

Akram Khan: dance as resistance

ROYONA MITRA

THIS issue on dance raises pertinent questions about the troubling relationship between Indian women's dancing bodies and patriarchy. Gitanjali Kolanad traces this discourse through the chronological contexts of temple dancers in pre-colonial India, the banning of such dancing and its salacious sexual overtones during colonialism, their Sanskritized manifestations as part of Indian nationalist discourse and the learning of these nationalized forms by middle class women as bearers of Indian culture at home and abroad. Kolanad crucially identifies the problematic schism between dance as a professional pursuit and dance as a hobby for Indian women.

As if these issues are not complex enough, I wish to complicate Kolanad's provocation further by examining it through the context of the British-Asian diaspora, in particular through a case study of the seminal British-Bangladeshi dancer/choreographer Akram Khan. Pursuing dance as a profession as a British-Muslim man presents Khan with a specific set of challenges that are as much informed by patriarchy as they are by race, gender, ethnicity and religion. Through this article I would like to argue that for Khan then to dance is an act of political resistance against those very mores that have critiqued his choice to do just so.

Akram Khan's story of success within the fields of British and global contemporary dance is velocious, unparalleled and, most importantly, still ongoing. Within a mere fifteen years, Khan has journeyed from a dynamic and innovative national artist to an influential and highly acclaimed global phenomenon. As a second-generation British-Muslim man of Bangladeshi descent, Khan is the first from his diasporic community in the UK to acquire such a dominant position in contemporary dance. In my recently published monograph, *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism*,¹ I argue that contrary to popular belief Khan is not contemporizing the South Asian classical dance form of Kathak. Instead, he is generating a unique performance language that layers South Asian dramaturgical principles from his Kathak training onto the politicized and emotive manifestations of British contemporary dance, particularly in its dialogue with physical theatre, thereby transforming the latter in intercultural ways.²

1. Royona Mitra, *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism*. Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2015.

2. The term physical theatre is charged with debate and came into public consciousness when DV8 Physical Theatre, a British company, used it in their company title in 1980s. Signalling a hybridised art form and originally operating at the borders between dance and theatre, but now embracing many more of the



Akram Khan in *Desh* (2011). Photograph by Richard Haughton.

Khan corroborates my claim when talking about his renowned Kathak guru Sri Pratap Pawar's influence on his own performance philosophy and aesthetic, 'When I wanted to do creative, contemporary work, he advised: "Akram don't mix modern in Kathak; you may use Kathak for mod-

ern work." This advice has helped me over the years.' (Khan quoted in Pratap Pawar website)

creative arts disciplines, the label seems to have reached a critical mass in terms of its usefulness. For brevity of words I am signalling here literature that addresses its origins and much debated applications within the British performance context. Please see Ana Sanchez-Colberg's article, 'Altered States and Subliminal Places: Charting the Road towards a Physical Theatre', in John Keefe and Simon Murray (eds.), *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader*. Routledge, Abingdon, 2007; the double-volume books *Physical Theatres: A Critical Introduction* by Simon Murray and John Keefe and *Physical Theatres: A Critical Reader* edited by John Keefe and Simon Murray and my own book chapter entitled 'Authorship, Physical Theatre, *Justitia*', in Paul Johnson, Sylwia Dobkowska and Jasmin Vardimon (eds.), *Justitia: Multidisciplinary Readings of Jasmin Vardimon Company*. Intellect, Bristol, forthcoming.

ern work." This advice has helped me over the years.' (Khan quoted in Pratap Pawar website)

This infusion of 'Kathak in modern work' takes a very particular shape in Khan's performance aesthetic and fuels his 'new interculturalism'. Khan informs his contemporary movement experiments with his knowledge and practice of *abhinaya* from his Kathak training. However, his treatment of *abhinaya* is complex and intercultural. At one level Khan uses the Sanskritized language of *abhinaya* as strictly codified in the *Natyashastra* to narrate stories that speak to his and our 21st century realities. This codified language from Kathak sits alongside more western dramaturgical

principles of movement-based storytelling, deliberately jarring, particularly for his predominantly white and western audience members, who cannot access these culturally specific codes. At another and more critically inventive level, however, Khan interrupts and alters what has been historically considered the codes of *abhinaya* by creating a gestural language that relies on the use of non-culturally specific and everyday gestures, while retaining its mimetic form and emotive power.

In this critical intervention, the original *Natyashastra*'s universal human emotional states (*sthai bhavas*) that are stylized through facial expressions, *mudras* and *hastas* into the *rasas* are retained, but the form and codes through which they are communicated is changed to speak to a 21st century global audience. Khan's dual treatment

and simultaneous use of *abhinaya*, both in its classical and deconstructionist forms, demonstrates the contemporary relevance of the *Natyashastra*, not just as an ancient treatise but as a living, breathing and interactive vision of performance studies of the now and the future.

I suggest then that Khan is mobilizing a 'new interculturalism' which is informed by his own embodied 'inside-outside' reality that operates across and between several nations, cultures, languages, borders and performance dramaturgies. Not only does this insider-outsider reality enable him to navigate between and beyond cultural specificities, it also enables him to negotiate both western and South Asian dramaturgical conventions with equal prowess. This 'new interculturalism' also critiques the 1980s intellectual and formulaic endeavour of 'intercultural theatre', undertaken by predominantly western theatre practitioners who borrowed from non-western people, resources, and performance traditions for the purpose of invigorating western theatre practices, in the guise of mutual exchange.³ Khan's 'new interculturalism' is thus an act of political resistance against dominant hegemonies of whiteness, leading to a more nuanced engagement with and representations of cultural otherness(es). But what of his act of dancing itself?

A normative narrative circulates in the public domain around why Khan started dancing and some of them have been verified by Khan himself in interviews. They include: he was four when his mother started teaching him

3. For well established postcolonial critiques of 'intercultural theatre' see Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture*. Routledge, London, 1993; and Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. Routledge, London, 1996.

Bangladeshi folk-dance. He was enthralled by Michael Jackson's *Thriller* dance routines and even won a dance competition within his London community as a teenager, gaining much kudos amongst his peers. He started Kathak lessons under the tutelage of guru Sri Pratap Pawar at the age of seven. While these facts might suggest *how* Khan encountered dance and started formal dance training, they do not satisfactorily address the question we are raising in this issue: Why (did/does Khan) dance?

So I posed Khan much more directed, even personal, questions that were designed to make him engage with not only these facts, but more so the socio-politics signalled by them. I share these questions with you along with his candid responses.

Why did you first start dancing?

In order to contain my hyperactive energy. I think I probably suffered from ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and found that the only thing that made me focus was dance.

What was it about Michael Jackson's dancing that spoke to you?

I suddenly became aware of the power of storytelling that could be exercised through combining singing, acting and dancing, as these music videos were doing for the first time.

What kind of resistance did you face and from whom when you decided to study dance and then later pursue it as a career?

The resistances came from different quarters in different contexts and at different moments in my life. At first it was from my Bangladeshi community who would never speak directly to me. But they would put pressure on my parents and share concerns about the need for me to study a 'serious' subject. To this migrant community who saw education as a means of survival and a better life, dance

seemed like an unwise subject to pursue at university. This was especially true as a Bangladeshi man. Later when I wanted to start to work with more contemporary languages, I faced resistance from my Kathak circle who wanted me to prioritize and preserve the classical language.

How did you negotiate these resistances?

I transferred the tensions into my dance and let them fuel my creativity. At every stage I wanted to prove my dance worthy of pursuit – first to my father, then to my wider Bangladeshi community, then to the western world in which I was dancing and finally to myself.

What does dance enable for you as a human being and as an artist?

The most important thing that dance allows is for me to connect to people at a level beyond oral language and this cannot be more relevant than now. At a time when we are so disconnected and disembodied, existing in the digital age overpowered by the internet, dance makes me reconnect with humanity.

Are you a political person and is dance for you a political act?

The older I get, the more political I am becoming, yes. And while my dance is not about politics, it always is and will be political. It will always try to explore a position that represents a resistance to the dominant stance.

As a child then Khan danced to ground himself in order to counter his short attention span. However, as he grew older, his reasons to dance became much more political. He danced to resist the conservative prejudices of his diasporic Bangladeshi community. He danced to challenge those who believed in the preservation of classical Kathak, to avoid its contamination via contemporary arts practices. He danced to demonstrate to the white, western world that there is a place at the centre, for a man of colour, in the domain of contemporary dance. He danced to prove to himself that all the norms he was fighting against needed dismantling. He danced to resist mainstream ideologies in any given situation. And



Akram Khan, Israel Galván, Christine Leboutte and Bobote in *Torobaka* (2014). Photograph by Jean-Louis Fernandez.

in doing so he challenged the ways gender, race, ethnicity and religion often determine (and limit) who we become in the 21st century. As a second generation diasporic subject in the UK, Khan's intervention then becomes worthy of acknowledgement.

Post-independence, and as part of the migratory flow of men and women from India to Britain's shores, the import and preservation of home-culture was very much considered the domain of the female migrant, and the role of dance was crucial to this diasporic project of building a home away from home. This mirrored the trend in the homeland itself where, post-classicisation of the Indian dance forms into sanitized and acceptable bearers of Indian national identity, the development and practice of the classical dance forms became a predominantly female domain.⁴ Despite a long-standing tradition of male gurus, Indian men who wanted to dance found themselves gradually marginalized as the classical dances began to develop along fairly colonial, patriarchal and heteronormative constructions of gender. And dance itself became a predominantly feminized pursuit.

Renowned Bharatanatyam dancer V.P. Dhananjayan laments this perception of the male Indian dancer as effeminate and a threat to masculinity: 'It is a fact that for many decades, dance has been a near monopoly of women, be it in the South or the North. Nowadays, the male dancer is a rare phenomenon and it happens that a section of the public looks down upon him. Men may become dance teachers, they may provide *nattuvangam* and musical accompaniment and do everything else needed to make it possible for women

4. Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsri, *Engendering Performance: Indian Women Performers in Search of an Identity*. Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2010, p. 165.

to dance, but if they themselves don't ankle bells and start to dance, they are put down as effeminate upstarts in an exclusively female domain.⁵

In the British diasporic context, a similar and problematic gendering of dance as an art form prevailed as observed by dance anthropologist Andree Grau in the influential South Asian Dance in Britain (SADiB) report. Grau noted that while some male dancers do exist, the South Asian dance field in Britain is predominantly female.⁶ Enrolling onto Kathak classes was in itself thus a resistive act for Khan, made more unusual by being under the tutelage of a male guru.

While a male South Asian dancer/choreographer is a rarity, particularly amongst the Bangladeshi diaspora, the British contemporary dance field is however currently dominated by (white) men.⁷ This in itself though is a fairly recent phenomenon, as the status of the male dancer in western societies has been long tainted via associa-



Akram Khan in *Zero Degrees* (2005). Photograph by Tristram Kenton.

tions with homosexuality.⁸ Despite these prejudices continuing to persist in contemporary society, the recent trend for men to lead the profession demonstrates that such limiting perceptions of masculinity are slowly starting to unravel.

Khan's presence in this 'alpha male' environment might thus be considered timely from the perspective of gender, but it does go a long distance to challenge the predominant whiteness of the field.⁹ As the only British South Asian, and one of four non-white Associate Artists of Sadlers' Wells, London's premier contemporary dance venue, Khan's presence in this influential domain is both conforming and resistive at once. And as I argue in my monograph, he uses his influential mainstream status at the centre to disrupt it, challenging its whiteness and dominance from within. An excellent example of this resistive act is Khan's choreography for a significant section of the London Olympics' Opening Ceremony (2012).

As a British-Muslim man with a fraught surname like Khan, in a post 9/11 and 7/7 Islamophobic landscape that associates Muslims with terrorism,

5. V.P. Dhananjayan, 'The Concept of the Male Dancer', in N.P. Dhananjayan, *A Dancer on Dance*. Bharata Kalanjali, Michigan, 1992, p. 23.

6. Andree Grau, 'South Asian Dance in Britain: Negotiating Cultural Identity Through Dance' (SADiB). Leverhulme Trust Report (1999-2001), 2002, pp. 1-85.

7. Some of the leading choreographers of British dance, other than Khan, include Lloyd Newson, Hofesh Schechter, Richard Alston, Wayne McGregor, Matthew Bourne, Michael Clark, Russell Maliphant and others. In comparison, there are fewer leading female choreographers: Shobana Jeyasingh, Sonia Sabri, Jasmin Vardimon and Charlotte Vincent.

8. Ramsay Burt, *The Male Dancer*. 2nd ed. Routledge, London, 2007, p. 11.

9. Judith Mackrell, 'Vanishing Point: Where Are All the Great Female Choreographers?' *The Guardian*, 2009. Web. 22 December 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/oct/27/where-are-the-female-choreographers>

Khan's central role in choreographing the tribute section to the victims of London's 7/7 bombings in July 2005 is significant. In the live television broadcast of the Opening Ceremony, Khan's choreography was precluded by a commentary that reminded audiences worldwide of the fifty-two lives that were lost in the London underground bombings that took place on 7 July 2005 by British-Muslim Al-Qaeda terrorists, the day after London won its bid to host the 2012 Olympics. Khan's powerful and compassionate choreography emphasized the resilience of humanity, the importance of intergenerational legacies and the vitality and hope in Britain's multi-ethnic future generations, embodied in a British South Asian boy, Reiss Jeram. The resistive act inherent in Khan, a British-Muslim man, choreographing a commemorative tribute for the victims who lost their lives due to the extremist actions of other British-Muslim men, became a powerful symbol of the complexity and plurality of Britishness in the twenty-first century.

The schism between dance as a professional pursuit and a hobby with regards to Indian women as observed by Kolanad, is, therefore, as applicable to aspirational male dancers in the British South Asian diaspora. While Khan's British-Bangladeshi community did not oppose his childhood participation in Bengali folk dance and Michael Jackson routines, it was only when his hobby became his profession, that they felt destabilized by a man from their community who was investing in a feminized and 'not serious enough' career. Thus for Khan, at every step of his life, dance has been an act of resistance to expectations, people and ideologies. What once was an act to ground him into distilled and sustained focus, has gradually become his ammunition for challenging the status quo, his vehicle for political statements and his very own language of survival.