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A figure in a Buddhist monk’s saffron robe walks slowly across the elevated path at the back of the stage and faces the audience with his right arm held up. The background chorus hums a melodic tune of portent and peace. Twelve dancers on stage form two slanting lines facing the monk and bow their heads toward the revered figure. They raise their arms in a large circle around their bodies that end with their palms together above their heads in a symbolic gesture of submission. A heavy male voice recites a Pali chant about the noble eight-fold path of Buddha. The dancers turn toward the audience, take a few steps in place, and turn toward Buddha’s silhouette again. With their arms held open, they point toward the earth and the sky, toward Buddha and the audience to signify the pull of enlightenment against that of family and earthly life. As Buddha walks offstage, two Buddhist monks in saffron robes enter the stage and give orange wraps to each of the dancers.

An audience member sitting in front of me asks his companion, “Are those Bangladeshis?”

This performance of *Hey Ananta Punya* (HAP) choreographed by Bangladeshi dancer Warda Rihab took place on December 5, 2009, at the Rabindranath Tagore Center in Kolkata as part of a three-day event to mark the preeminent Bengali poet, writer, and visionary Rabindranath Tagore’s 150th birth anniversary. I had traveled to India to see Bangladeshi dancers perform as part of ethnographic research for my dissertation. As I sat there in the auditorium, I considered the question by the audience member in this elite venue in Kolkata, and I realized it indicated that he had certain assumptions about Bangladeshi dance and dancers. This performance did not conform to those assumptions, which led him to question the dancers’ nationality. What are these stereotypes that are associated with Bangladeshi dance and dancers, and how do choreographers reinforce or resist those stereotypes?

This case study of HAP is part of my dissertation in which I compare the practice of Indian classical dance in Bangladesh with the most common dance genre, what practitioners call “folk” dance, but what I refer to as urban folk dance because it is not performed by rural people. It what Eric Hobsbawm calls “an invented tradition” that was developed mainly by three Bangladeshi dancers in the 1950s and 1960s (Hobsbawm 1992, 3). My dissertation focuses on the politics of classical dance and urban folk-dance practice in Bangladesh, since it is preferred by government-commissioned organizers in important national and
international events. Over the years, urban folk dance is the stereotypical dance form that has come to be associated with Bangladeshi dancers in South Asia. In the presentation, I will refer to this but will not go into detail because of time constraints. I am mainly going to focus on the politics of classical-dance practice in Bangladesh through the HAP case study.

Keeping urban folk dance in mind, in this presentation I analyze the HAP performance within the context of the whole event, the venue, and the position of the choreographer. Within that framework, I examine the concentric circles of power—individual, national, and transnational—that the choreographer is embedded in and working within, to understand why an audience member might question the nationality of dancers in a work like HAP. I relate this reaction of the audience member to a statement by Rihab, who is doing a master’s thesis in Manipuri dance in Rabindra Bharati University in Kolkata, India, with a scholarship from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), the government institution that handles cultural and educational policy with other nations. During my interview with her, Rihab exclaimed, “Only when I perform in India, my legs shake. I don’t feel this nervous anywhere else” (Rihab 2010). Both these instances are significant because they reveal assumptions of dancers about audience members, and vice versa. In this paper, I examine these assumptions to see how they are generated by larger political, social, and economic circumstances.

In the analysis, I am guided by Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of cultural consumption as socially conditioned behaviors that are dependent on the individual’s background and access to social, economic, cultural, and educational capital (Bourdieu 1984, 3). For example, because classical dance is highly symbolic and codified, classical-dance practitioners and audiences require particular kinds of literacy. Moreover, dance teachers and institutions that control their circulation in society are higher in the social scale of cultural production and consumption because they wield power by virtue of their position as standard-setters and gatekeepers of traditional “high” art. These choreographers, dancers, and policymakers of educational and state institutions are the agents who influence which dance forms are practiced and how and in turn which ideas about nation, religion, gender or ethnicity are expressed and reiterated. Michel Foucault’s theorization of knowledge as a system of power recontextualizes dance, which is a form of bodily knowledge, as a “political technology of the body.” With the term “political technology of the body,” Foucault refers to the notion that the body is implicated in a political field and power relations have control over it (Foucault 1995, 26). As a form of embodied knowledge, dance can function as a powerful tool in shaping, disseminating, and expressing ideology and creating subjects.

In the HAP case study I elaborate on how performances by Bangladeshi dancers who operate within the power-knowledge system use different tactics to “disidentify” with dominant cultural hierarchies. José Esteban Muñoz uses the term “disidentification” to describe tactical acts that minority subjects use to resist or survive while simultaneously working within and against dominant ideology in an effort to reformulate those power structures by offering other alternatives and possibilities of being (Muñoz 1999, 11). I use the framework of class and power by Bourdieu and Foucault, respectively, and Muñoz’s concept of disidentification to analyze how distinct ideas about national and class affiliations, about
ideological values and the “others” of a particular cultural practice are reinforced or contested through dance.

A brief description of the original plot will be helpful in understanding the details of the dance-drama. The main character is a court dancer Srimoti who is given the honor of conducting the ceremonial puja for Buddha’s birth anniversary by a Buddhist nun. However, Buddhist practices are punishable by death in the kingdom by the order of King Ajatashatru, who is Hindu and wants to suppress the spread of Buddhism. The queen mother Lokeshvari and her companions are offended by the respect shown to a mere noti or dancer, and so they conspire to have her perform a dance at the same time as the ceremonial puja. During the dance, Srimoti expresses her belief in Buddhism and is killed by the king’s soldiers.

Because of time constraints, I will only describe three scenes from the dance-drama, and then explain how the choices reflect the underlying matrix of power, class, and national identity.

Scene 1: A lively percussive tune starts up, and men are shown working in the field, cutting and gathering crops, transporting them in cow-drawn carts, and, during intervals, resting and wiping sweat from their foreheads. The spotlight shifts to the right side of the stage where women are shown working on a manual loom, the repetitious sound of the imaginary loom providing a percussive rhythm for the mechanical movements of the dancers. While they are working, one of the men tries to get their attention. The two groups engage in playful, flirtatious exchange of movements while dancing together.

Scene 2: A group of male dancers come in with lunging steps with their palms together on their forehead. A chorus of aggressive voices sings a chant about the violent nature and fierce appearance of the Hindu goddess Kali. Their movements are athletic and staccato, in keeping with the hard percussive beats of tabla and the clang of cymbals. The spotlight shifts to the other side of the stage to a group of female dancers whose movements are slow and controlled. A male voices sings a slow chant, prolonging each word and phrase; the dancers hold their poses, standing still with their arms lifted and their hands crisscrossing over the heads, the dim green lighting creating shadows so that, at certain moments, they seem like sculptures. The spotlight shifts to the male dancers and back to the female dancers; the alternating scenes between the two groups show the violent side of Hinduism represented by Kali and the peaceful way of life advocated by Buddhism.

Scene 3: A large group of dancers, both male and female, wearing orange to signify themselves as Buddhist devotees, dance together expressing their suffering and anguish. The dancers come together in complex formations, which then disintegrate abruptly to show the simultaneous oneness and separation of all beings. The dancers leave the stage at the end of the song, and only Srimoti remains. As Srimoti executes quick jumps and spins on her knees to sharp beats of the tabla, she visualizes her inner angst. Her dilemma
is further depicted by several murals that appear in the background; at one point, while she spins, the murals come together to form the picture of Kali, and Srimoti falls to the ground.

In the adaptation, Rihab makes several strong choices that depart from Tagore’s original play and reflect the particular circumstances in which Rihab created and performed the dance-drama. As a foreign student, Rihab is an “other” in the spaces where she trains and performs in India. Although Rihab has learned Manipuri dance from a very young age, she is still considered “foreign” to the art form, even in West Bengal in India, which shares the same language and many cultural elements with Bangladesh. As a dancer, and a Manipuri dancer at that, which has been appropriated from devotional Hindu rituals, an important marker of difference for Rihab in India is her religious background, as can be seen in an article published in The Hindu, a leading Indian newspaper. Shyamhari Chakra (2010) wrote about Rihab’s performance at a dance festival in Orissa, India: “It was equally exciting to watch Manipuri dancer Warda Rihab, a Muslim girl from Bangladesh, who has been in Kolkata with a scholarship from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations as a disciple of the renowned Kalavati Devi.” While only the native region of the other dancers are mentioned in the article, Rihab’s religion is mentioned along with her native country. Her identity, first as a Bangladeshi (therefore, non-Indian) and then as a Muslim (therefore, non-Hindu) precedes the description of her qualifications and details of her performance.

Bangladeshi dancers who study in India have remarked to me that, in India, Bangladeshi dance has a reputation of emphasizing glamour, makeup and colorful costumes more than technique (this stereotype can be traced back to the characteristics of urban folk dance). Besides this initial assumption of not being serious enough according to Indian standards, in Rihab’s particular case, the ICCR scholarship board and the university did not allow her to enroll in graduate-level classes, even though she had completed the undergraduate curriculum during her training in Bangladesh (Monishita 2008). But she had no certificates since there are no institutions in Bangladesh that offer bachelor degrees in dance. In the hierarchy of the knowledge system, the people in power did not deem her embodied knowledge to be sufficient, so she has to prove her merit through performances such as HAP. In a setting like the Tagore Center, most of the audience members are elites of Kolkata who were invited to the event, and some of them are involved with ICCR, the scholarship-granting government institution. In view of this setting, it is significant that Srimoti’s solo pieces in the performance are choreographed in Manipuri dance. There are several scenes, such as the one with the mural of Kali, which are not part of the original play. These solo dance pieces not only describe the emotional state of Srimoti and maintain focus on her but also highlight Rihab’s proficiency in technique to the audience members.

In the depiction of the ordinary people in the performance, Rihab also uses the dance form’s background to comment on the narrative. The segments where people of the kingdom are engaging in everyday activities are choreographed in various forms of folk dances that originate in India. For example, the sequence where women and men are interacting playfully with each other has movement phrases from pata-nach from West Bengal in eastern India and chhau from Assam in northeastern India (Monishita 2008; Rihab 2010). That the subjects of the kingdom are portrayed through folk dance points to their class and position in society but is an iteration of the theme of village life prevalent in
Bangladeshi urban folk dance. However, Rihab’s choreography offers a different way of presenting the dominant theme of urban folk dance, a more “sophisticated” version choreographed with Indian folk dances. In the context of the venue and the audience, who have come to expect “shiny costumes,” common folk songs, and fast-paced repetitive movements of urban folk items from Bangladeshi dancers, these scenes in HAP refer back to those stereotypes but resist and disidentify with that image (Monishita 2008; Rihab 2010). Thus, in alluding to urban folk themes and performing a variation of it through folk dances that are geographically Indian, she emphasizes her mastery of working with cultural practices that might “belong” to India but that are being crafted and presented by Bangladeshis.

The scene where Srimoti dances with the murals of Kali in the background or the alternating sequence of male and female dancers comparing Buddhism’s peaceful ideology with the violent approach of Hinduism are also not originally in the play. Coming from a Bangladeshi Muslim, these sections could be read as critiques of Hinduism and in the context of clashes between the Hindus and Muslims in the recent past, it could be interpreted as an allusion to the violence perpetrated against Muslims in India. During the interview when I asked her about this interpretation, Rihab emphasized that the creator of original text is Tagore: “This is not directly my view, since Tagore has written this [play]. If anyone wants to put blame [about criticizing Hinduism] they have to turn to Tagore first, and then I may come into the picture” (Rihab 2010). This act of deflecting to Tagore the responsibility of critiquing the dominant religion of India can also be seen as part of her disidentificatory tactics. Rihab highlights a certain perspective; but in view of her position as a student in India and as a beneficiary of Indian-government scholarship, her own stance is subtly expressed. It is concealed under the auspices of Tagore, whose persona and work is respected both in India and Bangladesh.

These tactics can be connected back to Rihab’s initial apprehension of performing in India for an Indian audience. For Bangladeshi dancers practicing Indian classical dance, there is a feeling that these art forms belong exclusively to the present Indian nation-state and, therefore, that Indian performers and their performances are more “authentic”; that Indian audience members have a deep understanding of classical dance because it is part of their culture, heritage, and religion. This idea has partly been generated by the successful cultural nationalist movement of the Indian state in creating, branding, and projecting certain dance forms as recurrent images of India’s “ancient” performance traditions (scholars such as Meduri, Coorlawala, Srinivasan, O’Shea have written extensively on this issue).

In her theorization of dance techniques as disciplinary procedures, Susan Foster extends Foucault’s idea of the political technology of the body to explain how specific techniques require the body to be physically disciplined and molded in a certain way. In learning Manipuri or Bharatanatyam for decades, especially when students go to study in India, dancers like Rihab learn to embody quintessential Hindu characters such as Radha, Krishna, and Parvati, mythic personas who often stand for archetypical relationships between man-woman, god-human, beloved-lover, and nation-subject; and these dancers then narrate stories that are closely related to the ethos of the Indian nation. Thus, in practicing classical dance, “foreigners” become implicated in the hierarchy of the classical dance system.
In the play Noti-r Puja, there is an insightful exchange between the Buddhist nun Utpalparna and Lokeshvari, who is lamenting the loss of her husband and son to Buddhism and her consequent fall from power. In response, Utpalparna asks her, “Do you think the price of gold and light is the same?” In the comparison between Indian classical dance and Bangladeshi urban folk dance, classical-dance practice is seen as “light,” a high-art practice that is spiritual and enlightening, whereas urban folk dance is “gold,” gaudy, shiny, and commercial. The preference and practice of any of these two genres of dance are indications of class affiliation, simultaneously classifying the dance form, its practitioners, and patrons. Bourdieu observes that taste is generated by “objectively classifiable conditions of existence such as social status, access to capital, and physical realities of race or gender” (Bourdieu 1984, 170–71). This framework reveals that cultural practices do not inherently fall into high or low categories in terms of ideological value, but that these categorizations are constructs: the audience member’s doubts about the nationality of performers or Rihab’s nervousness about performing for a particular audience group or the choice to perform urban folk dance for a foreign audience is not an isolated instance but is a consequence of individual, national, and transnational power relations.

Works Cited


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