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Articulating Choreography: Understanding Dance in Indian Context through Somatic Language

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Abstract:

The paper is an attempt at analysing specific artists and their works vis-à-vis how Indian dance has undergone mutations to create a divide between 'contemporary dance' and 'classical dance'. It raises questions pertinent to looking at dance as one of the aspects of deterritorialization materialized: What defines the contemporariness of a performance and how does a dance form develop into a coded language and separate itself from the other kinds of performance? Does contemporary dance in India, according to the viewers mean strange, meaningless movements? Does dance always have to be inserted with a single meaning, which is shared by the performer and the audience or is it open to multiple articulations on either end? Drawing from excerpts from my interviews with dancers, dancer performances witnessed and workshops attended, I have tried to formulate an argument on what constitutes as 'contemporariness' in dance and how production and reproduction of the same dance is articulated based on the socio-cultural understanding of the language of movement.

Key Words:

Contemporary, language of movement, articulation, dance semiology, palimpsest tradition, somatic articulation.

In a room of six dancers there I was, observing from the corner and translating dance gestures in my diary. And then there was Deepak Shivaswamy, instructing and evaluating the dancers' movement, standing stationary with his hands folded close to the chest and making mental notes for them. Three boys and three women in alternate rows ran in opposite directions in the room and paused in a half forward bent position on Shivaswamy's call—it was to make them look around and see if they were able to express the same bodily expression across the studio. He didn't expect them to mirror the intensity of their feelings with each other but asked them to reflect on the relationship between the emotion and the somatic articulation of it with themselves. And so, after a brief pause and observation, they resumed their movement across the room and gradually shifted into a synchronous tensed physical posture—they were a step closer to their performance 'Trapped', the first part of the choreography named *Within* conceptualised by Aditi Mangaldas. These dancers, trained in classical dance, Kathak, who with the help of Shivaswamy, were creating a new dance language of Kathak based in 'contemporary style'.

The following paper is not about analysis of specific artists or their works but it will look into how Indian dance has undergone mutations to create a divide between 'contemporary dance' and 'classical dance'. What defines the contemporariness of a performance and how does a dance form develop into a coded language and separate itself from the other kinds of performance? Does contemporary dance in India, according to the viewers mean strange, meaningless movements? Does dance always have to be inserted with a single meaning, which is shared by the performer and the audience or is it open to multiple articulations on either end? Drawing from excerpts from my interviews with dancers, dancer performances witnessed and workshops attended, I will try to formulate an argument on what constitutes as 'contemporariness' in dance and how production and

reproduction of the same dance is articulated based on the socio-cultural understanding of the language of movement.

After witnessing Shivaswamy's class proceedings I requested him for an interview. My first question to him was about his involvement with a prominent Delhi based Kathak group, Drishtikon, as a contemporary dancer. As an outsider to the institutionalised language of dance, what is the strategy of intervention that he adopts to dislocate Kathak and relocate it on the map of contemporary style while maintaining the tonality of the dance piece? He says that as a non-classical dancer he plays the 'neutral guy' who steps in only when he sees that there's an aesthetic gap amongst dancers. Of course, not everybody can articulate in the same manner but the general semiotic expression must be the same in case of choreography with more than one person on stage. According to Deepak this intervention is not to suggest dancers to develop a uniform approach to a performance but to be in sync with each other through a movement dialogue. He further states that 'dance is not a form that is best of articulation... Dance is not something that can give you information point to point. It's not a coded language which is meant to make complete sense of something...even language doesn't do it.'

Is contemporary dance and its non-coded gestures a way of then removing dance articulation from the responsibility of carrying a message across to the audience? Where does one place the Rasa theory in dance, which essentially concerns itself with receiving a response from the audience, which is in conjugation with the dancer's semiological intention? Sabsich in 'Articulatory Practice—in Situ' talks about silent consensus across cultures to associate choreography with language. A performance must always 'say' something for it to be further validated by spectatorial articulation of it. Consequently, 'as soon as one assumes that a choreography conveys sense, the analysis runs the double risk of mistaking a choreography for a language and of confusing the way in which a choreography makes sense with the meticulous notation of its concrete movements.' (98) The audience's attention turns towards the attaining a uniform and linguistically sound articulation of the movement which bears the stamp of cultural appreciation. The movement language at this point thus risks into being trapped by the semiological structuration as a text to be read and rather than experienced.

On the other extreme, even if one removes dance choreography from its direct notational meaning in written language, the tendency is to delve into movement analysis. This desire to conceive movement language further aggravates the problem of associating it with fixed signifiers thus performing a reductive reading of dance articulation. An instance of this movement analysis is from Deepak's performance (unnamed) where he depicts a few Kashmiri boys playing cricket on the street. He recalled how after the performance someone from the audience questioned his choice to show young boys pelting stones. The articulation of a bowling action as an act of stone pelting opened a vent for discussion of how dance gestures are culturally received by people and the possibility of 'truth' in its reading. He said, '...it's also a skill in the choreographer to place things in such a way that you just evoke that thought and it's a lot more stronger when something happens in your head than when someone is trying to say it to you.' (Bhagchandani, 2019)

According to him, contemporary dance hopes to evoke a reaction from the audience. It is this response that his work is sought after and not necessarily a meaningful articulation of the performance, encoded in a singular semantic understanding of it. 'Basically (when) I'm saying I know better than you, please listen to me, that's problematic. And one of the things that most of the contemporary art does is to get away from it. To take out the narration of it. To take out the pleasure of actually saying something from a pedestal. But that doesn't mean that it's meaningless.' (ibid) Shivaswamy's pursuit for a reaction from the audience is in agreement with Sabsich's reading of choreography through Saussure's approach to learning an unknown language. According to Saussure if language units are broken into singular, disconnected phonetic characters then

signification dominates sensorial reception of these units which separates spoken language from other linguistic structures. However, as Sabsich takes the language of choreography beyond this linguistic representation to place it on the platform of articulation, the signification over sensorial hierarchy is disturbed. And since choreographic articulation is based on the relationship of differentiation between two heterogenous parts and the connection between them, the language of choreography goes beyond a mere signification or sensorial analysis of movement. Instead it invokes a series of differentials, which has elements of non-sensorial as well, thus making each response more individualistic in nature. (118)

This dichotomy practiced in dance reception on the lines of cognitive articulation through linguistic structuration and spiritual articulation through suspension of thoughts started to develop very early on as dance entered the proscenium stage for public consumption through institutions. In my dissertation submitted to Delhi University, titled 'Nostalgic Innovations: Modern Performance and Pedagogy in Kathak' I have explored the mutations in dance reception (here Kathak) from spaces of private performance to government ownership and overhauling of the dance form for culturally utilitarian purposes. It was in the early to mid-20th century that both contemporary dance (which still is a debatable term attached with 20th century dance in India) of Uday Shankar and construction of institutional Kathak took place. At this point in dance history, the opposition between classical and contemporary was not stark since both aimed at glorifying the spiritual nature of Indian dance aimed at Western audience. The oriental production of movement aesthetics was intended to expand the global scope of spirituality associated with Indian culture, as opposed to the material, intellectual West. In *The Nation and its Fragments*, Chatterjee outlines the criticism of traditional socio-cultural practices of the East during the colonial period and the hierarchy of values this implied. The East however retaliated by organising its cultural practice around superior, spiritual beliefs. As a consequence, the West was bracketed as 'the material domain' that 'lies outside us—a mere external that influences us, conditions us, and forces us to adjust to it. Ultimately, it is unimportant. The spiritual, which lies within, is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential.' So long as India foregrounded the spiritual elements in cultural practices, it could adapt itself to the modern influences of the West, 'without losing its identity.' (qtd. in Bhagchandani, 2015)

In 1952 when the foundation of Bhartiya Kala Kendra was laid, the beginning of institutional Kathak in Delhi (cultural capital) was firmly established. Cultural entrepreneurs ensured that representatives of classical dance were brought to the city to sanctify the practice of dance. To further formalise movement aesthetics (in case of Kathak), books on gestural meaning of Kathak were printed. One of the initiators in this direction was Maya Rao who sketched gestures and somatic movements thus signifying it with the written word. Of course even before codification happened in print, the *mudras* had fixed meaning attached to it, but because of its association with oral learning, it was both open to change through individual adoption and also subject to interpretation. Print media was therefore a means to provide etymological significance to dance gesticulation, which could have slipped into the improvisational territory of contemporary dance. This institutionally accepted language of dance was linear in nature since it was read as a genealogical development of dance articulation, which was preserved through practice over the years. Subsequently, *gharana* or the families of dance practitioners were raised to the pedestal of supervisors and decision makers in the linguistic codification and movement articulation of classical dance.

Reading this shift in cultural development in dance aesthetics through Stuart Hall's reading of articulation, one can see the relationship of domination and subordination contributing to the construction of a movement ideology. While both contemporary dance and classical dance aimed at spiritual upliftment through dance dialogue, the latter gained prominence through its codified expression. It was at this moment that classical dance entered the space of cultural articulation,

including within its gamut improvisational techniques, multiple interpretations, and contemporariness of dance subjects, while at the same time validating these through the presence of stalwarts of dance and stakeholders of *gharanas*. One can thus see the mutation in dance culture through Hall's reading of miscellaneous forces which assist in articulation of certain selective practices over others. The acknowledgement of these forces thus becomes essential in revisiting established cultural practices to form a coherent historical understanding of how certain aspects of culture have been articulated across time:

The aim of a theoretically-informed political practice must surely be to bring about or construct the articulation between social or economic forces and those might lead them in practice to intervene in history in a progressive way—an articulation which has to be *constructed* through practice precisely because it is not guaranteed by how these forces are constituted in the first place. (95)

Continuing on the same note, Hall highlights the manner in which institutions materialise a communication pattern, which promotes the structure of (cultural) articulation. These institutional forces working from different directions like political, economic, technical, social, etc. are continuously in the process of materialising articulation which enters the consciousness of general public. Other material forces like institutional standardisation, advertisement, reinforcement through popular consent, etc reiterates the normalisation of these cultural articulations. However, Hall gives the responsibility of re-articulation of these cultural patterns to theorists who must tease out these contributory forces and perform a deconstructive reading of accepted cultural normative. The context in which the identity is constructed and practices generated needs to be revisited to understand the politics of context itself. A recent performance (July 2018) that adequately explains this connotational performance that creates the context rather than context giving way to the performance is *Ghosting* by Bernice Lee. Performed at an event put together by Gati Forum, New Delhi, the choreographic piece begins with Lee taking a selfie with the audience and announcing that the viewers are free to record her and tag her on social media. The performance began with Lee exploring the space with her arms closing in and moving away from her body; she gradually, in a soft voice started saying, 'Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter. The uproarious laughter between the two.' Lee's voice increased in volume and the space around her expanded to occupy the whole room; her movements too became wider. The two lines were broken into pieces, jumbled up and reproduced—sometimes as phrases, at other times stuttered. The performance that went on for almost 10 minutes edged towards an emphasis on the words 'laughter', 'uproarious' and 'indelible'. The performance ironically did invoke laughter in the audience, though some continued to stare at the performing body with an unsure gaze of participation. This continued for a while as the audience and even those not actively participating in the performance recorded the event with their mobile phones, perhaps to revisit it later and look for the meaning in isolation.

The performance came to a sudden end with Lee directly confronting the audience as she snapped at them with the statement, 'stop recording!' It was a moment of reflection for the audience, the ones laughing and recording more embarrassed than others. Lee took a pause before opening the hall for discussion. She didn't dismiss their reaction and agreed with their articulation of the performance as a laughter-inducing piece of art. However, compelled to recreate the context of the performance, she explained the origin of the quote as Christine B Ford's statement on Brett Kavanaugh's act of laughter during the course of her sexual assault. This information created an uncomfortable stir in the audience who started to rearticulate the performance in their head with a different context which now manifested in front of them. (Lee, 2018)

Lee explains *Ghosting* as 'The word I use to name my practice of presence, gaze, activation. A series of articulations seeking to understand a danced relationship between time, embodied (cultural) memory, and thought.' (Bakchormeeboy) The intended motive is not to create a uniform articulation

of meaning or even singular connectivity across chronotopes of performance but to generate a context imbued with a political thought which rearticulates the choreographic piece, furthering it each time into circumstantial improvisation. Like most contemporary artists, Lee doesn't encourage understanding a performance but suggests a sense of feeling that is beyond linguistic representation.

What about her snap at the audience "Stop recording!"? Perhaps, one can see it as her way of reclaiming ownership of her body and inverting the gaze back to the audience. Lee, like most artists encourages audience participation during the course of the performance rather than recording the performance for revisitation without context. The continuously fading body that refuses to be forgotten wants to enter the sensorial memory of the audience and not only the cyborg world of multiple mechanical reproductions. By reclaiming her body and performance, Lee expands the context of the performance beyond its spatial materiality to extend itself towards a cultural and universal feeling of ownership that one is often reduced to, thus reiterating the origin of the idea of Ghosting—of physical subjectivity and refusal to be ghosted/forgotten. It is an odd paradox in itself because she initially asked the audience to record her if they wanted to and by recording her performance, there is hardly any possibility of 'ghosting' taking place since it enters the rather more reliable and less elusive memory of the cyborg. And maybe this self-contradictory move was one of the ways in which Lee wanted to establish the context of her performance which induced misplaced laughter and unsettled the comfortable, passive reception of the people. Perhaps, the performance was aimed only at opening the doors of multiple articulations which collectively contributed to materlisation of the context of performance.

It is here that contemporary dance or dance, which is not 'coded' with meaning, takes a backseat and classical dance with specific meaning attached to it, the gestural understanding of a system of language, takes precedence. Even if a person is not able to articulate the entire dance language the satisfaction of knowing that there's a meaning attached in those gestures, especially spiritual meaning, allows the audience to feel in sync with the performer. Contemporary dance on the other hand takes away the pleasure of assigning a fixed signifier. The apparent meaninglessness of contemporary dance disables the spectator from the position of authority of assigning meaning and categorisation to dance. The gaze is interrupted by the abstractedness of the performance, which refuses to be narrowed to a singular, unifying articulation. The sense of community and spiritual connectivity across space which classical dance provides the audience with or has at least aimed to provide them with is also disrupted because here the individual takes precedence over community.

Performing arts theorists like Pallabi Chakravorty looks at Indian classical dance through the anthropological and cultural framework to trace this interaction between dance and collective viewership as a means to social construction of belief systems. Her essay 'Some Limits of Orientalism: Classical Indian Dance and the Discourse of Heritage' explores the idea of *Riyaz* (regular, repeated practice of a performing art form) and *Rasa* in the context of Indian classical dance. The essay is a detailed reading of how dance travels across time and space, carrying with itself the mutations in understanding the binary concept of tradition and modernity; the negotiation with the past and an adjustment with the contemporary. Under the subsection 'Embodiment and Cultural Memory' Chakravorty echoes the concept of somatic memory as the site for creating a palimpsestic understanding of culture. Drawing forth the dichotomic relationship between Western understanding of the performing body as the subject of gaze and the Eastern reception of the dancing figure as the embodiment of spiritual emotion, she places the argument in the linguistic and paralinguistic experience of performance. The section traces dance scholarship from 1960s and 70s where dance was being read as a choreographic text for analysis by western scholars, sometimes edging towards a reductive and essentialist reading of the performance. In comparison to this, Chakravorty's essay pushes to the fore Taussing's study of multi-sensorial experiences and Michael

Jackson's anecdotes to highlight the dance experience as an embodiment of paralinguistic features. (89-99)

It becomes almost necessary to include here two quotes which foreground embodied experiences articulated as something beyond often-reductive linguistic expression:

Before each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men [...] the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but not withstanding, it still remains the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people. (Du Bois, 96)

It is a cult enacted. An image of the past, even in the form of a master narrative, is conveyed and sustained by ritual performances. And this means that what is remembered in commemorative ceremonies is something in addition to a collectively organised variant of personal or cognitive memory. For if ceremonies are to work for their participants, if they are to be persuasive to them, then those participants must not be simply cognitively competent to execute the performance; they must be habituated to the performance. This habituation is to be found in the bodily substrate of the performance (Connerton 1989: 70-71, qtd. in Niyogi).

Both Du Bois and Connerton's reference to the communal element in performing arts tradition indicates a sensorial experience which precedes titillating (generational?) memory over temporal, independent linguistic articulation. Perhaps it's a similar kind of a fear that runs across audience in India who are used to classical dance.

Does this mean that contemporary dance, as we see it, threatens to rupture this genealogical fabric of cultural emotion? Does the lack of codification and promised sense of spiritual upliftment makes it any less articulate than classical dance forms? Why is there still a hierarchical gap between how we see classical Indian dance and Indian dancers performing in contemporary style? According to well-known dance critic in India, Ashish Mohan Khokar, the influence of 'modern' or the 'Western' belief system is tarnishing the reputation of Indian classical dance. "Our art forms are about the spirit and soul and that is why they were rooted in divinity. Western forms are rooted in body and that is a temporal form of art. Classical dance is at crossroads today." (Nathan, 2016) The fear expressed by Khokar is not necessarily shared by all classical dancers, but is still quite prevalent in dance circles. The binaries between mind/body, spiritual/temporal and articulate and the apparently inarticulate have been the question of debate in case of dance reception since the inception of institutional classical dance.

Laclau's reading of hegemony and domination of a political practice explains the still prevalence of classical dance over non-institutionalised contemporary dance in India. 'Towards a Theory of Populism' explores the potential of hegemonic beliefs to dominate through seemingly universal articulation. It's a gradual process of asserting power by projecting 'different visions of the world in such a way that their potential antagonism is neutralized' and the apparent becomes the ubiquitous. (qtd. in Slack, 121) It's perhaps this sense of hierarchy inevitably conveyed through classical dance, which separates dancers like Deepak Shivaswamy who choose dance to not instruct the audience but encourages understanding of the experience:

‘if I could say something, if I could write something, then give me a good reason to dance. ‘Cause...writing or saying...if I convey something by writing or saying, it’s much more clear. So why would I dance. So there’s no point in me dancing if someone would understand everything...dance is not a form that is best of articulation, let’s be clear.

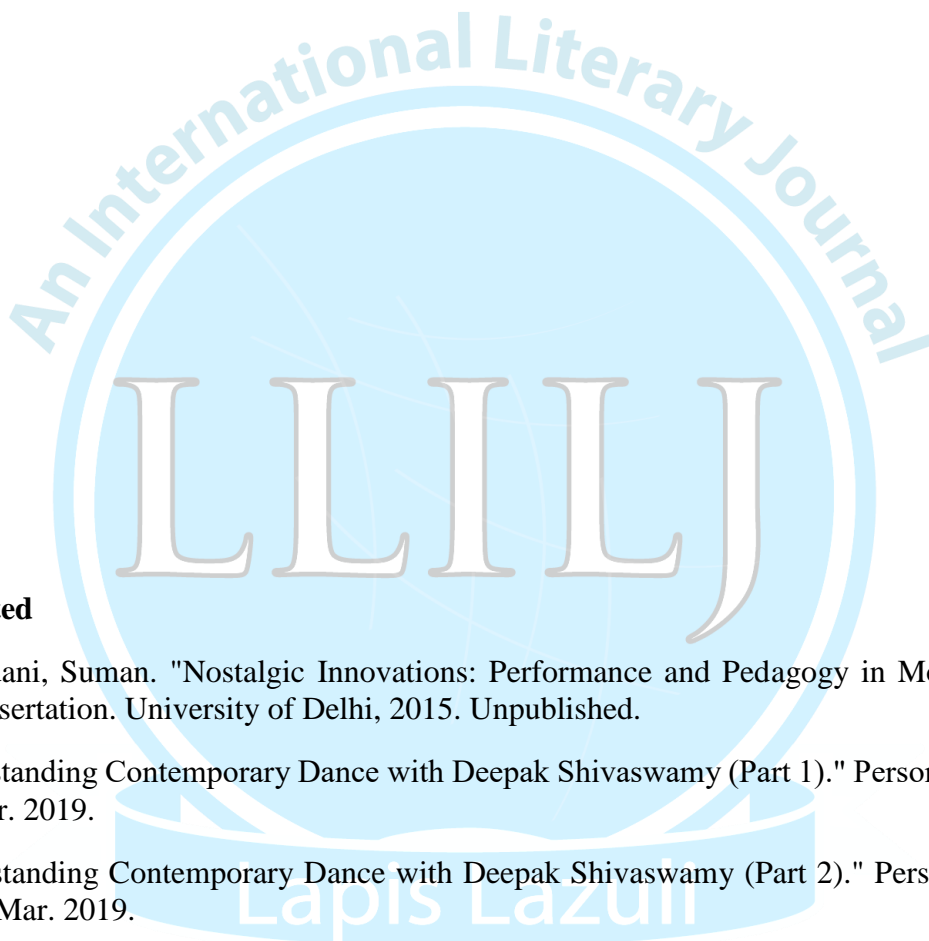
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But there’s also other way of looking at art. There’s one that you want to understand. The second I go into that loop as an artist, two things happen. Number one, there’s a pressure on me to say something all the time. Number two, putting myself above an audience. Basically I’m saying I know better than you, please listen to me. That’s problematic. And one of the things that most of the contemporary art does is to get away from it. To take out the narration of it. To take out the pleasure of actually saying something from a pedestal. But that doesn’t mean that it’s meaningless. Because one thing that we’ve lost in this capitalist society is the ability to experience something. We never look at something and say I’m here to just experience this rather than understanding something.’ (Bhagchandani, 2019).

And then sometimes, to appear ‘apolitical’ Shivaswamy goes a step ahead through performances like TransIt. Performed at Delhi in a basement, the choreography was to tease the city audience who essentially look for some social and political meaning in contemporary performances and he decided to remove all such connotations, to make it only an abstract movement experience—the actual somatic articulation of space rather than expanding it to a philosophical, social meaning. It began with a 15 minutes workshop with volunteers from the audience in which there were a few movement exercises across space by them. Once the volunteers had communicated with the physical space around them, Deepak requested them to return to their places and then started what appeared to be an almost solo replica of their combined movements. When questioned about this choice of performance, he said that for once he wanted to rip off all political thoughts intersecting a performance and allow the audience to enter the space of articulation of a performance themselves. Through his workshop he intended the spectators to have a dialogue with the inner space of movement articulation and then experience the same from the outside. Clearly Shivaswamy’s choice of performance was not mainstream political in its nature but it would be gross mistake to call it an ‘apolitical’ performance since in an unusual way it did create a vent for a personal, political and somatic articulation in the audience participants. The audience and especially the volunteers learnt a lot more about their own physical movement, their bodily reaction to the presence of other dancers, and their relationship with the space around them. The workshop constructed a space for corporeal awareness vis-à-vis the occupants of the place as opposed to people placing themselves on the larger map of socio-political collective identity.

Shivaswamy’s works in particular are aimed at breaking the stereotype of dance, especially contemporary dance as an elite choice of expression. Through his compositions he wants the audience and the workshop participants to explore the abstractedness of emotions and experiences through dance articulation. For instance, during the interview he mentioned his workshop-based performances with people from Kashmir, coalminers, and construction workers. In each of these cases, he allows the participants to choose their expression and to use their body to articulate the same—it’s not coded in a universal language of gestures. The aim is not therapeutic in nature either, it is in fact a methodology adopted by him to let dance become the medium of articulation for people who need not depend on linguistic framework of expression, nor expect dance stalwarts to represent them on the proscenium. These performances are not entrenched with social messages nor are they heroic in its tonality; they are in fact deeply entrenched in personal and hence political choices and subject to constant improvisation.

So what is it that contemporary dance is looking for through these performances? And what makes it so different from classical dance forms? 'I think the difference between contemporary work and non-contemporary work is with reacting. It's a lot more to do with now. I'm not saying that it should be new all the time; a reaction is also just critically looking at a classical work. That's a reaction. So in that wider sense I would say that contemporary dance is an art which is always constantly changing and constantly reacting to something.' (Shivaswamy, 2019) Instead of standardising and museuminising somatic articulation or seeking culturally uniform connections across time and space, dance continuously needs to contemporise itself. Dance as a medium will always be a segment of cultural articulation and not representative of the whole; there will certainly always be that which will remain (un)consciously unarticulated and subject to (mis)interpretation.



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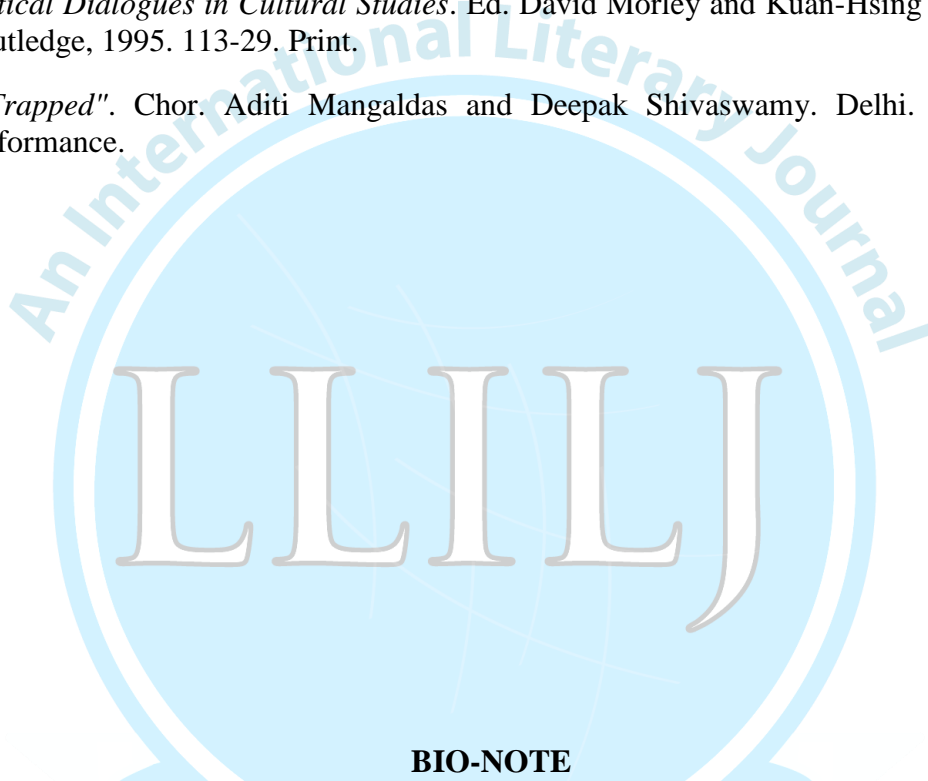
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BIO-NOTE

Suman Bhagchandani is a Ph.D. scholar in the Department of English, Jamia Milia Islamia University, and a Guest Faculty in Maitreyi College, University of Delhi. Her research concerns itself with the study of body of the Kathak dancer as the sight for cultural articulation and its negotiations with definitive and normative ways of reception. The ongoing research is an attempt to document personal narratives of Kathak dancers who have contributed in the construction of alternative narratives of pedagogy and performance, along with bringing to the fore their somatic, choreographic journey in the process. This project is the second stage of the M.Phil. Dissertation submitted in 2015, University of Delhi. The first stage was therefore used as an entry point to understand the works of non-*gharana* female Kathak dancers who introduced changes in classrooms and proscenium spaces while upholding the traditional symbols associated with its reception. The research is no doubt an interdisciplinary one, including both literary and empirical study of Kathak.

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