



Gender and Performance in V. Shantaram's *Navrang*

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Abstract

Aim: *This paper explores the evolving role of women as central performers in Indian dance, with a focus on V. Shantaram's Navrang. Rooted in the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA) legacy, which reshaped public performance by merging theater, regional cultures, and urban-rural sensibilities, it reflects the transformative impact on gender dynamics.*

Methodology and Approach: *The paper views the musical sequences in 'Navrang' as a form of gender discourse. It examines how these performances convey complex messages about gender roles, identities, and power dynamics within the cultural and cinematic context. Drawing from cultural criticism, the paper analyzes the cultural signifiers present in the film, including symbols, rituals, and representations of Indian culture. It explores how these cultural elements contribute to the construction of gender identities in the narrative.*

Outcome: *The paper showcases how the film emerges as a significant cultural artifact that transcends conventional gender roles within Indian dance. The analysis also demonstrates the strategic positioning of personal narratives within larger frameworks of mythological belief systems and community living. It's overlapping with the IPTA artistic movement and the affinity of its makers with IPTA contextualists it within the larger socio-politico-cultural environment of the time.*

Conclusion and Suggestion: *This paper has explored the film's profound impact on gender dynamics within Indian dance, particularly in its musical sequences. 'Navrang' transcends conventional gender roles, reflecting the evolving cultural landscape of its time. IPTA's influence on Indian dance is unmistakable, with women emerging as central performers, challenging traditional norms. The film's musical sequences serve as compelling narratives, blending mythology, community life, and cultural beliefs. This paper invites further research into the enduring impact of IPTA and cinema in reshaping societal perceptions of gender, urging us to embrace a more inclusive and liberated vision of the performing arts.*

Keywords: Gender Studies, Performance Analysis, Cultural Critique, Indian Cinema, IPTA Influence, Feminist Perspective, Cultural Signifier.

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Drawing from the existing body of works on performance in the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association, it can be said that the movement made significant

contributions towards Indian dance. Not only did it bring about a confluence of dance and theatre, regional cultures and performance and urban and rural sensibilities, but it also changed traditional modes of representation in public performances. One of the most essential contributions that IPTA made to dance was perhaps the emerging role of the woman as a central performer. Women along with their male counterparts toured the country and participated in various street shows and plays. Figures like Uday Shankar also played an important role in normalizing the position of the woman dancer. Through his creative efforts and attempts at educational reforms via 'Uday Shankar India Cultural Centre', Uday Shankar broke the stereotypes such as the image of a nautch girl attached with female dancers and opened up more avenues of representation in performance. IPTA also succeeded in achieving this objective. Owing to the booming cultural interaction in this period, this transformation was soon also reflected in the cinema of the time.

This paper shall attempt to read the place of the female dancer in the dance sequences in V.Shantaram's film, *Navrang*. The focus is on performance in the musical sequences rather than the narrative of the film in its entirety pointing to the suggestion that performance in itself can be read as a language of expression and a vocabulary in its own. These sequences can therefore be seen as independent narratives in themselves. A number of musicals directed by Shantaram such as *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje*, *Jal bin Machchli Nritya bin Bijli* and *Navrang* portray a nuanced fusion of Indian dance forms. However, *Navrang* specially deals with the politics surrounding the female body, both in terms of the plot of the film, where the protagonist constantly wishes for a beautiful, ornamental version of his ordinary, traditional wife as well as in the dance sequences which can be studied to see the ways in which the female dancer is represented. Choreographer Shyam Kumar's work in the film also aids in bringing

movement and themes together contributing to the representation of women in performance.

In the choreography of the song, “*arre jaa re hat natkhat*”, Sandhya, the central female dancer dances both as a man and as a woman. There are no male dancers involved and she single handedly dances to the song to portray the story of Radha Krishna which is also representative of interaction between two lovers. Along with the dance steps and movement, other supplementary factors such as props, costumes, fabrics and masks have been used creatively in almost all dance sequences of the film to add to the narrative of the song. In this particular instance, her costume involves a female getup in the front and an attire of a man at her back with a mask and a moustache attached to the back of her head to the effect that she turns her orientation to switch playing the roles of a man and a woman. Traditionally in India, public performances such as the Ramleela involved only men who played both male and female characters. This sequence reverses that tradition and for the first time, gender welding is witnessed in dance performance in Indian cinema. It involves a fusion of Kathak and an element of folk dance. One aspect about dance at that time that comes across in this sequence is that even movements and dance steps are gendered in choreography. The fusion that occurs shows a clear difference between feminine movements which are free flowing and graceful and masculine movements which involve hops, jumps and jerks. The theme of the song, the choreography as well as the song lyrics provide a voice to the woman where she says “Palat ke doongi aaj tohe gaali re. Mohe samjho na tum bholi bhaali re”. She is capable of retaliating and countering the actions of the male figure in the narrative of the song which is built around the interaction that occurs between girls and boys in the festival of Holi.

An element of Hindu mythology is seen in the last part where Lord Ganesh comes alive in the form of an elephant and dances with Sandhya. Their movements are matched together to show a link between God and life. The

elephant walks with its trunk on her shoulders while she switches sides from dancing as a man to a woman. A harmonious blend of mythology, religious belief systems of the people, community living and peaceful coexistence of both genders is seen in the end as the audience dances and sings along. The men and women in the audience are seated separately which is in stark contrast to the gender blending occurring on the stage.

In the song “*Kaari Kaari Andhiyari si Raat*”, a new form of choreography has been adopted which can be seen in contrast to the previous dance sequence. It involves more lyrical movements where hand movements and postures are used to signify certain phenomenon or objects. For example rapid movements of the palm spread in all directions is used to show the black night that is being talked about. Sticks have been used as props to create the image of a peacock or a bird dancing in love. Here again, the principal dancer is a female and the male dancer acts as a supporting performer. A religious reference to Krishna is made in the lyrics of the song while a short choreography sequence towards the end is an allegorical reference to the undressing of Draupadi by Duryodhan in the *Mahabharat*. The undressing happens in this section and the female protagonist is stripped off a number of multicolored saris which rise above the ground in the air to ultimately form a rainbow. The woman voluntarily spins around to free herself of the saris. The act of undressing is shown as an act of being emancipated from the bondage of clothes and the narrative of the mythology has been reversed. A strong influence of the beliefs and methods of IPTA artists can be seen in this inversion of mythological narratives. In this case, it is done to free the woman. The emergence of the rainbow from her clothes perhaps suggests the closeness of the female body to nature and creation.

The place of the female within the household can be seen in the sequence of the song, *Tum mere Mai Teri*. This portion captures the image of the exemplary beautiful wife that the male imagination craves who wears ornaments; uses make

up, dresses up, cooks for him, feeds him, does the household chores and gives birth to his child. All these activities are done by the dancer in subtle movements where she uses utensils and regular objects of the household as props. The dancer also uses her garment as “*ghoonghat*” for a prop that adds to the choreography as well as the narrative of the song. The song shows the thought process of a man and takes us into the psyche of the male protagonist, however, the performer is still the woman and the man is an observer of her activities. The lyrics of the song constantly describe the nuances of a female body and a gross anesthetization takes place.

The background or stage settings in which these performances are set also add to the narrative of the dance sequences. For example, in the dance sequence of the song, *Tu Chupi Hai Kahaan*, the barren landscape with leafless trees adds to the loneliness which the male protagonist is feeling because of being distanced from his lover. A unique cinematic technique used here is the resizing of objects like bells and candles to show them as objects larger than the female body. The female figures are seen as tiny bodies dancing and balancing on large bells which seem to be bells of temples. This perhaps suggests the place of the woman in a patriarchal, materialistic, religious society. The principal dancer is accompanied for the first time, with other supporting female dancers who balance and move on the large bells perhaps to show unity in suffering or as collective voices trying to be heard. Meanwhile, the lyrics of the songs say that if the man hears the voice of the woman’s ailing heart, he might be able to find her. In the end of the song, the protagonist male sees his wife clad in her regular, plain clothes and is relieved that he has found her. There is an acceptance of the woman as she is, as opposed to the imaginative form that is seen in the other dance sequences throughout the film.

Thus, we see how throughout the film, the female dancer emerges as the sole performer who carries the narrative forward. Thematic representations of

women have been dealt with, differently in every song through performance, stage setting, songs, movement etc. 'Navrang' emerges as a cinematic gem that transcends conventional gender roles within the realm of Indian dance. The film empowers the female dancer as the central figure, carrying the narrative forward across a spectrum of thematic representations. Each musical sequence serves as a unique exploration of the female dancer's role, integrating elements of mythology, community life, and cultural beliefs. These personal narratives are strategically positioned within larger frameworks of mythological belief systems and community living. Consequently, 'Navrang' becomes more than a cinematic masterpiece; it stands as a cultural artifact that audaciously challenges deeply ingrained gender norms and reflects the evolving contours of Indian culture during its historical milieu. By dissecting the film's intricate portrayal of gender dynamics in performance, this paper underscores its pivotal role in shaping the discourse surrounding women in the performing arts.

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