



CELLULOID CLASSICISM: EARLY TAMIL CINEMA AND THE MAKING OF MODERN BHARATANATYAM

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Hari Krishnan's *Celluloid Classicism: Early Tamil Cinema and the Making of Modern Bharatanatyam* traces the shared histories of Bharatanatyam and early Tamil cinema, two significant South Indian modern cultural practices. He argues that the development of both forms in the early and mid-twentieth centuries was owed to the free-flowing exchange of dancing bodies, choreographers, aesthetics, technique, and repertoire between the stage and the screen. Calling this interface "interocular and intermedial," Krishnan looks beyond mere acts of representation in these medias, to focus on how social artistic networks, affective inclinations of audiences' and performers' lived identities, shaped the dissemination and consumption of the reinvented Bharatanatyam on the stage and in cinema (2–3). *Celluloid Classicism* is an original and highly systematized historical reconstruction anchored through life anecdotes, choreographic and dance text analyses, and extensive archival material such as film posters, advertisements in film magazines, screenshots, and songbooks (featuring stills from the film and details of the songs). The book is structured precisely, leading the reader through a linear and chronological evolution of "cinematic and stage versions of Bharatanatyam" (152). The first three chapters discuss the politics of staging a nationalist classical dance form through the migration of hereditary *devadāsī* temple dancers and the middle-class Brahmin women. The fourth chapter examines the performative careers of selected male dance teachers, and the last chapter provides an engaging discussion of how Bharatanatyam's repertoire was hybridized and augmented in the stage-screen dialogue. The coda is an interesting reaffirmation of the continuing visible exchange of Bharatanatyam's idiom between television and cinema.

Krishnan leads us into the yesteryears of Bharatanatyam in Tamil cinema, through evocative and emphatic narratives. His work compels readers to engage with the appropriative model of dance revival that unfolded simultaneously in the cinema. His discussion, for example, of a hagiographic account that cast the hereditary courtesan T. R. Rajakumari to retrieve and reclaim the once devotional and pious identity of the *devadāsī* is a moving iteration of how cinematic representations significantly contributed to the *devadāsī* defamation. Several such accounts, including an analysis of the namesake film *Devadasī* (1948), showcased a *devadāsī* dancer-actress as the eternal temptress duping the hero (39–40). Although the Tamil drama and cinema harbored the deformed *devadāsī* and her traditional repertoire, these were also sites that exploited her cultural labor to dehumanize her lived and performed identity. A commentary of how the new middle-class Brahmin Bharatanatyam representative in cinema conveniently inhabited the role of the righteous wife in didactic narratives that emphasized the immorality of the *devadāsī* community and ultimately portrayed the next generation *devadāsī* women such as Jyothilakshmi and Jayamalini as "item dancers," is visceral (70). Through such hitherto uncovered archival evidence, Krishnan astutely makes his case that these sociopolitical maneuvers centralized the *devadāsīs* in the discourse of "degeneration of Bharatanatyam through cinema" (72).

Although Krishnan's inquiry of the caste and class-based history of cinema dance, and its prescriptive notions of female morality, is unprecedented, perhaps the author's more significant intervention comes in the conceptual discussion of Bharatanatyam's classicality. In the "aspirational aesthetics of Bharatanatyam," Krishnan explores how the classical in Bharatanatyam was made popular through the cinema (152). In the most pragmatic and unimposing ways, the book explores the idea of classicism that has historically policed the practice, performance, and scholarship of Indian dance. Whereas the anti-colonial, elite cultural nationalists situated Bharatanatyam's classicism in antique tradition and Pan-Indian Sanskrit texts, Krishnan argues that it was cinema's

equivocal iteration of Bharatanatyam's classical-ity that popularized the otherwise elitist insular constructions of the form. The confluence of these articulations represented a new aspirational aesthetic in Bharatanatyam, best understood as "celluloid classicism" (159). Some of the best iterations of celluloid classicism are scaffolded in the second chapter, all of which magnify seldom discussed facts of Indian dance history. For example, musician Papanasam Sivan evolved his distinct music style, which is considered the backbone of Bharatanatyam during his two-decade stint in cinema from 1930 to 1950, when he composed innumerable repertoire pieces of Bharatanatyam. Krishnan also provocatively contends how Sivan's collaboration with Rukmini Arundale, the forerunner of the Brahmin revival movement, which borrowed from mythic screenplays, enormously aided her project to spectacularize the dance-drama genre on the stage. Similar iterations, such as cinema adapting Arundale's costume innovations for its dancers and mythological screen characters, and the staple staging, on the stage and the screen, of the icon of Śiva-Naṭarāja as the patron deity of Indian dance, are highlights of Krishnan's exceptional scholarship that weaves crucial missing links of Bharatanatyam's growth being rooted in cinema. In doing so, *Celluloid Classicism* conclusively reveals that the new aesthetic of the classical gained a shared audience and popularity, only due to the breeding of essential signposts and symbols of the reinvented Bharatanatyam with the cinematic landscape.

Krishnan's research on the construction of Bharatanatyam in Tamil cinema as embodied nationalism and Tamil regionalism not only adds to extraordinary previous scholarship, particularly of Janet O'Shea (2007), Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji (2008) and Mathew Harp Allen (2010), but steers the discussion into a completely new trajectory. For Krishnan, the physical acts of patriotism on the celluloid gained a "celebrity" status for several dancer-actresses across the caste-class spectrum, be it for Brahmin middle-class dancers such as Kamala Lakshman and Vyjayanthimala, or non-Brahmin upper-caste dancer Padmini Ramachandran (of the Travancore sisters Lalitha-Padmini-Ragini) and *devadāsī* T.D. Kuchalakumari (181). At the same time, cinema's public-friendly "semiotic, textual, and movement registers" also rendered

these dancers as symbols of ideal Indian domestic womanhood and keepers of Hindu religion and tradition (158). Often set in the middle-class Indian home, the Bharatanatyam dancers waved the Indian flag, garlanded a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi, and bowed to the icon of Śiva-Naṭarāja after posing as the dancer-deity. The performances to patriotic Tamil and Telugu songs successfully broadcast Bharatanatyam as a newly minted, religious, and nationalist amateur artistic practice of Indian women.

Krishnan's focus, in addition to the dance form, on professional careers of the male *naṭṭuvanār* choreographers in cinema is refreshing and insightful. In particular, analysis of the choreographic process of *naṭṭuvanār* Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, who, along with his disciple Kamala Lakshman, created a new athletic, fast-paced dance vocabulary, exposes how cinema revealed several choreographers of acclaim to the stage, and that the different styles in Bharatanatyam evolved through cinematic explorations. Krishnan also drives home the point that the power of cinema afforded the male *naṭṭuvanārs* with financial and professional growth as film choreographers and Bharatanatyam teachers, while completely erasing the women counterparts from their hereditary communities. Another primary contribution is etched out in the final chapter in which Krishnan argues that Bharatanatyam's technique and repertoire "were irrevocably transformed through its encounter with the cinema" (211). The cinema sent back to the stage a repurposed *padam*, the quintessential expressive and improvisational piece of the *devadāsī* repertoire, by adding rhythmic flourishes, exaggerated facial expressions, religious devotion, and spatial choreographies. Such valuable historic retrieval provokes a reexamination of present-day *padam* genre performances, which claim an unbroken linear genealogy. Similarly revealing lineages, dance pieces such as the "*pampu natanam* or snake dance" and the innumerable songs about Śiva-Naṭarāja, were birthed as popular entertainment forms for the cinema audience before forming an integral part of the high art of classical Bharatanatyam (232–233).

Krishnan's exemplary work convinces that the discourse on and pedagogy of the classical Bharatanatyam was created through the shared textual, sonic, ocular, performative, and

sociopolitical aesthetics of Bharatanatyam in cinema and stage. *Celluloid Classicism* situates itself amidst Indian dance scholarship in the past decade that examined Bharatanatyam's growth and development through its dialogue with complex and heterogenous performative contexts and spaces, to question and challenge the standard representations of the form's past. Prominently, Davesh Soneji (2012) whose work Krishnan quotes extensively, examined an appropriated modern Bharatanatyam through the marginalized *devadāsī* voices and embodied memory. Priya Srinivasan (2012) interrogated how Bharatanatyam had obscured the bodily labor of transnational dancers both historically and otherwise. Krishnan's work, in the dearth of scholarship on cinema and Bharatanatyam, is a larger laborious exercise that shifts the focal lens away from an acute predisposition on the dance form itself to how Bharatanatyam might manifest when viewed from the cinematic landscape. In doing so, Krishnan inspires performers and scholars of Indian dance to go beyond mere acknowledgment of the historical malleability of Bharatanatyam, to borrow from several popular media forms, and to engage more effectively with such history in performance and scholarship in order to oversee an organic growth of the classical form.

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- HISTORIA QUEER DEL FLAMENCO: DESVÍOS, TRANSICIONES Y RETORNOS EN EL BAILE FLAMENCO (1808–2018)**
- by Fernando López Rodríguez. 2020. Madrid: Egales. 377 pp., 35 images. €20 paper. ISBN: 9788417319977 doi:10.1017/S014976772000039X
- In a dramatized interview for the broadcast TV show *El coraje de vivir*, Spanish flamenco artist Lola Flores (1923–1995) not only confessed how she lost her virginity, but described the occasion in which she accepted sex with a man in exchange for money to lessen her family's financial difficulties during the beginning years of the Francoist dictatorship (149–150). This tangential anecdote, which explicitly draws an intersecting connection between flamenco and sexual labor, allows Fernando López Rodríguez to challenge traditional understandings of flamenco history in his most recent book, *Historia queer del flamenco: desvíos, transiciones y retornos en el baile flamenco (1808–2018)* (*Queer History of Flamenco: Deviations, Transitions, and Returns in Flamenco Dance [1808–2018]*). Through an approach anchored in a broad understanding of the term "queer," López Rodríguez offers a new reading of flamenco dance that highlights forgotten marginal voices from the beginning of the nineteenth century, arguing for the invisibilized queerness flamenco embodies. López Rodríguez's book expands on the dissertation he defended at Université Paris VIII in 2019 and draws on his vast experience as a dancer and choreographer. This text comes as an extension of his previous book, titled *De puertas para adentro: disidencia sexual y disconformidad de género en la tradición flamenca (Indoors: Sexual Disidenc y Gender Nonconformity in Flamenco Tradition)* (Egales, 2017). The result is an ambitious piece that aims to firmly question flamenco dance from a combination of critical approaches that the author associates with the term "queer." Rather than a singular thesis, this book offers a set of invaluable questions