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democratized (*KaliyarangileDesa/BhoothaBhavanaka*l36*)*.

In the wake of the discussions so far, one can tentatively put forward an overarching observation that Mohiniyattam stands as an important signifier in various realms, representing the tradition and heritage of Kerala. As said earlier, it is often associated with the traditional, ideal Malayalee woman. But in contemporary reality, the individual performer need not necessarily be a person who endorses this 'tradition'; she may be a girl with varying 'modern' sensibilities (in 'off-stage' life, she may prefer to wear jeans or bob her hair).

To reformulate in slightly different terms, in the current scenario, Mohiniyattam can be definitely viewed as an 'empty signifier.' An 'empty' or 'floating signifier' is variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or nonexistent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even *any* signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean. In such a state of radical disconnection between signifier and signified, 'a sign only means that it means.' (*Semiotics for Beginners* 52)

CONCLUSION

The consolidated attempt of this thesis has been to chalk out a semiotic and discursive study of Mohiniyattam by placing it in the socio- political context in which it evolved into the present-day form.

The formulation of Mohiniyattam into a standardised art-form is in itself the deployment of a cultural imaginary that aids the process of creating an 'imagined community' called the 'Kerala state', within the larger contours of the Indian Nation State. The basic observation is that Mohiniyattam as an art form was transformed into a cultural object that could be held up to quicken the state formation. In this process Mohiniyattam which evolved from Dasiyattam (which is a proto-type common to both Mohiniyattam and Bharathanatyam) came to be considered as the 'indigenous' dance form of Kerala. This process was effected through the imposition of various reforms on the art form (For example inclusion of the poems and songs of the poets in Kerala.). This observation is substantiated by the insights from Eric Hobsbawm's article "Inventing Traditions" and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*.

There was always the intervention of a male agency in the most decisive stages in the evolution of Mohiniyattam. Laura Mulvey's observations in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* illuminate the argument that from the prehistoric times women were manipulated by the patriarchy to suit their needs; they were deified as Devadasis, tied to their place as the bearer of meaning. The circular, swaying movements in Mohinyattam give full scope for the display of the feminine form (as it exists in the Male fantasy) in all its curves and contours; i.e. in Mohiniyattam, woman is displayed as a sexual object with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact.

Also, in many ways, Mohiniyattam becomes a site for gender(ed) performance. The rigorous body and facial exercises to acquire a necessarily feminine shape, the attire during a Mohiniyattam performance compels the female body to conform to the constitutive idea of emerging as a 'woman.' Judith Butler's idea of 'Performativity' validates this argument.
Even today, the image of the 'ideal Kerala woman' thus constructed is sustained through advertisements and films by the use of Mohiniyattam as indexical references.

Yet another space where Mohiniyattam is performed is at youth festivals. This performance is different from the performances at temples or at concerts; it is performed ultimately for the judges. Here the performing body acquires another different meaning.

To conclude, Mohiniyattam is today an 'empty signifier.' It means different things to different people on different occasions.

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