

Stigmas and Sexuality: Poetry and Dance Challenge Norms

Female sexuality is not a comfortable topic. While laws in certain countries may equate women to men in terms of suffrage or wages, the social stigma against femininity and sex as interwoven concepts remains formidable. In India, a culture of misogyny and violence towards women renders the country almost dangerous for the female individual. Bharatanatyam, a traditional style of South Indian classical dance, has a particularly storied history regarding the mistreatment of women. Thus, the immense success of Alarmel Valli as a female bharatanatyam soloist is not only impressive, but also inspiring. Valli, who trained in both bharatanatyam and classical music, consciously integrates ancient Indian poetry and music with bharatanatyam, thus creating a meaningful relationship between the art forms. During Valli's October 11th performance at Wesleyan University, she presented a range of nuanced pieces containing both technical and expressive elements. Through her combination of poetry, music, and dance, Valli crafted strong female characters that appeared to reclaim femininity and sexuality.

Bharatanatyam is an ancient Indian art form that is over 2,000 years old. While today it is immensely popular, that has not always been the case. Bharatanatyam began in the temples as an offering to Hindu gods and goddesses. From the start, the study of bharatanatyam, then known as *sadir*, was segregated by gender: *nattuvanars*, or male teachers, would instruct female *devadasis*, a word that literally means "servant of God". When bharatanatyam moved into the royal courts as a form of entertainment, it became more stylized and was structured by the Tanjore Quartet in the Maratha-period court of the city of Thanjavur. During the mid-19th century, under British occupation, devadasis developed a negative connotation in society, as they were equated with prostitutes because they were unmarried and did not fit into expected gender roles ("Devadasis"). This damaging perspective was reinforced by Victorian values; as K. Santhaa Reddy of the

National Commission for Women in New Delhi states, “For a European mind, a dancing girl could be just an entertainer performing for the pleasure of rich men” (Reddy). Rather than being respected for devoting their lives to the ritual worship of God, devadasis were considered shameful because they did not align with the traditional gender roles. Bharatanatyam had a revival in the early- to mid-20th century as artists such as Rukmini Devi Arundale and E. Krishna Iyer celebrated bharatanatyam as an art form by linking it back to ancient traditions and texts, such as the *Natya Shastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* (Puri 119). By focusing on the technical elements of bharatanatyam, these contemporaries were able to bypass the stigma of the mid- to late-19th century. Today, bharatanatyam is once again an accepted and thriving art form; yet, the degrading attitude towards women that was once associated with bharatanatyam and the current prevalence of sexism in India create negative connotations surrounding female sexuality and dance that persist to this day.

A prominent exponent of bharatanatyam, Alarmel Valli trained in the *pandanallur* style of bharatanatyam under Sri Chokkalingam Pillai and Sri Subbaraya Pillai and received classic music training from T. Muktha. Valli’s work predominantly focuses on tying these aspects of her life together, along with ancient Indian poetry; during her performance, Valli stated that she aims “to ‘write’ with her body [and] ‘sing’ with her art” (“Alarmel”). Valli added that she perceives dance as a physical manifestation of music and poetry, as is exemplified by her film entitled ‘Lasya Kavya’, or dance as “visual poetry” (“Lasya”). Valli’s work has earned her the prestigious Padma Bhusan, Padmashri, and Sangeet Natak Akademi Puraskar awards in India, as well as numerous other national and international arts honors (“Alarmel”).

Valli has performed expansively, propagating her art far beyond India, and making her way across the globe to Wesleyan University. Valli stated at the beginning of her Connecticut

debut that Wesleyan's culturally-informed student body and close relationship with South Indian performance art made her presentation in Crowell Concert Hall particularly special. The audience's understanding allowed her to perform a range of pieces featuring *nritta*, pure technique, and *nritya*, storytelling using a combination of hand gestures and *abhinaya*, or expression. Valli presented four pieces: an introductory item on nature and cosmic energy, or *prakriti*, a *varnam*, or a long expressive and technical piece that is part of classical repertoire, a *javali*, or satirical expressive item, and part of a *thillana*, an item involving fast-paced technical hand gestures, body postures, and footwork. Valli's commitment to her traditional roots was evident as she used her gurus' classic pandanallur *jatis*, or technical sequences set to rhythmic syllables, in her *varnam*. The syncopation of her movements against the *roopaka taalam*, or six-count rhythmic pattern, provided a subtle intricacy to her movements, demonstrating that classic methods can be just as stunning as contemporary ones.

Valli's expressions commanded attention: her facial expressions engaged the audience continuously, from the moment she stepped onstage to the close of her final piece. In one vignette, Valli portrayed the goddess Parvati's fear as her consort Shiva swallows poison from the mouth of a serpent used by celestial beings and demons to churn the ocean. Valli managed to distinctly depict the serpent, poison, demons, celestial beings, Parvati, and Shiva all in the span of less than a minute. From overt horror at the sight of poisonous fumes spreading through the air, to Parvati's shocked disbelief that Shiva was drinking poison, Valli jumped from emotion to emotion, from mindset to mindset, with ease. Her clarity when transitioning among characters was astounding; at times, it seemed as though her body was just a vessel for each character to possess and enact the tale. At other times, it appeared as though she was not alone onstage. During the *javali*, Valli portrayed an angry and betrayed woman whose lover attempts to win her

over after various infidelities. Her expression created such tension with the imaginary lover that his presence could be palpably felt onstage; at one point, Valli fell forward as if the lover had tried to grab her wrist, a move so convincing that it gave the impression that an invisible force was pulling her. Valli's commitment to embodying every character was truly mesmerizing to watch, demonstrating her ability to write stories with her body.

Most fascinating was how Valli's portrayal of ancient Indian text through bharatanatyam created self-directed and sensual female characters, a sharp contrast to the sexual degradation of women associated with bharatanatyam in the past. Poetry in India has a strong tie to eroticism: “[p]oets in India were required to be proficient in the knowledge of erotics... [t]he knowledge of kamashastra was proudly displayed by Sanskrit poets in their descriptions of love-making” (Amaresh 1202-1203). In the past, this eroticism, when linked with bharatanatyam, was used to force a shameful sexual association upon devadasis. When bharatanatyam contemporaries revived the art form, they placed emphasis on love, or *sringaram*, as maternal love and devotional love for god, to avoid the negative connotation of eroticism. Thus, Valli's choice to include two significant pieces featuring an unapologetically amorous female heroine is a bold one, and Valli's portrayal of these leading characters further promotes female empowerment. In her introduction to varnam, Valli mentioned an erotic element to her expression, which was noteworthy in her performance. Last year, Alastair Macaulay of *The New York Times* noted that this particular varnam “beautifully shows how Indian art can combine the erotic and the existential”, citing Valli's expressive depiction of Parvati's “amorous longing for the god Shiva” (Macaulay). Indeed, her depiction of the goddess Parvati pining for Shiva used coquettish looks and sensual body language to demonstrate her love and yearning. In the javali, Valli played a woman who shuns an unfaithful lover, and, unlike in so many javalis, in this particular piece, the

heroine does not forgive her lover. Valli did not choose these pieces by chance; she is known for selecting javalis containing themes of “unabashed eroticism” (Khurana). Whether female empowerment was an intention of Valli’s choreography, her precise combination of ancient Indian poetry and bharatanatyam dance develops female characters that shed the negative sexual taboo of bharatanatyam and sexism in India and can be erotic and feminine without being degraded or subservient to men. Valli’s dance appears to assertively reclaim female sexuality as she showcases strong female characters that express sringaram erotically without being objects, all using bharatanatyam, a formerly culturally stigmatized art form.

The link between poetry, music, and dance is a core tenet of Valli’s bharatanatyam mission. Her dance almost creates synesthesia as her body works in tandem with the words; the sounds of the poetry and music are heard as words and songs can be seen. It’s unclear whether Valli aims to create empowered female characters, or if the combination of overtly erotic expression and poetry with female heroines through bharatanatyam simply implies the reclaiming of femininity and sexuality. Valli’s Wesleyan debut was aesthetically spectacular and every moment enthralled the audience. But perhaps more importantly, it challenged gender roles and cultural traditions, raising enduring questions about femininity and power.

Works Cited

"Alarmel Valli - Dancer, Choreographer." Alarmel Valli. Web. 15 Oct. 2015.

<<http://www.alarmelvalli.org/thedancer.html>>.

Amaresh, Datta. "Erotic Literature." *Encyclopaedia of Indian Literature*. Vol. 2. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1988. 1202-1203. Print.

"Devadasis." *Accelerated Motion*. Wesleyan Press. Web. 15 Oct. 2015.

<<http://acceleratedmotion.org/dance-history/bharatanatyam/devadasis/>>.

Khurana, Suanshu. "Lessons in Harmony." *The Indian Express*. The Indian Express, 22 Sept. 2015. Web. 18 Oct. 2015. <<http://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/lessons-in-harmony/>>.

"Lasya Kavya." *Alarmél Valli*. Web. 15 Oct. 2015.

<<http://www.alarmelvalli.org/lasyakavya.html>>.

Macaulay, Alistair. "Existential and Erotic, Like a Flower Yielding to a Butterfly." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 23 Sept. 2014. Web. 18 Oct. 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/24/arts/dance/utsav-a-festival-of-indian-dance-and-music.html?_r=0>.

Puri, Rajika, and Diana Hart-Johnson. "Paradigm of India's Classical Tradition: Bharatanatyam as Performed Today." *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*.

Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement, 1985. Web. 15 Oct. 2015. <http://jashm.press.illinois.edu/3.3/3-3Paradigm_Puri117-138.pdf>.

Reddy, K. Santhaa. "Devadasis - Time to Review History." *Samarth Bharat*. Hindustan Studies and Services, 12 Apr. 2002. Web. 15 Oct. 2015.

<<http://www.samarthbharat.com/devadasis.htm>>.