



## SHOORPANAKHA ON STAGE: LOOSENING THE NOOSE

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research paper investigates how Bharatanatyam dancers reconfigure specific cultural histories in their novel choreographies and practices. It considers two stage productions, *Shoorpanakha – Navarasa Gadhya* by Karthik Hebbar and Shruti Gopal and *Shoorpanakha – The Story Only She Nose!* by Dakshina Vaidyanathan Baghel. The paper intends to study how these dance labels contest the social and cultural norm from within the traditional art form and from the outside lived-in cosmopolitan life. The discussion will intertwine with the exploration of gender and identity through female characters from Indian mythology. While this paper argues that these artistes continually expand the creative boundary, it also recognises that contemporary Bharatanatyam is in flux that culturally is of value.

**KEYWORDS :** Bharatanatyam, Performing arts, Women and/in Indian Mythology, Gender, and Identity.

It is customary to find literature on Bharatanatyam that illustrates it as 'divine' and 'ancient'. These qualifying terms render the art its timeless quality. As 'a classical dance form of southern India', named after the sage Bharata who wrote *Natya Shastra*, Bharatanatyam has evolved as an amalgamation of 'Bhava' (expression), 'Raga' (music), 'Tala' (rhythm) and 'Natyam' (dance). The dance forms divine, traditional, and classical heritage is indisputable. Also, this relatedness with the past gives it a strong sense of rootedness. Tracing back into the past, the practice of Bharatanatyam has amended itself to the changing times. From the 17th century *Sadir* to the present-day Bharatanatyam, extensive historical and sociological factors have determined its advancement. In other words, the renaissance of 19th century India presented greater liberties to the contemporary dance artistes concerning the conception of ideas, themes, choreography, and presentation, within the traditional ambit. Ketu H. Katrak, Professor of Drama at the University of California, Irvine in her paper titled "Innovations in Contemporary Indian Dance: From Religious and Mythological Roots in Classical Bharatanatyam" records,

*"India's rich heritage of dance and music has a long history with impact of royal families and patrons of the arts in pre-British colonial times, followed by British colonialism (mid-18th century onwards), then into the postcolonial era (after India's independence from the British in 1947) and contemporary 21st century. Bharatanatyam's movement vocabulary constituted of nrtta (abstract foot-work), mudras (hand gestures), and abhinaya (gesture language, facial and bodily) along with its roots in Hindu religion, mythology, and the two major Indian epics that often inspire Contemporary Indian dancers who are trained often in one or other of the classical dance styles."* (Katrak 48)

The Ramayana and The Mahabharata have always been the seedbed for any of Bharatanatyam repertoire. Over the years, dance artistes have sought to challenge and change this notion by experimenting with diverse themes. Nevertheless, the stories from the mythologies and epics of India have been predominant and unvarying. The Ramayana has been told and retold a great many times through various modes and genres. Many generations of dance artistes have retold these stories. Hence, it is a challenging task to create a new piece of art based on the epic. In this context, stage productions, *Shoorpanakha – Navarasa Gadhya* by Karthik Hebbar and Shruti Gopal and *Shoorpanakha – The Story Only She Nose!* by Dakshina Vaidyanathan Baghel gain attention. Both Bharatanatyam productions are an innovative attempt to retell the story of Shoorpanakha from the Ramayana for a contemporary audience. While they are working with the mythological figure, thematically they are well established in the choreographers' contemporary urban experience. This

paper looks at the reconfiguration of specific cultural histories by the coeval Bharatanatyam dance artistes in the discussion. The research design employs a review of the performance – one released on YouTube as a part of Sunanda's Performing Arts Centres' *'Arpanam – a new beginning 2021'*, an initiative started during the pandemic times and the other in the video format. Insights of the dancers into the production collected through the interview is incorporated. This paper focuses on issues of gender and identity through the thrust aside character of Shoorpanakha.

*Shoorpanakha – Navarasa Gadhya* is a Bharatanatyam dance production by Karthik Hebbar and Shruti Gopal. Karthik Hebbar is the composer and the singer. Shruti Gopal reproduces the lyrics through her choreography and presentation. The production team also has Narayan Sharma on violin, Arjun Jith with cinematography and Parshwanath Upadhya with editing and direction. *Shoorpanakha – Navarasa Gadhya* is a novel retelling of Shoorpanakha's story to a contemporary audience. The aharya (costume) of Shruti's Shoorpanakha is unconventional. The evolving dance costume has made its way into the performance by Shruti Gopal. She has kept it to a bare minimum of ornaments and headdress. Instead of the otherwise popular tailor-made pyjama costume, Shruti has adorned a deep blue cotton saree contrasted with maroon draped in kachche saree drape which helps define the character of Shoorpanakha like any other woman and nothing extraordinary (referring to her as a rakshasi in the mainstream narrative). These kinds of modified costumes are a trend in Bharatanatyam visual aesthetics today. The colour play is another striking feature to be noted. The choice of deep blue adds a sense of honesty to the character of Shoorpanakha in her display of the nine emotional states. The deep blue colour gives a calming effect to the viewers. It also helps the character build trust with the audience. The presentation of the nayaki (heroine) is firmly rooted in the traditional repertoire of Bharatanatyam performance. Shruti recounted that the inspiration for this production came solely after listening to Karthik Hebbar's poetry. Also, she recalled her experience working on *'Abha'* (a dance ballet) Sita's take on Ramayana, produced by Punyah Dance Company based in Bengaluru. She opines, while working on these two productions, she has learnt to 'see' things from various perspectives. According to her, retelling is a process of unlearning and relearning. Hence, though reimagining may feel tautological, they do serve a pivotal purpose. With *Shoorpanakha – Navarasa Gadhya*, the team has tried to present various emotional transitions in Shoorpanakha throughout her life than the usual mainstream narrative that depicts her as an enchantress and restricts her experience to that of cutting off her nose.

Shruti's treatment of Shoorpanakha is unconventional in

many ways. She here is seen as a person devoid of her social markers and frills surrounding her identity. In the costume or her gestures, Shoorpanakha is like any other woman. Unlike a *rakshasi* – as the popular narrative perceives her to be. Shruti leaves her mind with a haunting question,

*"Even if she was attacking Sita, even if it was a die-hard situation, would it have been necessary to mutilate a lone person? Could it have been handled better?"* (Gopal)

Thus, Shruti's *Shoorpanakha* is an investigation into the question of her mutilation. Considering that Rama and Lakshmana were both skilful warriors, the act is rather deplorable. Mapping of the poetry into Navarasa (Nine Emotions), namely *Shringara* (beauty/love), *Hasya* (laughter), *Karuna* (sorrow/pity), *Raudra* (anger), *Veera* (courage/heroic), *Bhayanaka* (fear/terror), *Bheebhatsya* (disgust), *Adbhuta* (wonder/surprise), *Shanta* (peace) allowed the choreography to explore Shoorpanakha's mind and heart. Shruti has focused on the *abhinaya* (Bhava- emotion) aspect of Bharatanatyam in this production. There is little use of *nritta* (pure rhythmic movements of dance). The team has not used the traditional instrument accompaniment. The use of the only violin enunciated the elaborate segments of the presentation. The focus is more on Shoorpanakha as a thinking individual, making the production a self-reflective one. The less rhythmic movements of dance allow the audience to listen to Shruti's *Shoorpanakha* intently.

Shruti believes that Shoorpanakha is a misunderstood character in the epic Ramayana. Her presence is insignificant after the mutilation episode. In *Shoorpanakha – Navarasa Gadhya*, Shoorpanakha is smitten. She boldly approaches Rama and expresses her desire to have an association with him. Mainstream narrative with patriarchal prejudices 'punishes' this bold expression of sexual desire through mutilation and body shaming. Through this reinterpretation of the epic, Shruti examines the episode of self-expression of Shoorpanakha as liberating. The utilization of the mirror as a retrospective and anticipating prop in the choreography is praiseworthy. Concerning the importance of retellings and re-explinations, Shruti remarks,

*"It is important to retell mythological stories from various perspectives. It makes it possible to give the younger generation, not the 'standard' story, which customarily is from the male gaze."* (Gopal)

The production received mixed reviews. Going against the grain would certainly yield backlashes. In response to the backlashes, the choreographer remarked,

*"The kind of things you see are male-driven. It is necessary to look at things clearly and analytically from multiple spectrums. This production is not contesting with the existing mainstream point of view but is an exploration of possibilities. As artistes, it is necessary to push the boundary - even if it is politically loaded and you deem it essential, one must go ahead."* (Gopal)

Through *Shoorpanakha – Navarasa Gadhya*, Shruti interrogates the act of mutilation, deliberates over the issues of 'otherness', argues for body positivity comprising the subjects of beauty, skin colour, and physique. The choreography delineates the sexist stereotyping of women in the mainstream narratives and advocates gender consciousness through reinterpretation.

*Shoorpanakha - The Story Only She nose!* by Dakshina Vaidyanathan Baghel as she remembers was conceived for 'Paatra Parichaya', a program curated by Usha R K, an art connoisseur from Bengaluru. As a part of this dance festival,

Dakshina was entrusted with the character of Shoorpanakha. Hence Shoorpanakha chose Dakshina to tell her story that only she knows! The title with a pun on the word knows/nose is intriguing. Probing into the conception of the story Dakshina has used a tribal version of Ramayana where Shoorpanakha's approach towards Rama is a ploy to avenge her husband Dushtabuddhi's death in the hands of Ravana, her brother. This tribal narrative chosen by the choreographer does not alter anything about the mainstream narrative, but this perspective is built around Shoorpanakha seeking revenge. Dakshina comments,

*"Interestingly, this is an enthralling perspective on the Ramayana. It does not in any way alter the facts of the story. It does not change anything we already know about the Ramayana or already believe about the Ramayana. And it can very well as easily be true as easily as it need not be true."* (Baghel)

The narrative begins at a point in the story when Shoorpanakha is roaming in the forests of India after the death of her husband in the hands of her brother. In this widowed and desolate state, she found Rama and immediately planned to retaliate. She comes across as any woman who has been betrayed or had someone close to her cheat her and wants revenge in life. In this production, Dakshina has portrayed Shoorpanakha as a woman who loves passionately. She's also capable of showcasing her aggressive side if anyone was to come between her and the ones she loved. It also showcases the fantastic planning and manoeuvring of her plan. It comes across to the audience as a surprise that Shoorpanakha deftly organized her ploy, that nobody in thousands of years of mankind has suspected her of having been the one who abated Ravana's murder in the first place.

The characterization of Shoorpanakha by Dakshina is praiseworthy. Here, we find the heroine as a young, beautiful, talented, intelligent, loving Meenakshi whose circumstances transform her into a manipulative, shrewd, devious, and smart Shoorpanakha, literally meaning the one with unkempt nails. At the outset, the costume in colour black and red is striking as it shows the Shoorpanakha as we already know. Changing a little on the traditional Bharatanatyam headdress Dakshina has let her hair loose which again is a bold move that symbolises the freedom that the heroine enjoys. The red alta smeared on both of her palms represents avenging her husband by revenging against her brother, the egoistic Ravana. The ten-headed Ravana, the king of Lanka who killed Dushtabuddhi to end the competition without even thinking that his act would devastate his sister Meenakshi estranged him from his little sister. On the death of her husband, Meenakshi is heartbroken and is left aghast at her brother's deed and succumbs to anger. Withdrawing to this anger, she psychologically manifests the inner rakshasi in the plotting against the king of Lanka in the hands of Rama, hence becoming the dreadful Shoorpanakha.

Responding to the relevance of Shoorpanakha's character in the contemporary world, Dakshina answers,

*"Protective instinct is pervasive, especially in a woman. I'm not advocating revenge by death (laughs) but I will advocate fierceness with which one must love. In today's day and age, it is easy to stray, easy to forget what one's priorities are. But to keep home the way it is everyone – man and woman both must work towards it. And that is a trait that I admire about Shoorpanakha."* (Baghel)

*Shoorpanakha – the story only she nose!* is a retelling of Shoorpanakha's episode from the Ramayana similar to Shruti's production *Shoorpanakha – Navarasa Gadhya* yet unique. Myths are created from time to time when required to

tell a story, to teach a lesson, and to inculcate certain qualities in people. To keep the mythological stories relevant and contemporary, revisiting them becomes of utmost necessity. Commenting on retellings of the mythological stories, Dakshina responds,

*"With changing times, the relevance of these mythological stories keeps changing. It is important to keep it retelling to keep it current. Otherwise, the entire plethora of mythology becomes entirely obsolete and irrelevant. And the certain important spiritual significance of it is lost."* (Baghel)

Through *Shoorpanakha – the story only she nose!* Dakshina wants her audience to be definite in character, fierce in mind, and passionate in love. This production was well-received among the audience, but Dakshina acknowledges a handicap in not knowing the exact roots of this version of the Ramayana.

Dance has always been a significant non-verbal mode of communication. How it disseminates ideas and concepts is phenomenal. The dance collectively has a profound impact on its audience, operating the narrative tools of dance - space, gestures, force, time expressions and such. Discussing the emerging trends in thematic concerns and choreography in Indian Classical Dance with special reference to Bharatanatyam and Kathak a decade ago, Ketu Katrak notes,

*"Hybrid choreography uses Indian dance mudras for abstract contemporary dance or gives modern re-interpretations to Indian epic and mythological stories. Contemporary Indian dancers may evoke the religious base of classical Bharatanatyam even as they re-invent, in tune with today's concerns with gender and sexuality, ethnicity and nationality, notions of bhakti (devotion) and mythic-religious figures in ways markedly different from early 20th century artists when nationalism and anti-colonial rhetoric directed the recuperation and celebration of classical Indian dance."* (Katrak 48)

It is easy to be repetitive but to conceive and present what is relevant is challenging. These young artistes have been successful in creating narratives that are relevant to contemporary times. Following the convention and blindly revisiting would be counterproductive is what both these artistes propose. In essence, both Shruti and Dakshina have conceived the character of Shoorpanakha in accordance with their perspective. Beyond the mythological framework of the story and amid the traditional ambit of Bharatanatyam, two of these artistes have presented Shoorpanakha like any other woman of today.

Shruti's Shoorpanakha negates the otherwise interrogated emotional depth of her character. Within the context of navarasa (nine emotional states), minimum nritta (rhythmic patterns of movements) and instrumental accompaniment, Shoorpanakha here is thoughtful and impels the audience to examine the bias concerning her character in the epic. Whereas Dakshina's Shoorpanakha is sharp-witted and crafty which is portrayed aptly through deft movements, body language and sharp yet effortless facial expressions. The various swara patterns set in different ragas enunciate the heroine's sentiment. As the performance ends, Dakshina the dancer and Shoorpanakha the heroine come down the stage and walk out of the auditorium amidst the audience artfully putting her plan into action. This dramatic exit from the stage and, in the context of the epic, exit from the plot gives agency solely to Shoorpanakha.

Despite the different presentation methods, both works follow the basic principles of Bharatanatyam, explore a specific cultural history, and confidently reconfigure it to suit the

contemporary era. As an art form, Bharatanatyam has evolved with its content. Therefore, this reinterpretation of cultural texts resonates with today's audiences.

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