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Queering My Mudra: An Exploration on the Role of Bharatanatyam in the Activism of an Indian Queer Group

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Abstract: The Supreme Court of India has recently re-enforced Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, a colonial set of laws that criticise any kind of sexual acts that do not fit into the mainstream heteronormative system. Thus, in contemporary India, homosexuality and other types of ‘inverted behaviours’ in relation to gender and sexuality are currently considered as immoral, illicit, against the order of nature. This essay explores how the Indian classical dance form Bharatanatyam, and particularly its narrative component (the *abhinaya*), can be involved in the process of performing non-normative behaviour in order to legitimate it. In particular it investigates the work of a group of LGBT artists based in Bangalore, called Queer Art Movement, active since 2013 organising ‘queer performances’ between Bangalore and Chennai (Southern India). Bharatanatyam, as a narrative form in which dancers are allowed to move between gender boundaries and as a classical dance style culturally recognised, becomes for this group a space of political agency. They use it as a powerful tool to show the Indian population that any gender or sexual behaviour, even the norm, is culturally performed and that the non-normative is an alternative, legitimate possibility.

Keywords: Bharatanatyam, gender, queerness, activism

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India, July 2009. In response to years of political activism and protests all over the country, the Delhi High Court overturns section 377 of the Indian penal code, a colonial set of laws that criminalised private consensual sex between same-sex adults, as ‘carnal intercourses against the order of nature’ (Indian Penal Code, 2013).

Four years later, in December 2013, the Supreme Court of India chooses to re-introduce the section, declaring homosexuality and other types of ‘inverted behaviours’ in relation to gender and sexuality as immoral, unnatural, against Indian traditional values and, consequently, punishable by law (ORINAM, 2013). In contemporary India, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) subjects are therefore living their lives and their romantic relationships as criminals; engaging in legally illicit acts every day, against what has been constructed as normative, natural behaviour.

In this context, the Queer Arts Movement, a group of artists active between Bangalore and Chennai, Southern India, felt the need to communicate to the Indian population that love cannot be illegal: ‘love cannot be a crime!’ (rediffNEWS, 2013). They felt the necessity to show that nothing is natural or unnatural in terms of gender, sexuality, desire, and love; everything, especially the norm, is culturally performed, based on ‘a stylized repetition of acts through time’ (Butler, 1988:520). Thus, the possibility to fail this repetition in dance, showing unconsidered alternatives to what is meant to be right and natural, is for this group a powerful modality to ‘destabilise received and rehearsed categories’ (Fraleigh Horton, 2004:15). Through the Indian classical dance Bharatanatyam, these artists openly question the natural features of normative and legitimate sexual behaviours.

Feminist scholar Judith Butler has profusely highlighted the major safety of performing arts, compared to everyday life, as places to destabilise normative categories. Non-theatrical contexts are indeed ‘governed by more clearly punitive and regulatory social conventions’ (Butler, 1988:527). Furthermore, the explicit decision made by the members of the Queer Arts Movement to favour Bharatanatyam over other types of performing arts, has stimulated my interest in investigating what may be the particular features of this dance that add relevance to it in this specific context. Is there anything, characterizing this choreutic form that may increase its potential of raising people’s awareness on issues such as gender and sexuality? What is it that may transform Bharatanatyam into a powerful instrument of

action in the hands of an Indian LGBT activist group? How can this dance form become a potential tool and a space through which the non-normative can show unconsidered possibilities to the mainstream? While a large amount of research has been conducted on the relevant role of performing arts as a locus to explore, express, and question gender categories and sexual behaviours, the specific field of Bharatanatyam remains almost unexplored from this perspective. Through this work I will attempt to shed light on what I consider to be a current and highly relevant area of scholarship that is worthy to be explored.

This paper investigates the place that Bharatanatyam occupies in the experiences of these dancers, looking at their activism in relation to the choreutic and political features that, I propose, make this dance a legitimate space for the performance of the illicit, and a powerful tool of communication that could ‘lead the spectator into brave new perspectives that have liberating possibilities’ (Fisher & Shay, 2009:21). On a choreutic level, Bharatanatyam allows dancers to move across gender boundaries. Through the narrative part of the dance, the *abhinaya*,¹ dancers are expected to enact multiple gender roles, exploring different attitudes, feelings, and desires. On a political level, this performance seems to be legitimised by the high social status of Bharatanatyam, the Indian classical dance *par excellence*, a symbol of Indianness on both a national and a transnational level (O’Shea, 2007:93), as well as by the pure, ancient past that the dance is believed to narrate. My general aim is to explore how the combination of these features, as the result of the intersection between social, political, and historical dynamics, transform this dance into a cultural space of agency² for the social actors’ part of the Queer Arts Movement.

My exchange with this specific group is part of a broader ethnographic exploration on the cultural links between Bharatanatyam, gender, and sexuality that I conducted among dancers of the LGBT community of Chennai (Tamil Nadu). Through my main collaborators, I managed to create a connection with the previously mentioned artists from Bangalore (Karnataka), and engaged with them in a virtual exchange. Although I never met them, what could be defined as a small, continuative electronic fieldwork allowed me to get close to their

¹ My exploration is based on the identification by scholar Anne Marie Gaston of three main components of the dance: *abhinaya*, a narrative and meaningful set of gestures and movements; *nritya*, which defines non-meaningful codified patterns evoking neither moods nor feelings; and *nritya*, the realisation in dance of both of the components (1996: 257). While this classification is only one of the possibilities discussed among dancers and scholars, it is through this separation that I was first introduced to the dance and I will therefore refer to it within my investigation.

² In opposition to several social and anthropological perspectives considering human beings as completely conditioned by the cultural schemes of their society, in the 70s the so-called theory of *agency* emerged. It introduced a more elastic and dynamic perspective in light of which human beings have an active role in the construction of their culture: they are, indeed, ‘social actors’ (Natali, 2009:25).

specific purposes, experiences, and meanings in staging these performances. Their dancing activism, and in particular a specific piece performed by one of them, *Queering My Mudra*, will be approached from an anthropological perspective, which questions the boundaries between what is culturally written on the body and what can be re-drawn through individual agency (Desmond, 1993–94:36). Locating my exploration at the intersection of Feminist theories that conceptualise gender and sexuality as performances and learned behaviours, and at the same time, on those investigations that value performing arts as powerful tools to make changes in cultural processes (Hanna, 1988; Burt, 2009; Fisher & Shay, 2009), I show how contemporary Bharatanatyam may give voice to the illicit, the non-normative, and the Queer.³

Dancing across gender boundaries in *abhinaya*

Dancer and scholar Purnima Shah asserted that in Indian classical dance, ‘perfection can be achieved exclusively in the spiritual transcendence of one’s gender’ (1998:3). Telling stories through the bodily vocabulary provided by *abhinaya*,⁴ dancers perceive themselves as ‘blank pages’ who are able to become everyone and to express any sort of emotion, moving across the boundaries of gender and sexuality. As performance scholar Avanthi Meduri fittingly observed, ‘the Indian classical performer is a “perhapter”, a self-styled magician playing at everything without inhabiting any one space exclusively’ (2003b:191). This game of impersonations, based on the translation of traditional lyrics through bodily gestures and facial expressions, can assume different forms, depending on the type of text that is translated. Sometimes, dancers simply narrate episodes from the big corpus of Hindu epics and mythology, becoming any character of the story, and switching quickly from the representation of a male character to the representation of a female one. With other types of compositions, the main aim of the performers is to express characters’ emotional states through *abhinaya*. The feelings and emotions of a character are generally addressed to a specific subject, who vary in relation to the nature of the composition. At times, *abhinaya* becomes a means to worship specific Hindu deities: through their bodies, dancers express love, devotion and desire for union with god. This is the case of devotional texts such as

³ ‘Queer’, a term that was once as much a slang for ‘homosexual’ as a word with homophobic acceptance, has successively become an open and elastic umbrella term which can define every conceptualization in terms of gender and sexuality that is not included in the normative dichotomy male-man, woman-female (Prosser, 1997: 309).

⁴ Although this exploration focuses on the performance of gender that dancers actualise through the set of codified gestures provided by *abhinaya*, I consider the non-thematic component of Bharatanatyam – the *nritta* – to be similarly relevant in this context. While male and female dancers should perform the choreographic patterns of *nritta* in two different styles, respectively the virile *tandava* (recalling *Siva*) and the gentle *lasya* (recalling his consort *Parvati*), both styles are actually nurtured by dancers of each sex (Hanna, 1988: 103).

slokams or *bhajans*. When it comes to the performance of pieces like *padams* or *javalis*, the text being translated through movement is an erotic one and the dancers act in relationship to their beloved, who – in this case, as well – are often divine. Indeed, in *abhinaya* pieces, the thin line between erotic and devotional love is quite hard to demarcate, especially because of the type of devotion characterising Hindu religion, the *Bhakti*, in which what a devotee feels and expresses for a god is an intimate and erotic form of love⁵ (Hanna, 1988:105).

In ancient periods these types of pieces were mainly performed by female dancers, a specific hereditary group of dancers known as *devadasi* (Srinivasan, 1985; Kersenboom, 1987; Jordan, 1989; Meduri, 2004; O’Shea, 2007; Soneji, 2012); however, nowadays both male and female can engage in this bodily translation of traditional lyrics. This is related to the quite recent invention of the figure of the male Bharatanatyam dancer, who replaced the traditional female impersonators and their performances characterized by cross-dressing and gynomimesis⁶ (Krishnan, 2009:382). As scholar and performer Hari Krishnan points out, during the period when, as we will explore in detail afterwards, Bharatanatyam transformed into its contemporary form, gender was re-imagined under colonial and upper caste nationalist frameworks that invented the male dancer as a hypermasculine, spiritual, and patriotic icon for the emergent new nation (2009:378). Yet, male dancers are now expected to enact female roles and to express love for same-sex subjects, maintaining their masculinity and without any use of costumes, make up, props or technical effects. In such an ambivalent and contradictory position, the majority of male dancers in India tend to favour devotional pieces, avoiding to dance erotic and passionate desire addressed to male subjects.⁷ In this context, *abhinaya*, and in particular those erotic and sensual expressions of feminine love that the majority of the male performers avoid, could become for some dancers a tool to explore, through their dancing bodies, different gender attitudes and feelings, as well as to express desire for multiple types of subjects, even for same-sex ones.

The colonial creation of a contradictory figure of the male Bharatanatyam dancer has

⁵ Here I am particularly referring to a Hindu form of devotion known as *Madhura Bhakti*, which often characterises the devotional composition of the so-called saint-poets of the Karnatic tradition. In this type of devotion, oneness of the devotee with the divine, is of the kind of unity of a bride with her husband (Benary, 1972: 45-46).

⁶ The figure of the male impersonator, that through the re-invention and codification of Bharatanatyam has been detached from this dance form, is still central in several performing arts of India. The Bhamakapalam, devotional dance drama form of the Andhra Pradesh, the Gotipua dance of Orissa and the Kathakali, a form of dance-drama from the state of Kerala, are only a few examples of performing arts where all-male troops enact multiple gender roles by cross-dressing.

⁷ Relevant exceptions are the cases of hereditary styles like the one practised and transmitted within the Pillai lineage from Thanjore, in which *abhinaya* pieces characterised by strong erotic features are learned and performed by both female and male dancers.

perhaps, and unexpectedly, originated a potential space to subvert the normative, legitimate structure. The experiences of the social actors at the centre of my exploration are situated in this space of agency. Through their performances, the dancers of the Queer Arts Movement deconstruct normative categories in an attempt to show how they are culturally constructed and based on a performative system which is rarely questioned. As anthropologist and dance scholar Jane Desmond explained, ‘So much privilege lies in heterosexual culture’s ability to interpret itself as society ... as the elemental form of human association, as the indivisible basis of all communities’ (2001:11). While the heteronormative system is socially meant to be the only acceptable type of love relationship, in *abhinaya* different possibilities can be explored and expressed. By destabilising the normative, this choreutic space may offer, both to performers and audiences, ‘an opportunity to find new ways of interpreting gender and sexuality, showing that it does not have to be like this’ (Burt, 2009:159–160).

A legitimate performance of gender

If the possibility for male dancers to express love and desire for same-sex subjects may create a cultural space of agency on a choreutic level, it is mainly the social state of Bharatanatyam as traditional and classical Indian dance that makes this performance doubly legitimate. On the occasion of the first Indian National Dance Seminar, an event that took place in 1958 in the city of New Delhi, scholar and critic Venkataraman Raghavan first defined Bharatanatyam as the ‘Indian national dance *par excellence*’ (1958:26, cited in Meduri 2008:232). To understand the complexity of the cultural processes that placed this dance form on its elevated position, we should briefly go through the cultural, historical pattern of its formation.

This takes us back to the 1930s colonial city of Madras⁸ (Tamil Nadu, South India), a geographical and political context in which the dance repertoire of *sadir kacheri*,⁹ was re-invented and re-codified as the classical, traditional, Indian high art known today as Bharatanatyam (Allen, 1997; Meduri, 2004; O’Shea, 2007; Krishnan, 2009). As mentioned earlier, the *sadir kacheri* was previously performed by the hereditary community of *devadasi*.

⁸ The South Indian city of Chennai was temporarily re-named as Madras during British colonialism. The city went back officially to its Tamil name in the late 1990s (O’Shea, 2003: 182, note n. 3).

⁹ Religion scholar Davesh Soneji has shown how the concert repertoire that used to be performed by the *devadasi* is reckoned by a number of names (2012: 202). Nevertheless, in this paper I will refer to it with the double name used by Krishnan in his essay ‘From Gynemimesis to Hypermasculinity: the Shifting Orientation of Male Performers of South India Court Dance’ (2009). According to the author, the word *sadir* seems to come from the Telegu *chaduru*, which means ‘court, assembly or throne’ (Arudra, 1987: 30, cited in Krishnan, 2009: p. 387, note n. 4). The word *kacheri* comes from the Urdu *kachahri*, also meaning ‘assembly’ (Madra University Tamil Lexicon, vol. 2, pt. 1: 368, cited in Krishnan, 2009: 387, note n. 4).

These women were socially considered to be married with specific gods or goddesses, and their ritual marriage used to be seen as a legitimate mark of their celibate or unmarried social status. Their particular role, however, did not deny them from engaging in social activities such as economic management, sex, and child-bearing (Srinivasan, 1985:1869). Indeed, unlike most Indian women in this specific context, *devadasi* had considerable economic and sexual autonomy (Vanita, 2005, p. 76). In addition to their ritual activity in the temple, their performances were often required at the courts or within private celebrations.¹⁰ At times, courtesans were not ‘dedicated’ to temples, but, as religious scholar Davesh Soneji explains, they may have been marked by other types of rites of passage or may have simply been co-opted into the courtesan lifestyle without any such rituals (2012:207). Dance was the means through which they used to worship their divine consorts or the kings who requested their services. They were, at that time, together with the male exponents of their social group, the only subjects who had access to the knowledge and the practice of the *sadir kacheri*.

Relevant changes occurred to the social status of the *devadasi* and to their dance style during British Colonialism. In that context, *sadir kacheri* was declared immoral and stigmatised, since it was associated with the non-domestic lifestyle of this group of women, and largely considered as prostitution (O’Shea, 2007:4). As ethnomusicologist Anna Morcom points out, ‘As modernity, nationalism, and colonial and bourgeois morality began to sweep definitively across India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, performing arts changed radically’ (2013:11). A series of colonial policies and ‘purity’ campaigns known as *anti-nauch* (anti-dance) marked the status of the dancers and their sensual, erotic dance as illegal, immoral, and illicit. These acts marginalised their social group and opened the way for the entry of high social class groups into performing arts, as well as for the re-definition, re-construction and re-configuration of the dance form. Not only was the style re-shaped and codified in order to remove the erotic attitude that had once characterised it, but also the repertoire was revised and re-selected, favouring devotional compositions to openly erotic ones. Thus, within the so-called ‘revival’, nationalist and colonial discourses of ‘purifying’ performance arts morphed ‘immoral eroticism’ into sacred and devotional love, thereby re-inventing *sadir kacheri* as a pure, non-immoral Indian tradition (O’Shea, 2003:178). At the same time, as ethnomusicologist Matthew Harp Allen revealed, the hereditary community of

¹⁰ In particular, a quite active site of dance production in pre-colonial time, was the 19th century’s Tanjavur court of king Serfoji II, where the well-known ‘Tanjavur Quartet’, a group of four composers and musicians, first systematized the court dance tradition and the *sadir kacheri* repertoire as it is generally still transmitted today (O’Shea, 2007; Krishnan, 2009; Soneji, 2012).

devadasi dancers was replaced by a new community of upper-caste dancers, now both male and female' (1997:65).¹¹ This transformed the choreutic style as a dance of the high social class. Bharatanatyam is therefore the result of Indian upper-class exponents' attempt to re-establish *sadir*'s dignity, dissociating it from the ritual dancers' system and their immoral, illicit world¹² and associating it with an ancient, pure past, symbolised by ancient Sanskrit and Tamil texts (Allen, 1997; O'Shea, 2007; Krishnan, 2009; Natali, 2009). It is the classical dance that, as Morcom proposes, in the post-colonial context was marked as legitimate, in contrast with the dance of the *devadasi* and the female impersonators, and a large number of other forms, which were characterized by a more erotic style of expression and marked as illicit (2013).

Thus, the modern, post-colonial construct on which I am focusing my exploration is not only a dance of elite, at the heart of upper and middle castes' aspiration and consumption, but also a contradictory space where female and male dancers can move on the thin line between devotional and erotic love and legitimate and illicit desire. Paradoxically, what was re-invented and purified in order to be disassociated with an illicit world, is now used by the non-normative to perform illicit behaviours in the attempt to legitimise them.¹³

The Queer Arts Movement – claiming legitimacy through tradition

Feminist scholar Teresa de Lauretis has defined Queer theory as 'another discursive horizon, another way of thinking the sexual' (1991:iv, cited in Yep, Lovaas & Elias, 2004:2).

Essential features of this intellectual movement, which developed in the early 1990s out of the field of Gay and Lesbian studies, are indeed its definitional indeterminacy, discursive possibilities, and conceptual elasticity. It approaches sexual identities as multiple, unstable, and fluid social constructions, proposing 'not to abandon identity as a category of knowledge and politics but to render it permanently open and contestable' (Seidman, 1996b:12, cited in

¹¹ What is commonly known as the 'caste system' is a system of social stratification which defines Indian communities in endogamous hereditary groups called *Jati*. Considered as part of the Hindu system to classify the universe, this system determines the socio-economic positions of the members born in each of the groups (Belkin, 2008, p. 1). Although it has undergone a multitude of transformations over the course of Indian history, the system remains, in India and particularly in Tamil Nadu, an essential element of social organisation.

¹² In her book *Illicit worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion*, Morcom proposes that during British colonialism the creation of a legitimate group of dances, considered as sacred and traditional, implicitly created an illicit world of Indian dance, related to the illicit figures of the *devadasi* and the female impersonators (2013, p. 12). The concepts of legitimate and illicit will be largely used throughout this paper, in the attempt to highlight the respectability of Bharatanatyam in contrast to the illegality of same-sex sexual acts.

¹³ The possibility of agency that Bharatanatyam may create needs to be explored in relation to the place that the social actors involved occupy in Indian society. The artists of the Queer Arts Movement are socially perceived as immoral and illicit for their sexual behaviours; however, coming from upper and middle classes, not only can they access an elite dance such as Bharatanatyam, but they can also openly declare their sexual orientation.

Yep, Lovaas & Elias, 2004:24). This set of theories, which has been influential both in academia and in cultural politics, is at the centre of the political activity conducted by the artists of the Queer Arts Movement. They define themselves and what they do as queer, understanding the concept as ‘whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant ... as an horizon of possibilities whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be defined in advance’ (Halperin, 1995:62, cited in Dave, 2012:21). Their main aim is to show the horizon of unconsidered possibilities that the concept of Queer embraces in the attempt to make it as normal as what is considered to be natural and right.

In 2013, the artists of the Queer Arts Movement began telling stories of illicit, non-normative love through traditional Indian arts and in particular through the Indian classical dance Bharatanatyam. As one of them claims, ‘We speak about love through tradition, it gives us voice and strength, it makes us reach people’.¹⁴ Although my exchange with these social actors was exclusively conducted through electronic media, it shed light on the specific place that Bharatanatyam occupies in their activism. In particular, it was through conversations and discussions with one of the dancers that the reasons behind their choice of using this traditional dance form as a legitimate expression of queerness emerged. This male dancer, named Masoom,¹⁵ explained to me that ‘a quite common belief in contemporary India is that not-normative behaviours in terms of gender and sexuality have never been part of Indian culture, but are immoral colonial impositions and western imports’.¹⁶ Considering that section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, currently criminalising same-sex erotic acts, dates back to the colonial period, it may seem strange that what is commonly associated with British colonialism is not the introduction of homophobia, but the import of homosexuality itself. In contrast to these common beliefs, the executive director of the activist group Creating Resources for Empowerment in Action (CREA),¹⁷ Geetanjali Misra stresses the fact that the set of laws was ‘part of Britain’s efforts to impose Victorian values on its biggest colony’ (2009:21). Similarly, Indian scholar and historian Ruth Vanita firmly defined the nineteenth century as ‘a crucial period of transition when a minor strand of pre-colonial homophobia became the dominant voice in colonial and post-colonial mainstream discourses’ (2001:3). Although in the field of academia and LGBT activism we can currently find general agreement about the existence of queer dynamics in pre-colonial India, even if with different forms or names (Vanita, 2001:1), these behaviours are still largely considered

¹⁴ Poomar, M., Interviewed by: Azzarelli, S. (10 Mar 2013).

¹⁵ Respecting my collaborator’s preference, I am referring to him with his real name, Masoom Poomar.

¹⁶ Poomar, M., Interviewed by: Azzarelli, S. (12 Mar 2013).

¹⁷ Founded in 2000, CREA is a feminist human rights organization based in New Delhi, India.

as immoral, unnatural, and Western phenomena. By becoming aware of these cultural dynamics, I realised the importance for these artists of going back to this traditional dance form, commonly thought to narrate stories from ancient times, in order to gain legitimacy. These activists perceive Bharatanatyam as a legitimate modality to reconnect to a pre-colonial past, which, as psychoanalyst Ashis Nandy maintained, was characterised by a more fluid organisation in terms of gender and sexuality, represented by the concept of 'gender fluidity' (1988, cited in Leslie & McGee, 2000:35).

The Queer Arts Movement acts therefore through the cultural space of double agency offered by Bharatanatyam. They see in *abhinaya* the possibility to enact multiple desires, multiples performances of gender and at the same time they perceive the traditional background Bharatanatyam incorporates as a particularly powerful medium to talk about their culture and hope to be heard. Through their queer performances they aim to reach two types of audiences, and to interact in different modalities with them. On one hand, they attempt to speak to those LGBT subjects who perceive their sexual behaviours to be unnatural and wrong. As Misra points out, section 377 does not act practically on these sexual minorities, but it implicitly influences the way in which they are marginalized in society (2009:21). Thus, the attempt of normalizing differences through dance should act as 'a ritual healing of violent and traumatic exclusions' (Burt, 2009:156). On the other hand, these performers want to reach a broader audience; they want to use the power dance has to 'make people question things'.¹⁸ As Masoom explained to me, 'After Section 377 was reinstated in 2013, we have attempted to reach a more general audience and in particular those subjects who make decisions in the country like politicians and religious heads'.¹⁹ According to him, Bharatanatyam is considered, especially by the high caste exponents, as telling stories of a pure, ancient past, in an aesthetically elevated form. If this dance can speak of queer love, then people might think that it is not so extraneous to Indian culture and that it was not imported by the West. As dance scholar Ramsay Burt puts it, what happens in their performances could be seen as an 'evocation of shared memories and histories of a kind that are normally denied' (2009:155) through a legitimate tradition. The exploration of a specific dance performance, *Queering My Mudra*, which happened and is still happening in different contexts, will serve as an example of the modality in which Bharatanatyam can give voice to love and desire, whether it is considered legitimate or immoral.

¹⁸ Poomar, M., Interviewed by: Azzarelli, S. (10 March 2013).

¹⁹ Poomar, M., Interviewed by: Azzarelli, S. (10 March 2013).

Queering My Mudra

The Lord who always slept with his head on my breasts

Is – ayyayyo! – now sick of me.

His eyes fixed, unblinking on my face, he would say:

‘When dusk falls, your face, alas, will be hidden in the dark’.

And then asked me in broad daylight, for a lamp.

Ayyayyo! He is now sick of me.

Biting my mouth in love play, since to talk would be to let go,

My lord would speak only with his hands,

Ayyayyo! He is now sick of me.

Lest in sleep his embrace should loosen,

He will ask me to tie down the four corners of our blanket.

Ayyayyo! He is now sick of me.

(*Ayyayyo vegatayene*, XVI century’s Telugu *padam*)²⁰

These above lines tell the story of a powerful, true and painful love. The person who is talking seems to be moved by an inner, struggling desire. This *padam*, which is attributed to the sixteenth-century Telegu male poet Ksetrayya, features, as typical of this type of compositions, an explicit expression of love and physical desire addressed to a male subject. Mainly written between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries by Telugu and Tamil composers, *padams* usually consist of erotic lyrics addressed by a *nayaki* (female devotee) to her beloved *nayaka*; a male deity or human patron (Puri, 2011:79). These poetic compositions used to be, together with *Javalis*, at the core of courtesan performances in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, especially for Telugu-speaking dancers, who spoke the language in which the majority of these texts were composed (Soneji, 2012:203). Through these compositions, hereditary female dancers were enabled to display and discuss sexuality in a very explicit way, a thing that would have been perceived as immoral, if not done through the legitimate means of dance. Furthermore, they were allowed to express non-normative types of desires and tell stories of secret and extra-marital relationships, dissociating themselves from the moral values that their society ascribed to women.

The possibility to display and discuss illicit desire in an explicit modality seems to still be a particularly powerful tool in the hands of non-normative groups. This specific feature characterising *padams*, combined with the contradictory figure of the male Bharatanatyam dancer, may render these compositions as powerful pieces for the Queer Arts Movement to

²⁰ This particular translation to English of the *padam*, used by Masoom for his performance, is by A.K. Ramanujan, David Shulman, and Velcheru Narayana Rao, available in their book *When God is a Customer: Telugu Courtesan Songs by Ksetrayya and Others* (1994: 121-22).

act. While a *padam* such as *Ayyayyo vegatayene*, expressing a struggling desire for a male deity, would have been previously performed only by female dancers, the transformations of the choreutic form that occurred in the early-twentieth century now make it possible also for a male dancer to perform these kinds of pieces, without the need of cross-dressing. Although it is quite rare for a male dancer to perform these erotic poems addressed to the beautiful god, Krishna, because of the cultural fear of its association with homosexual behaviours,²¹ it can happen. Sometimes the dancer solely perceives the erotic feelings performed as a metaphor to represent the union of human and divine. Yet, at other times he can feel those emotions as human, passionate, and same-sex desire.

To show this type of desire, Masoom, a dancer of the Queer Arts Movement, decided to perform this *padam* as a man, who is struggling with the indifference of his male lover. Discussing with a collaborator, he realised that there is no reason why Lord Krishna, *Muvva Gopala*, the god known for being the beloved of young girls, could not be the beloved of a beautiful man this time. What Masoom did, therefore, in order to ‘queer’ the performance, was a very simple thing on a choreutic level: he changed the gender of the dancer, dancing a male character in a male body. He created his own choreography, as dancers usually do with a *padam*, since this expressive unit is not traditionally meant to be transmitted in a fixed form, but it is based on the interpretation and codification of the poem by the dancers, or even on their improvisation on stage (Meduri, 2003a:141). He conceived the piece thinking of himself as a young boy who used to secretly meet Krishna every night. That Bharatanatyam piece was speaking about same-sex love, showing how this does not change, in any way, its emotional intensity, attempting to destroy ‘the means through which gay behaviour can be marked as different’ (Burt, 2009:159).

The piece, called *Queering my Mudra*, was performed in several situations, firstly during the Bangalore Queer Pride, which happened in November 2013, the month before the final verdict of the Supreme Court of India on homosexual sexual acts was declared. During that period, LGBT activist groups were already aware of the possible re-activation of section 377; so the performance must be contextualised in this collective feeling of opposition. The performance took place in the auditorium of a university in central Bangalore. In a short video excerpt of the event, that my collaborators shared with me, we can see the dancer moving, in his traditional *dhota*,²² in the background of the multi-coloured Queer flag. His

²¹ Information collected during my ethnographic research in Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

²² Traditional Indian cloth worn by men.

delicate, yet strong, *mudras*²³ and his harmonic bodily movements are gently asking his imaginary lover why he does not love him anymore. We can see him telling the audience how they used to spend time together, showing the warm embrace of *Muvva Gopala*, lasting the entire night, and displaying their playful love exchanges under the light of the moon. The dancer shows the audience how he used to listen for hours to the mesmerising music played by Krishna's flute, staring at his beautiful presence. Also, he shows how the one who always slept on his breast does not even remember his face anymore. Everything is told through traditional codified movements and gestures. Minimal details distinguish this queer performance from a traditional one. The dancer emphasises these details in the attempt to make his male gender evident and to describe the particular features of love between two men. Translating the first two lines of the *padam* in movement, 'The Lord who always slept with his head on my breasts, Is – ayyayyo! – now sick of me,' he changed the *mudra* from *alapadma*,²⁴ symbolising a pair of female breasts, to a *pataka*²⁵ showing the perfect male chest line. Similarly, in the narration of playful moments between the two characters, he uses specific bodily movements that he associates to lovemaking between two men: 'the hickeys on the neck, the sliding of hand below the waist'.²⁶ He carefully depicts his male body through codified gestures, being a man who loves a man, making his love become queer. This performance is an expression of desire, absence, charming and sad memories, hope and dreams. What Masoom wanted to show is simply love; a different, illegitimated, possibility of human love.

Conclusion

At the end of the performance of *Queering My Mudra*, two young boys went near the stage to talk to the dancer. They told him that after having watched him dance they felt less abnormal, less different, 'because they discovered that queer relationships have always existed'.²⁷ Tradition worked for them as consent, as a cultural space to find prescriptions on what can or cannot be done. While this was the most common response among their LGBT

²³ The *Hasta Mudras* are a set of codified hand gestures, essential in the interpretation of lyrics through *abhinaya*.

²⁴ Hand gesture characterized by fingers beginning from the little fingers bent and separated from one another is called *alapadma*. It has a multitude of meanings, such as a full-blown lotus, the female breast, the full-moon, beauty, separation from the beloved (Nandikesvara 1957: 56-57).

²⁵ The hand gesture in which the thumb is bent to touch the fingers, and the fingers are extended is called *pataka*. (Nandikesvara 1957: 52). This *mudra* is largely used in *Bharatanatyam* for its adaptability to a large number of meanings.

²⁶ Poomar, M., Interviewed by: Azzarelli, S. (12 Mar 2013).

²⁷ Poomar, M., Interviewed by: Azzarelli, S. (12 Mar 2013).

audience, it is interesting to note that after this performance, the Queer Arts Movement is also receiving more and more support from heterosexual subjects and human rights groups. Their dancing is showing unconsidered possibilities to quite a broad audience; a rich amount of modalities to fail those repetitions of acts that became, at some point, the right things to do in terms of gender and sexuality. The brief exploration of the performance *Queering My Mudra* and the description of the reaction to it among the audience show, on a practical level, how the intersection of choreutic and political dynamics previously investigated may transform Bharatanatyam into a safe space to display and discuss sexuality and a powerful tool to reach and inform people, especially in India. On one hand, *abhinaya* and in particular its contemporary state of performance for both men and women become, in Desmond's words, 'a liminal space, a safe in-between where a variety of sexualities and desires can be symbolically rendered through the play of imagination combined with the articulation of the body' (2001:21). On the other hand, the reaction of the audience to a queer performance made through tradition clearly highlights the communicative power of a classical legitimate form.

The modality in which Bharatanatyam is perceived in Indian society legitimates what social actors can do within its choreutic space. This legitimacy, based on tradition, makes this space of agency larger and stronger, especially with regards to the illicitness that characterizes my collaborators. Thus, the piece created by the Queer Arts Movement clearly displays how Bharatanatyam can allow queer groups to trouble and destabilise the contemporary perception of LGBT subjects as the marked ones. In a social and political context in which the normal and legitimate is identified in a number of cultural fixities, this legitimate performance of gender communicates that every identity, even the normative ones, are changeable, unstable cultural performances. Moreover, it can explicitly communicate that 'despite the use of relatively well-fixed codes, it is a richly dynamic rather than static world that is being portrayed' (Emigh & Hunt, 1992:196). In order to change social attitudes toward queerness and to show that love can never be illegal, can never be a crime, the dancers of the Queer Arts Movement move across cultural fixities, performing illegal love and desire. Bharatanatyam is the space through which they speak, the legitimate tool that gives voice to the illicit, and that one day will, maybe, legitimise it.

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