THE DANCER'S VOICE: PERFORMANCE AND WOMANHOOD IN TRANSNATIONAL INDIA

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A proliferation of scholarly projects on Indian dance—such as Urmimala Sarkar Munsi and Aishika Chakraborty's contributions in 2018 and, previously, Urmimala Sarkar Munsi's in 2014, and Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsi's in 2010—has highlighted the role of the woman performer in maintaining the performance economy through her gendered identity. In her recent book, Rumya Sree Putcha sheds new light on the creation and reception of such public performances of Indian womanhood that authorize her right to citizenship. By arguing that "performance shapes the way women, especially those who understand themselves as Indian women, experience citizenship as a gendered and racialized practice," (2) Putcha proposes a critical link between performance, subjectivity and citizenship for Indian women.

Building on Richard Schechner's [1985] (2011) theory of performance, where he famously describes performance as "twice-behaved behavior," (36) Putcha delivers two key ideas on how performance shapes/constructs Indian womanhood. She argues that it is through the public act of performance that the Indian dancer is granted access to citizenship, and this form of citizenship requires that the "Indian women's voice to be managed in public cultures" (3). By focusing our attention on the dancer as communicator, Putcha's work opens discussions around sovereignty for Indian women as shaped by their caste and class location.

In her book, Putcha shows deep affinitive ties between the project of casteism and racism through the figure of the transnational Indian dancing body. Putcha advances Aihwa Ong's (1999) theory of "flexible citizenship" to argue that citizenship for Indian (immigrant) women is "a multiplied and unstable experience" (71). According to Putcha, citizenship for Indian women is hinged upon "an unstable and shifting set of identity signposts, which constantly reflect and refract white supremacy, anti-blackness, and immigrant assimilation" (120). Throughout this book, she draws upon the relationship among gender, caste and race to advance her analysis of performance and womanhood for the south Indian dancer in public cultures.

Developing on Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of "affective economies," Putcha urges her readers to visualize the Indian dancer, as never been done before, "as a racialized and casteist affective economy" that models the "docile" immigrant (11). Through the figure of the Indian female dancer, Putcha attends to the identity politics of transnationalism, as one which demands the dancer "to [either] assimilate or to abdicate" (112). What stands out for me in her argument is the astute distinction that Putcha makes between transnational immigrations and diasporic racial formations that are uniquely different processes of identity formation for Indian immigrants in the United States (US) (8). In doing so, Putcha points to the processes of identity formation of Indians in the US, especially post-1965 Immigration Act. This is when Indians in the US came to represent India and South Asia as predominantly "Hindu-centric" (8)—a manufactured representation that aligns with the very caste hierarchies and Hindu ethnonationalist ideologies that Putcha aims to critique in this book.

In terms of methodology, *The Dancer's Voice* is a rigorous work of feminist praxis. Putcha's work is influenced by and draws upon a range of Indian feminist thinkers, such as Susie Tharu (1996) and Sharmila Rege (1995), Black feminist theorists bell hooks (1989, 1992) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), and critical race theorists Richard Delgado (1984, 1992) and Anne Anlin Cheng (2019). By aligning her work with black, transnational and global South feminists, Putcha expands our understanding of gender as inextricably linked to empire—its expansion through colonialism and imperialism—and Brahminical cis-heteropatriarchy (13). In her analysis of the role and training of the female dancer-singer-actress in Telugu cinema, Putcha shows the reconstruction of the ideal Indian womanhood as a project linked to casteist and racialized assumptions of gender.

Putcha's work models a range of research methods for critical dance studies scholars to draw from—praxical, ethnographic, archival, critical feminist, critical race and critical caste methods. In an in-depth study of the constructions of Indian womanhood through the figure of the dancer, Putcha performs an astonishing task to conduct ethnographic and archival research in over eight cities between India and the US from 2004 to 2019, while always staying attentive to, incorporating and *voicing* her own migration and family history (5). Putcha self-reflexively examines her family's migration history to the US and her dance training in south Indian classical dances, bharatanatyam and kuchipudi, as both a Telugu Brahmin and Indian American woman. Pointing to Salman Rushdie's (1992) observations on "the incompleteness of postcolonial and immigrant subjectivity" (Putcha 2023, xvi), she provides a glimpse into the cultural landscape of immigrant families in the US—Indian American and dominant caste—where Indian classical dance is perceived as a form of "religious edification" for young Indian women (xv).[1]

Rooted in her familial history and her cultural and somatic memory, Putcha's strong ethnographic vignettes in the beginning of each chapter contextualize and complicate the colonial and the nationalist narratives of south Indian womanhood expressed in media, including films and advertising campaigns, dance studios and training centers in India and the US. Researching the presence of the transnational Indian female dancer from the 1930s to 2019, the chapters in the book are structured chronologically. Each chapter theorizes the intersection of identity markers such as gender, caste and race, and demonstrates how they build the category of the transnational Indian womanhood and authorize her citizenship in the public sphere. The intersection of key concepts in each chapter enables readers to review the book in their preferred order.

To set the stage for her project that investigates the complex relationship between subjectivity, performance and citizenship for Indian women, Putcha juxtaposes in her introduction two very different public expressions of Indian womanhood—Miss America, Nina Davuluri (who identifies as Indian American) and Jyoti Singh Pandey (famously known as Nirbhaya, who was an Indian citizen). She presents these two examples—one as the celebrated Telugu immigrant beauty queen and the other as the victimized Indian woman—to question if Indian women have access to only these two extreme choices to represent themselves in public.

In Chapter 1, Putcha traces the figure of "mythical courtesan" in Telugu films from 1930s and 1940s, focusing on the career of dancer-singer and *bhogam* woman Sundaramma. Drawing on bell hooks's (1992) concept of the "oppositional gaze," Putcha destabilizes representations of south Indian womanhood as "a modern and national Brahminical womanhood" (25). Developing on Davesh Soneji's (2012) work on the early twentieth-century south Indian performance history, Putcha shows "how and why *bhogam* identities are tethered to Brahmin dance cultures" (24). Furthermore, Putcha argues that films and colonial narratives strategically built a "relationship between marriage and nation for Indian womanhood," where heterosexuality became equated with citizenship and, thus, eventually erased the presence of hereditary caste communities from films (26).

Scholars Anusha Kedhar (2020) and Nishant Upadhyay (2020) have demonstrated how Brahmin culture dominates and strategically substitutes Indian culture in the public domain. In Chapter 2, Putcha pursues this argument and adds "how Brahmin womanhood participated in establishing caste hegemonies" (46). Drawing in her analysis upon the work of black feminists such as Hazel Carby (1987) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Putcha weaves a dialogue between postcolonial nationalism, casteism, and India's obsession with fair skin. Building on Collins's concept of "controlling image" (46), Putcha demonstrates the careful curation of marginalized caste and hereditary performers' image as "unclean" and upper-caste and class women as "fair." Conducting a detailed analysis of the film songbooks—an unusual and unique form of print media in 1940s—and her mother's handwritten song diary, she shows how the visual of the socially and economically privileged woman's face on songbooks helped establish "both caste hierarchies and racialized understanding of feminine beauty" (46). According to Putcha, songbooks carefully shifted the association of singing and dancing bodies with lower caste and hereditary

castes to married Brahmin women, thus making "Brahmin wifehood" a new marker of south Indian womanhood (59).

In chapter 3, Putcha complicates the understanding of citizenship for Indian women—as a gendered and caste-based process—and further interlaces it with the politics of language and region. This chapter discusses the relationship between language and identity formation through the analysis of Telugu films in the era when India was being "divided into linguistic states (1956–76)" (70). Putcha argues that "language participates in gendered identity formations," (71) which is widely illustrated in cultural expressions such as films and dances. The author takes the reader to 1953 Madras, where upon the division of the Madras Presidency, two separate linguistic states were born—Telugu and Tamil-speaking states. Furthermore, through a comparative analysis between south Indian dances, kuchipudi and bharatanatyam, as representative of Telugu and Tamil identities and cultures, Putcha shows how the dancing body skillfully performs regional identity.

In a strategic inclusion of the details of her ethnographic visit to singer-dancer-actress, L. Vijayalakshmi's home in Davis, California,[2] Putcha draws attention to the period of sexualization of the dancing body in Telugu cinema. Putcha notices that this was the period when the "division of body from the voice engendered new aesthetics of athleticism" (113). Moreover, in paying attention to Vijayalakshmi's athletic performance in films, plus her family's Tamil Brahmin social status, she argues that Vijayalakshmi was successful in casting yet another version of Indian womanhood and citizenship, this time one which concretized her "physical abilities as social capital" aligning her with the standard of "a fitness-conscious ableist, Indian beauty" (85).

In chapter 4, drawing examples from advertisements, such as Trans World Airlines (1960s), Putcha shows how the south Indian dancer is manufactured as a representative of "Hindu" India globally. The gendered dancing body, according to Putcha, "exposes the soft power of a Hindu nation-state and imaginations of a Hindu past, present, and future" (92–93). Continuing her comparative analysis between the gendered dancing body and the nation-state, Putcha asks a much relevant question, "What makes a dancer look and act appropriately Indian. . .." (106). Through her ethnographic anecdotes, where she juxtaposes the Indian and the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) dancer, Putcha claims that a woman's hips indexed her "gendered Indian identity," and "this gender work translated into heteronormative affect" (105).

While the dancing body represents what Cheng (2019) calls the "broader Asiatic womanhood—a compliant, curated, and therefore desirable body" (Cheng 2019, 65 cited in Putcha 2023, 110)—Putcha shows that this silenced and compliant dancer can also be a source of resistance. Building on bell hooks's (1989) concept of "talking back," Putcha theorizes the dancing body as "both a source of struggle and resistance and a space where silence can be transformed into its own form of power" (91). Listening to the dancer's voice across film archives, familial history and ethnographic interactions, Putcha shows us that the dancer's voice houses "quiet strategies of resistance and subversive acts of compliance" (3). Her focus on the dancer's voice as well as the body critiques the separation between the two—a divide that privileges a Brahminical and Orientalist view of the Indian dancing body and assures her compliance in gendered violence and racial assimilation.

Putcha's *The Dancer's Voice* joins the ranks of other recent books on Indian dance that bridge the gap between film studies and dance studies. Where these existing projects focus on the dancer's labor, as it constructs her subjectivity and her gendered identity, in the Hindi film cinema, Bollywood (see Pallabi Chakravorty 2017 and Usha Iyer 2020), Putcha extends the range of such compelling projects by including an analysis of the dancer's labor in the underrepresented Telugu cinema and institutionalized dance centers in south India. Scholarly fields that this book contributes to include dance and performance studies, film and media studies, gender studies, women studies, South Asian studies, feminist studies and more. This book will also be of interest to scholarly fields that engage with the book's methods such as critical caste and critical race methods, and critical ethnography, among others.

What has remained with me from this book is the dancer's voice itself, which the author unearths from film archives, songbooks and

her familial history. Putcha leaves us with the image of Princess Jasmine, from the film *Aladdin*, represented as a south Indian dancer to bring her point home that "struggle for subjecthood remains embedded in performance" (122). In doing so, she shows us, once again, what she is fighting for—a feminist critique of the "Orientalized and fetishized" figure of the transnational Indian female dancer (20).

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Notes

1. Regarding the practice of bharatanatyam in immigrant families, Janet O'Shea (2007) has written "The dance form, and especially its amateur practice, also provides a means for immigrants to maintain their social identity in diaspora. It offers South Asian communities in Europe and North America an implement for, in Arjun Appadurai's (1996) terms, intentional cultural reproduction and, thus, for the reiteration of their homeland's culture in diaspora" (3).

2. Rumya Sree Putcha notices L. Vijayalakshmi's Lux headshots and her dancing photo in a new and revealing style of costume in Telugu film, *Sree Krishna Tulabharam* (1966), hung in Vijayalakshmi's living room in Davis, California.

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