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Redefining the Feminine in Kathakali

In this article Arya Madhavan examines the significance of the female protagonist Asti from the new Kathakali play, *A Tale from Magadha* (2015), in the four-hundred-year-old patriarchal history of Kathakali. The play is authored by Sadanam Harikumar, a Kathakali playwright and actor, whose contemporary retelling of Hindu myths and epics afford substantial agency to the female characters, compelling radical reimagining of Kathakali's gender norms and a reconsideration of the significance of female characters, both on the stage and in the text. Asti unsettles the conventional norms of womanhood that have defined and structured the 'Kathakali woman' over the last five centuries. Although several new Kathakali plays have been created in recent decades, they seldom include strong female roles, so Harikumar's plays, and his female characters in particular, deserve a historic place in the Kathakali tradition, whose slowly changing gender norms are here analyzed for the first time. Arya Madhavan is a senior lecturer in the University of Lincoln. She has been developing the research area of women in Asian performance since 2013 and edited *Women in Asian Performance: Aesthetics and Politics* (Routledge, 2017). She is a performer of *Kutiyattam,* the oldest Sanskrit theatre form from India, and serves as associate editor for the *Indian Theatre Journal*.

Key terms: patriarchy, *minukku*, matriliny, agency, knife costume, masculinize.

MY CONCERN in this essay is to analyze the patriarchal nature of Kathakali, a dramatic performance form from the south Indian state of Kerala, and the ways in which Asti, the female protagonist from a new Kathakali play written by a male playwright, unsettles it. I argue that Asti is an aberration from the long practised patriarchal gender construct of the female employed by the performance in question.

It is important to consider the character of Asti and to study her place in the history of Kathakali because the political perspective on women remained almost unchanged in its four centuries of existence and development. Any gender-specific research on Kathakali has been scant to date, and scholars such as Phillip Zarrilli and Eugenio Barba focus on its performer training method. Given the fact that female characters or indeed female performers are limited in Kathakali, it is not surprising that so little research material has been produced on the subject, so in this study I will examine why women characters in Kathakali occupy such inferior positions.

The reasons will be examined first through the socio-cultural lens of Kerala, from where Kathakali emerged; and second, by enquiring what is feminine in *minukku,* the term used to denote generic female roles in Kathakali, and how it has been accommodated to a wider range of female characters. In the same vein, I will also briefly overview the patriarchal nature of Kathakali performances. In the third section, on Asti, I will discuss why she is not a typical *minukku* and the reasons for having to reinvent her entry, her characterization, and finally her costume.

The cultural landscape and social practices of Kerala are crucially linked to the performances in the state such as Kathakali, and its socio-cultural perspectives on women are well-reflected in the performances. One such aspect is the social perspective on the female characteristics that class a woman as either 'good' or 'bad'. Strikingly similar is the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' in Kathakali. Kathakali plays and performance structures, I argue, author the feminine by encapsulating Kerala social norms in the

form of *minukku*. The tripartite structure of this essay will, therefore, situate Asti outside the long patriarchal narrative of Kathakali, while also considering Kathakali's slowly changing gender norms for the first time.

I bring a wealth of experience of watching Kathakali from a very young age and am familiar with most of the popular Kathakali texts, characters, gestural acting system, and most of the performance terms circulated among the Kathakali community (consisting of masters, students, and connoisseurs). I will, then, be referring to terms and concepts in Kathakali which are not widely to be found in the scholarly publications. Being a native speaker of Malayalam, one of the languages in which the play texts or most scholarly works on Kathakali are written, I will also refer to published works only available in Malayalam, providing translations where necessary.

Background to Kathakali

Kathakali is among the best known performance forms from the subcontinent. Having emerged in the seventeenth century (Namboodirippad and Namboothiri, 2013; Zarrilli, 2000), it has remained as a male dramatic form throughout its four-hundred-year history, written by men, for men, glorifying male exploits. War, slaughter, sexual adventures such as rape and other 'heroic' activities of heroes or anti-heroes from the Indian epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are the thematic content of the most popular Kathakali plays (Madhavan, 2017).

So the demon King Ravana, the rapist Prince Keechaka, or the greedy monarch Duryodhana are gloriously performed in some of the popular Kathakali dramas. Even though the Kathakali plays themselves narrate their defeat at the hands of male gods or heroic princes or kings, such fates merit only a small share of the stage compared to the pompous display of their daring deeds.

Amidst such an unabashed display of male 'prowess' female characters only serve the purpose of being beautiful bodies – trophies of masculine success – filling the roles of vulnerable damsel, loyal and obedient wife, or loving mother: they are the quintessential 'good' women of Kathakali. *Minukku,* the shining, is the term that denotes these Kathakali female characters. Women of intellect, women of power, or women of knowledge have no place in the Kathakali world. Any woman who demonstrates her sexual desire is caricatured as a 'bad' woman, who is then punished by a male hero, typically by mutilating her breasts and nose.

Surpanakha, for instance, declares her love for Rama, the male protagonist of the epic *Ramayana*, and is brutally punished by his brother by cutting away her breasts. *Ninam,* meaning blood, is a character type in Kathakali, typically a woman, who gets her breasts and/or nose mutilated by a man for declaring her desire. She is rendered breastless and, therefore, 'undesirable' to any man thereafter. Intellectual activities of women, if any, which appear in the text may also be edited out by performers during the compositional process (*chittapeduthal*), thereby reducing her to an ornamental role on stage.

Who are the Kathakali performers? Men perform both male and female parts. Men sing the song-text of Kathakali. They play the percussion, make costumes and props, and manage the backstage activities. It was not considered honourable for women to engage in any of the these activities and so women never took an active role in Kathakali performances until recently (Daugherty and Pitkow, 1991; Madhavan, 2017; Pitkow, 2011). The social stigma attached to sharing the stage with men negatively impacts on active female engagement in Kathakali, even today. Kathakali, is therefore an agent of patriarchal power.

After the first male Kathakali playwright, Kottarakkara Thampuran (1555–1605), almost all Kathakali playwrights were men.[1] There were only three female playwrights in the history of the form: Kuttikunju Thankachi (1820–1908), Madhavikkutti Varasiar (1927–1998), and Radha Madhavan (b. 1946). None of their plays are as popular as those written by men for the last four hundred years.

Radha Madhavan is the only living female Kathakali playwright and has written

several plays, including one based on an episode in the Bible. Although her female characters weigh equally with their male counterparts, the importance is still accorded to the lead men in those plays.

The patriarchal structure of Kathakali divides women into two types – the 'good' women, who are 'well-born' wives and mothers and the 'bad', who are either strong-willed or independent and/or sexually liberated. A 'well-born' woman will not make any explicit reference to her sexual desire or engage in any 'manly' activities such as warfare. Nor does she violate the honour, desire, and commands of any male benefactor such as her father or husband. The social expectations of a quintessentially 'good' woman are inscribed in the Kathakali female character.

Asti is very important in this discussion because she makes a new trajectory and radically rewrites female agency in Kathakali performance. Asti's character is multi-layered and complex and she negates the character tropes of both 'good' and 'bad' women of Kathakali. She is the first of her kind, unsettling the existing norms of representation of the Kathakali female. Asti is a warrior, a grieving widow, and a daring princess, all at the same time.

Genealogy of Good and Bad

In J. Devika's book *Kulastreeyum Chantapennum Undayathengane?* (*How Did the Well-born Woman and the Rowdy Wench Emerge?*), she enquires into the formation of these archetypes in the social history of Kerala, arguing that in the latter half of the nineteenth century

> home was constituted as the right space for a woman. . . . Activities such as household tasks, giving birth, raising children, and leading her family members on the 'right track' by influencing them through emotional expressions became the radius of her responsibilities. . . . It was argued that women, by nature, possessed qualities such as love, kindness, motherliness, and a capacity to influence people through words, tears and polite requests. (2011, p. 72)[2]

Such a conception of 'real womanliness' amounted to a degradation of all female labour that took place beyond the confines of the home and family environment, leading to the emergence of the categories of women as 'good' and 'bad', and it is fair to say that this dichotomy still defines the judgement of a Kerala woman's character.

From a performance perspective, it is clear that such a dichotomy will influence female characterization in Kathakali. How does such a social distinction regarding women help our understanding of the female characters of Kathakali? The question is highly relevant in the history of Kathakali since twenty-one of the forty most popular Kathakali plays were written between the nineteenth century and now, and all observe patriarchal gender norms.

In my essay 'Between Roars and Tears: Towards the Female Kathakali' (Madhavan 2017, p. 83–96), I radically reassessed the structural components of Kathakali that limited or castrated female involvement. It included a discussion of the constricting factors of the existing range of female characters and the problems that they posed to women performers. I also briefly touched on the problematic character groupings that Marlene Pitkow suggested for the female Kathakali characters (2011. p. 223–44). Here I am extending the arguments to analyze Harikumar's female character against this background.

Devika, while assessing the emergence of 'good' and 'bad' women in Kerala society of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries speaks about the ways in which kindness, love, and patience were assigned to women by both male and female members of society. As Devika argues, logic and reasoning were assigned to men. She further states that most female writers of contemporary Kerala are literary persons even today because

> literature is considered to be a product of emotional engagement . . . [whereas] criticism, science, and social science remain as male areas of interest. Socially speaking, women who engage in intellectual activities demanding reasoning and lived experience are generally considered 'masculinized'. (2011, p. 76)

According to Devika, such a division of a female character centred on the emotionality

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of women resulted in assigning 'gentle power' to her, a power that is based on the love and patience instrumental in her running a family. Early Kerala feminists from the 1930s argued that 'gentle power' could be useful even in public domains such as education, health, and so on, so that women who used 'gentle power' were deemed 'good' and any falling outside the borders of this gender norm were 'bad'. But 'gentle power' also came with a moral presumption that women of gentle power were devoid of sexual desire or political ambition. Although women were expected to offer services to the nation, such services were only for the sake of serving one's country and not to hold a political position or power.

Furthermore, 'the popular presumption was that women entered into politics for their own sake and men, for the sake of the society as a whole' (2011, p. 62). Devika argues that such a social position adversely affected the rule of a queen in the local kingdoms of Kerala (prior to a unified Kerala in 1956, during British rule in India, it was divided into small kingdoms) a female was reduced to the position of a regent: someone who could only rule in the name of the next male heir until he came of age.

The Matrilineal System of Kerala

The royal families of southern Kerala followed the matrilineal system by which power was transferred through women, yet female rulers were never queens but only regents. Colonial rule in India had a detrimental impact upon women becoming queens or holding a position of power – highly contradictory, given that England had seen female rulers since the sixteenth century. Devika argues that 'several social reformists of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Kerala considered women of political power as cruel and masculinized', which adversely affected their political ambition (2011, p. 61).

The matrilineal system of inheritance asserted female power over money and land, and the oldest female member of the family, *taravadu*, was its head. In the matrilineal system – *marumakkathayam*, as it is known in Kerala – women possessed sexual agency to desire and decide their sexual partner. While they remained married to a male member of their own caste, matrilineal women were socially permitted to maintain a parallel sexual relationship with a male member of a higher caste at the same time. Children born from such parallel relationships belonged to the mother's family. However,

> *Sambandham*, the customary institution that framed sexual relations between men and women following the matrilineal system was not recognized by colonial power in its official discourse as a legally valid relationship, that is, as constituting marriage. It was seen as comparable to concubinage. (Kodoth, 2001, p. 350)

Arunima's book, *There Comes Papa: Colonialism and Transformation of Matriliny in North Malabar, c. 1850–1940* demonstrates 'the historical contingency of gender as it was made to occupy a central place in the reorganization of power within the household' (Sinha, 2006, p. 532) and how it adversely affected the communities following the matrilineal system in Kerala.

Crucially, such realignment of a matrilineal family set-up, and the effort of situating women within a patrilineal system, took place during the latter half of the nineteenth century in colonial India. The central constituents of a Nair matrilineal family were sisters and their children, and this was totally foreign to the patriarchal and patrilineal British colonial officials.[3] Nivedita Menon, who belonged to a Nair matrilineal system, explains how her grandmother considered family to be a unit where

> sisters and brothers lived together with the sister's children, and these children's father would continue to live with their own sisters. . . . This form of family was legally ended in the late nineteenth century through interventions brought about by the British in partnership with the Nair male elite. (2012, p. 23)

Praveena Kodoth argues that *marumakkathayam* was radically reconstituted under colonial rule

> in order to establish the primacy of conjugality to any form of family [and that women were] recast

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as monogamous, 'chaste', and dependent upon husband and father (both of whom were in the official discourse on *marumakkatayam*, legal non-entities). The willingness of the colonial government to intervene through legislation . . . was perhaps linked to the 'correctness' of this age. . . . At the core of the reforms . . . was the need to redefine sexuality. There were two aspects to this: (i) control over women sexually by men within the conjugal family; and (ii) the production of the conjugal family as the property space, by defining property relations within it. (2001, p. 356)

Kodoth notes an observation made by Elie Reclus about matrilineal marriage in Malabar in Kerala:

Marriage elsewhere is or has been the taking possession of the woman by the man. . . . The nuptials here are interposed only to emancipate women and introduce her into the world. . . . Provided she wears a *tali* round her neck, she is free of conjugal bonds.
(Reclus, cited in Kodoth 2001, p. 362)[4]

In a Christian monogamous marital tradition, observing a patrilineal economic transference of inheritance, the level of sexual agency and economic status enjoyed by women of the *marumakkathayam* system contradicted the 'normative' assumptions of marital contract, where the man is dominant and the woman a subordinate. Clearly, that was the only legal form of marriage that prevailed in India since its independence. The destruction of the matrilineal system in Kerala is a lasting legacy of the four hundred years of British colonial rule in India.

Considering the social history of Kerala in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one may find the emergence of clearly distinct caricatures of 'good' and 'bad' women on the basis of public and private space, socio-cultural assumptions about a fixed female nature, colonial redefinition of marriage and female sexuality, and assumptions about women's intellectual capacities. If a 'good' woman is a high-born woman who occupies the domestic space in a patriarchal household, a 'bad' woman is the one who sells in a noisy marketplace – a public space where people of lower caste and all religions come and go. Sweat, noise, hard labour, sexual promiscuity and, above all, freedom to engage in economic activities all became associated with a characteristically 'rowdy-wench'.

Domestic Space and Female Sanity

The idea of home as the appropriate space for a 'well-born' woman was a position also exerted by the nineteenth-century Christian missionaries from Victorian England, who were heavily engaged in spreading English education and English values in Kerala. As Devika argues, the writings of nineteenth-century Kerala critics who borrowed Western notions of gender divisions based on physical characteristics further sustained the home that was the place for 'good' women (2011, p. 72), thus echoing the nineteenth-century Victorian view that home was the 'natural' and 'righteous' space for women.

In 1905, T. B. Hyslop, a doctor in Bethlem Royal Hospital, stated that:

The removal of women from her [*sic*] *natural space of domesticity* to that of mental labour not only renders her less fit to maintain the virality of her race, but it renders her prone to degenerate. . . . It has very direct bearings upon *the increase of nervous instability.*
(Cited in Digby, 1992. p. 197; my italics)

Note the imagined 'direct' connections between domestic space and female sanity. Critiquing the notion of the domesticity of women in Victorian Britain, Linda McDowell argues that, while

middle-class women might have been characterized as 'domestic angels', working-class women and women of colour who were present in the public or outer world of the streets and workplaces were constructed as a threat, as active, sexualized, and dangerous women; therefore, the working-class women were 'constructed as the inferior 'other'. (2002. p. 819)

McDowell argues that, in Victorian Britain, the binaries of 'sexual–frigid, impure–pure, dirty–clean, animal–human, loose–moral' to distinguish women were firmly set in stone. Her argument resonates well with the social distinction between a morally 'good', 'well-born' woman and a disrespectfully 'bad', 'rowdy wench', thus embedding deep-seated

Victorian moral codes within Kerala society.

How does the moral distinction of 'good' and 'bad' influence the formation of female characters in Kathakali? In her essay 'The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Kathakali's Females and the Men who Play Them', Pitkow identifies the three types of female characters in Kathakali as *minukku,* an idealized noble maiden; *lalitha,* the female demon in disguise as a beautiful woman, who often freely expresses her sexual desire; and *kari,* a demoness in her own form and someone who is sexually promiscuous, cruel, and fights with men (2011, p. 225). Pitkow identifies clearly defined 'good' and 'bad' women character tropes in Kathakali.

The One that Merely *Glitters*

Minukku literally means 'the glittering'. *Minukku* costume is used for both female characters and ascetics in Kathakali; however, they look substantially different from each other. A *minukku* character has a slightly orange-tinted facial make-up and this is the only reason why both ascetics and women are characterized as *minukku.* Since the focus of this essay is exclusively on female characters, *minukku* is used here to signify the feminine in Kathakali. All 'good' female characters, young or old, noble or maid, rich or poor, strong or weak, come under the category of *minukku.* In this sense, *minukku* is generic 'woman' with all womanly physical attributes.

The term, which is politically problematic in more than one way, objectifies 'woman' and reduces 'her' to mere glitter, casting away any intellectual or cognitive qualities from 'her'. *Charakku,* local Malayalam slang for good-looking women, as used by men, meaning a 'big vessel', or *sadhanam*, a term for an adulterous woman of upper caste, signifying that she is an object, are no different to the term *minukku*, the only costume type in *stree vesham*, the generic female costume

In contrast, there is no *purusha vesham* – a generic male costume. Male characters are multi-layered and terms denoting their costume and the associated character tropes that male costumes represent change according to the nature of male characters in Kathkali.[5] Pitkow argues that the *minukku* is

> a restrained character whose virtues are praised. She is beautiful to gaze upon and behaves in a chaste and modest manner. In idealizing her, the actor confers on her a benign and divinely auspicious presence and she is rewarded for her devotion. . . . While *minukku* maidens are in some ways subordinated to their male counterparts, it is their heightened sense of piety and devotion that generates their internal self-control and in so doing ensure the protection of her family.
>
> (Pitkow, p. 225–6)

Note the link between chastity, self-control, and the protection of family, which resonates well with Devika's arguments summarized earlier. A well-born woman is expected to be chaste, devoted to a male protector – husband – and restrained and modest in words, deeds, and attitudes. Only then can she continue to protect the interests of her family, no matter what. Socially and economically, her only reward comes from this 'useful' behaviour.

Such a woman's subjectivity socially conditions her to be chaste and modest; she 'becomes' a well-born woman, rather than being 'born' one (borrowing Simone de Beauvoir's idea that one is not born a woman but becomes one). She is passive, never qualified to be active in a patriarchal world. Kathakali mirrors such social insistence only too well and paints its female characters accordingly.

Key advice is given by King Nala, the hero in disguise of the highly popular eighteenth-century Kathakali play *Nalacharitham* (*Nala's Story*, 1675–1716), to his estranged wife Damayanti, who is ardently searching for her husband: 'A well-born woman should not be angry. . . . Such husband-devotees are rewarded with comfort in earth and heaven' (Unnayi Variyar, 1980, p. 191).[6] These lines are later repeated and reinterpreted in the play by another character as '*even though there is fault in Nala*, a well-born woman [such as you] should not be angry' (p. 193; my italics).[7]

Pati-devatha or *pativratha* are Sanskrit terms signifying someone who devotes her

life in servitude to her husband. The term literally suggests that, for a woman, her husband is her god because it is he who provides her with food, wealth, and material comforts. In return she remains devoted to him, chaste, and modest in his interest and takes care of 'his' (not her) children and family. *Pati-devatha,* husband-devotee is the quintessence of 'good' womanhood. Power is central in this discourse and, indeed, there is a weaker sex and a stronger sex.

In her analysis of the place of women in contemporary Indian families, Nivedita Menon argues that, 'if marriage-based family is the foundation of the social order as it exists, at the heart of that family is an identity [based on] sex difference' (2012. p. 49). It is no wonder that age-old patriarchal values remain unchanged in the Kathakali *minukku,* given that the fundamental social/family values of Kerala society are still strongly founded upon them.

Features of the Female Character

Pitkow groups female mythical characters such as Sita, the heroine of the epic *Ramayana*; Mandodari, the wife of Ravana, the demon King in *Ramayana*; Damayanti, the most popular Kathakali heroine from the *Nala's Story*; and Kunti, the queen mother of *Mahabharata,* in the *minukku* category. This grouping is based on the assumption that Kathakali women, passive and reserved, are idealized by accompanying male characters.

While there is a clear deficiency of female character tropes in Kathakali, Pitkow's categories do not fully address the complex *minukku* women who fall outside its structure. Damayanti, for instance, is perhaps the only female protagonist in Kathakali who hosts various dimensions of womanhood in her character, transforming from a love-stricken young princess who secretly wishes to marry King Nala to a mature queen who confronts her husband in disguise, wins him over again, and then motivates him to fight for his kingdom in *Nala's Story*.

In the entire Kathakali repertoire, there is no other female character who presents an actor with such a wide range of character features. Damayanti, therefore, positions herself outside the normative structure of *minukku* , since her function is not just that of a loyal wife or a loving mother.

According to Pitkow, *minukku* women are ideal women represented by men. She states:

> The actor takes a long time in his facial dance in order to accentuate his attention to the heroine, to elicit the proper sentiment of pleasure in the audience, and especially to direct the audience's gaze to his own. Although the object of his delight is Mandodari, it is Ravana's performance of her that commands the spectator's attention. . . . In contrast to Ravana's flamboyant exhibitions, Mandodari's response, though twice as long in terms of the text, takes much less time to enact. As is typical of the *minukku* heroine, Mandodari maintains a low profile on stage and moves minimally. (2011, p. 229–30)

Pitkow further suggests that Mandodari's bodily gestures are small and abbreviated and that she is impersonating no one and nothing. She is modest and respectful, reserved and chaste. Her only function is to be a pretty and faithful wife. Pitkow states that nature epithets such as lotus and moon 'are among the most common ways to describe and enshrine her. They are also meant to celebrate the life-giving aspects of *minukku* heroine' (p. 230).

This quotation summarizes Pitkow's definition of *minukku*. There is also the fact that female characters are bestowed with minimal performance opportunities. Pitkow's association here between nature and female fertility is significant. Nivedita Menon states that according to Vandana Shiva, a key thinker of eco-feminism in India, 'both women and nature are thought to be passive by masculinist ideology, productive only if their energies are harnessed in a certain way' (2012, p. 66).

Nature analogies are profusely bestowed on women when exhibiting their idealized physical beauty; such descriptions are particularly evident when a male character describes the breasts and hips of a female. Pitkow's analysis thus seems to fit most *minukku* characters. But what about the character of Damayanti? Does she fit the typical *minukku* characterization? Damayanti is perhaps, the only female character in Kathakali

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who is multi-layered and challenging to perform. She is also the most popular female character in Kathakali, providing opportunities for an actor to display his prowess.

The Case of Damayanti

Pitkow argues that Damayanti can fit the expectations of a typical *minukku* character. Damayanti is also a typical noblewoman, a well-born *kulastree*. She is also a husband-devotee, a *pati devatha*. Therefore, she should be passive, and an actor must take 'much less time to enact' her. Women's intelligence is not a matter of concern for Kathakali, yet Damayanti is intelligent and level-headed and through espionage searches out her emotionally tormented husband, Nala, who loses his kingdom, wealth, and even his clothes in a chess game (a traditional Indian version of gambling).

Note the reversal here of intelligence and emotion between female and male characters, problematizing the social assumption, as argued by Devika, that emotion equates to women and intelligence to men. Damayanti finds and rescues her husband from his distressed mental state, leading to her winning back their kingdom and wealth. In this four-act play, Nala and Damayanti have equal roles. She is indeed a well-born woman in the strictest sense, but is also brave, active, and intelligent with commendable decision-making capacities.

Damayanti regains Nala through spreading the false news of her remarriage. Nala eventually reaches Damayanti's father's kingdom where she lives after being estranged from her husband. She meets Nala, who is in disguise and he reveals his true form by wrapping a special cloth around him.[8] An overjoyed Damayanti attempts to embrace Nala but he stops her. He is angry that she had spread news of her intention to remarry and asks her to live with King Rituparna who is in love with her.

According to the traditional norms of patriarchal Hindu marriage, even the thought of another man is a sinful crime, let alone the publication of a woman's remarriage. Noteworthy is the fact that men can be polygamous, while 'chaste' women must not even be jealous of co-wives. (Here, I am not ignoring the heroine of *Mahabharata*, Draupadi, who had five husbands and yet was considered 'chaste' and well-born. Polyandry was practised in several parts of India until a few years ago.)

Damayanti argues her case and states that her spreading of false news should only be seen in the light of her effort to find Nala. Nala is adamantly resolved that his wife is errant; he wants to separate from her, and Damayanti says these landmark lines unspoken by any other Kathakali heroine:

> Dear husband, what is wrong with the plan that I, who was thoroughly tormented by not seeing you, hatched to find you back? My mother is my witness. [After explaining everything clearly and honestly,] if I am still guilty [in your eyes], I am resolved not to be sad and I am happy . . . [or] with full conscience accept me back. *I am standing straight in front of you and talking the straight truth.*
> (Variyar, 1980, p. 204; my italics)

Note that this is not a father figure who is to witness for Damayanti, but a mother, recalling the *marumakkathayam* system followed by the Variyar caste to which the author of the play belongs. Father is the one who simply 'knows' about Damayanti's plans ('It cannot be anything if my father also knows my plans': 1980, p.204), designating the place of a father in a matrilineal family system.

Damayanti's mother is recurrently mentioned throughout the last act of *Nala's Story* and she is clearly a matriarch who advises her daughter at a highly crucial juncture in her life. Damayanti is a 'straight-talker' who stands straight and confident in front of her husband and states facts truthfully. She is a matrilineal 'wife' in a patriarchal family. How does she fit the typical caricature of a *minukku* woman? She does not. No male has to 'exhibit' or idealize her. She is a level-headed, independent woman who knows how to manage a crisis.

When Pitkow states that Damayanti is merely rewarded for her piety by her protecting male (2011, p. 230), she does so without fully recognizing her character as it plays on stage and in the text. Even though Nala conforms to the social expectations of a male

(by stating that 'a well-born woman must not be angry') Damayanti is the more complex character in this play. Nala's wrap, which reveals his 'true' self, is of male socio-cultural patriarchal values, whereas, Damayanti's *minukku*, her well-bornness, is only a shiny wrap that masks her matriarchal true self as a matriarchal character who negotiates within a patriarchal cultural and familial system. Externally, she presents all the typical features of a 'well-born' woman such as chastity and modesty, but her interiority is that of a modern-day diplomat who dextrously take care of a difficult situation without explicitly revealing her intentions. Sadly, *minukku* does not build such complexities as Damayanti's into its structures.

Characters such as Urvasi, the heavenly nymph, Chitralekha, the able maiden, or the Hunter Woman, the disguise of Goddess Parvathy, are all in the same vein. If Urvasi and Chitralekha are *minukku* (in terms of costume), there is no character trope to describe the Hunter Woman. She is a goddess in disguise anyway, but her face is painted in black or dark blue. She would not wear the typical *minukku* white sari with red border. Even her veil is dark in colour. Her movements are more emphasized than those of a *minukku* and she takes an active role along with her husband, the God Shiva (who is also dressed in black). She is extremely playful and visibly engages in all actions on stage.

Urvasi is a celestial nymph who openly expresses her sexual desire to Arjuna, a prince from *Mahabharata*. She is also *minukku*. Killimangalam Vasudevan Namboothirippad and M. P. S Namboothiri state that 'Urvasi's immodest appeal of sexual desire to Arjuna in a manner that does not fit the behaviour of a *well-born woman* could only be considered as odiously erotic and not erotic rasa' (2013, p. 55; my italics).[9] She is not a *lalitha*, yet she actively expresses her desire.

The third of the three, Chitralekha, is a maid to the princess Usha, who is in love with Prince Anirudha, the grandson of God Krishna. Chitralekha, adept in magic, skilfully abducts Anirudha and 'flies' him off to Usha's bedroom. Contrary to Pitkow's observation that a *minukku* character is 'seen in protective company of her mate who asserts himself as a powerful stage presence' (2011, p. 226), Chitralekha takes a protective position, acting to satisfy the wishes of her mistress. She is unaccompanied by a male on stage and is the protector. Once again, she is a *minukku*.

None of the four roles mentioned here are in any way insignificant female roles in the world of Kathakali. All are popular female roles and, more importantly, depart from the typical characteristics of *minukku*. While Pitkow's female categories represent a pioneering attempt to understand the nature of the female characters of Kathakali, more thought needs to be invested in their grouping. The four liminal *minukku* characters problematize the popular notion of female *minukku* in Kathakali.

Twenty-first Century Kathakali Women

Where do the new female characters of Sadanam Harikumar fit into this narrative? Harikumar – a musician, a sculptor, an artist, aa Kathakali actor and guru – is a traditionally trained Kathakali performer who currently teaches in Gandhi Seva Sadan Kathakali Academy, popularly called Sadanam, situated in northern Kerala. He has authored seventeen Kathakali plays called *attakkatha* between 1990 and 2018, six of which have a female lead – in Kathakali terms *adyavasana vesham*, or roles that go from beginning to the end.

These lead characters steer the direction of a Kathakali play. Except for a single play, the rest of the ten assign equal roles to female characters. Here I shall only examine one of them – Asti, the lead female character in *Magadheyam* (*A Tale from Magadha*) written in 2015. Harikumar is currently writing *Amba* (*About Amba*), a play with another female protagonist. Both characters are mythical in nature, appearing in various Sanskrit sources including the epic *Mahabharata*.

Harikumar's plays and his female characters in particular deserve a historic place in the Kathakali world. I have discussed elsewhere the lack of variety and challenge in

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female characters of Kathakali and how this hampers the opportunities for women to perform female roles (Madhavan, 2017). Although several new Kathakali plays have appeared in recent decades, they are seldom performed more than three or four times. In most, women characters do not have much significance. Asti's character posits a real challenge to the traditional *minukku,* so Harikumar's experiments concerning *minukku* bring a fresh breath of air into this tradition.

The Complexity of Asti

Asti is the protagonist and only female character in *A Tale from Magadha.* She is a princess of Magadha, daughter of King Jarasandha and wife of King Kamsa, who is God Krishna's uncle. When the play starts, Krishna, Arjuna, and Bhima arrive in Magadha to stop Jarasandha from killing any more kings; he has, by then, sacrificed ninety-nine kings to overpower the God of heaven, Indra, and capture heaven. A widowed Asti is in the palace too, having lost her husband Kamsa, who died at the hands of Krishna. She prepares her revenge. Meanwhile, Jarasandha is killed by Bhima and, vengeful, Asti attacks Krishna. Suddenly, she sees both Kamsa and Jarasandha in Krishna and falls unconscious. Krishna wakes her up and she is transformed into his ardent devotee, leaving the kingdom to lead an ascetic life.

Apparently Asti's male divine benefactor, Krishna sees her through her spiritual transformation, thereby reflecting the conventional cultural expectations of female guardianship by a male, but Asti takes a divergent female trajectory in Kathakali because of the complexities of her character, which distinguish her from a typical *minukku*.

So as to engage in an in-depth character study of Asti I will analyze her character as it appears in the text and on the stage separately. By 'text 'in Kathakali I mean the text as sung by the musicians; the stagecraft is derived from the text. However, the actor's interpretation or his *manodharmam* – on-stage, improvisational, extempore acting – stage conventions, or costume specifications are absent from the text. Usually costume details are not required because the actors know the stock characters and their costume classification beforehand. However, costume analysis is vital in my study of Asti.

The actor's manual, *attaprakaram*, derived from the play text, acts as an intermediary between text and performance for traditional Kathakali plays; it is a helpful resource for the actors to employ, although it is not commonly used as a teaching device. *A Tale from Magadha* is a new play and no separate *attaprakaram* is written for it. So it is necessary to engage in a study of both text and stage representation to understand Asti's character. Harikumar's text, however, contains both sung verses and some *manodharmam*.

When Asti enters, her husband King Kamsa is already dead. She is vengeful and maddened with grief, yet 'full of valour in her eyes'. She does not conform to the conventional character trope of a grieving widow by any means. Her opening lines at the start of Scene Two are

> My husband did not die of natural causes and he was deceived in war [by Krishna]. . . . I will certainly reduce [Krishna's] black body into ashes, and his entire dynasty.

Such an entry for a *minukku* character is impossible in the Kathakali structure: only a *kari* character can enter in this manner. Asti is not a demoness qualifying for *kari* status but her entry itself renders her *minukku* characterization untenable. One may also wonder whether Kathakali can really find a space for such 'third' characters who do not fit neatly into the binaries of 'good' or 'bad'. She then performs her 'curtain look' or *tiranokku,* the highly stylized convention for a male character to enter on stage. Normally, female characters, *minukku* or *lalitha*, with the exception of *kari,* never perform a 'curtain-look'.

What follows Asti's 'curtain-look' is a long monologue combining *manodharmam,* which, once again, is not normal practice for female characters. Unusual in Kathakali structure, sung verses are absent from her gestured monologue (all monologues in Kathakali are gestured – hence 'monologues' hereafter). With the exception of the play *Ravanotbhavam* (*Ravana's Rise*), the practice of

The newly designed costume for Asti. Photo: courtesy of Hari Menon.

monologue preceding text is uncommon (Harikumar, 2018). A Kathakali character's text is sung text (hereafter called song-text) known as *padam*.[10] Song-texts are dialogues or monologues.

Actors improvise and perform the meaning of the song-text through gestures and physical movements. *Manodharmam* can take place during textual interludes or after the song-text is finished. If it takes place during the song-text, the relevant verses are sung repeatedly to recall the text's relation to the actor's *manodharmam.* Thus the text exerts its hierarchically supreme power over an actor's improvised playing.

A *manodharmam* that takes place after the completion of a song-text but before the ending of the same scene can take the shape of gestural conversations between characters or monologues, interspersed with action.

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Monologues are usually a male terrain in Kathakali and characteristically female monologues are either brief or typically in the company of a male character. Occasionally, such female monologues are with another female character, so Asti's 'atextual' monologue is an aberration, primarily from the commonly practised structure of *manodharmam* itself and, secondly, from its conventional conception of a *minukku* character.

This resonates well with Devika's argument summarized earlier. To repeat, Devika states that 'socially speaking, women who engage in intellectual activities demanding reasoning and lived experience are generally considered "masculinized"'. *Manodharmam,* by its nature, demands 'lived experience', knowledge, and understanding of myths and epics, as well as an ability to interpret and enact the meaning of Sanskrit or Malayalam verses. A combination of these attributes feeds into the actor's imagination, and Kathakali actors are generally well respected for their prowess in *manodharmam*.

The late master performers Keezhpadam Kumaran Nair (known as Keezhpadam) or Nelliyode Vasudevan Namboothiri (known as Nelliyode) were esteemed for their intelligence in *manodharmam*, but the late master Kottakkal Sivaraman is the only female impersonator to join the likes of Keezhpadam or Nelliyode in winning respect for his *manodharmam* performance. A *minukku* character cannot engage in *manodharmam* because such an independent, intellectual engagement in acting, socio-culturally, is not a female trait for Kathakali.

Furthermore, such opportunities are also rarely available for *minukku*. After all, she is 'merely a woman' (*verumoru pennu,* meaning just that, is a popular line by the male protagonist of the Malayalam movie, *The King*). Growing up in Kerala as a young woman, I recollect the recurrent statement from family and friends that 'men are here' (*athinivide anungal undu* in Malayalam) to undertake all skilful tasks whether in the visual or the performing arts, or in criticism or science. Such age-old phrases are used even today and are recurrent in Kerala television and cinema. Given the context, the *manodharmam* engagement by a *minukku* character can potentially make her 'masculinized', and this is a major cause of the minimal female engagement in Kathakali performance even today.

Asti's Character Development

Next is the content of Asti's monologue, during which she is sitting next to Kamsa's corpse. Grief-stricken, she becomes weak and, stroking Kamsa's forehead, even weaker. As she remembers the life that she spent with Kamsa, her weakness slowly transforms into eroticism. Below is my English translation of part of the monologue:

> Countless times have I applied my blood cut from my own finger to his forehead. Since I could not reach his forehead he, who held a sword in his right hand, used to lift me up with his left hand [to do so]. . . . He had no sex drive on days when he had killed no one. He was [active like] a child in sex on the days he slaughtered [people]. How will I ever forget the sex that we had on the nights that he killed Devaki's sons? Where is that Krishna who destroyed everything today? . . . [*She imagines killing Krishna by suffocating him.*] Oh, my blood is boiling. . . .

The content of this monologue is highly unconventional. What emerges from it includes: the connnection of blood and slaughter to female erotic pleasure; a female brave enough to cut her own finger to apply blood to her male counterpart (later in the monologue Asti talks about her martial training from her father); a desiring female who aspires to untamed (childlike) sexual pleasure and slaughter of any kind, if that is what it takes to get this pleasure; expression of female rage against the male who brought an end to her sexual pleasure.

Female sexual desire is the key here, and never before in Kathakali has a *minukku* character thus linked blood and sex. Noteworthy is the fact that Kathakali considers Urvasi's (the heavenly nymph's) expression of sexual desire as odious-erotic. In this way Asti's eroticism challenges the *minukku* characterization. In Scene Four, Asti hatches a plot to avenge her husband's death. She decides to attack the Pandava kingdom

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while Krishna is in Madhura. The Pandavas are the five sons of Prince Pandu and their mother Kunti, who is Krishna's paternal aunt. Krishna is accompanied by the Pandavas Bhima and Arjuna in Madhura, while the eldest Pandava, Yudhishthira, rules the Pandava kingdom, which Asti asks her brother Sahadeva to join her to attack.

Sahadeva refuses and, ashamed of her brother's 'fearfulness', Asti demands that he give her 'the sceptre, bows and arrows, mace and sword', since she is 'knowledgeable in warfare'. Angry, she prepares the Magadha military herself , deciding to lead the war on her own. In this scene she also engages in 'war preparations' – a theatrical, action-packed dance known as *padapurappadu.* Sahadeva interrupts her and begs her to support her father, who has to fight Bhima. Asti decides not to proceed with the war against Yudhishthira and returns to Magadha.

If sexual pleasure and slaughter merged in the characterization of Asti in the earlier scene, Scene Four unveils her prowess as a warrior and her might as a steadfast woman who can plan a war on her own, unaided by a superior male decision-maker. She is a Kathakali woman who proudly invades all conventionally 'male' activities. She would not require a protector for she *is* the protector. She would not require a male decider since *she* decides. She leads from the front and does not hide behind any man.

Once again, strictly speaking she is not proven to be a 'good' woman, home-bound and waiting to serve a male benefactor. On the other hand, she is not altogether 'bad' either. A *minukku* character is expected to be faithful to her husband and love him unconditionally. Asti's actions only emerge from her love for Kamsa; her sexual desire is only for him and she is chaste in her role as a wife – one of the many social conditions attached to an 'ideal' wife. She is faithful to him and is also grieving for Kamsa's death, conforming to the cultural expectations of a 'good wife'.

A 'Good' Wife – but not Passive

Asti is only 'bad' in being active rather than passive in all her interactions. Many 'good' wives of demonic husbands in Indian epics and myths, such as Mandodari, Ravana's wife, or Bhanumati, Duryodhana's wife, were chaste, 'good' women. They remained faithful to their husbands, despite whose amoral actions they never dared interrogate them. Mandodari never once criticized Ravana for falling in love with another man's wife (Sita) and kidnapping her to win her love. They remain 'good' – in other words, passive and silent throughout the story.

Asti, similarly, is a chaste wife, but she rejects the option of silence. Throughout the text, she is shown to be an active decision-maker, a brave protagonist, and a grieving widow, who plots to avenge her husband's murder. Harikumar conceived her

> as a capable administrator or a warrior, otherwise, she will not get prepared for war with an intention to fight against Yudhishthira. She is a highly determined woman and a capable administrator like Unniyarcha, and adept in fighting men and claim[ing] victory over them. Her long-term plan in fighting against Yudhishthira is to avenge her husband's death at Krishna's hands and helping her father to be victorious against the god of heaven. She is well-trained in warfare and can win wars. That is her character as I conceived it.
>
> (2017, translated from Malayalam)[11]

Such agency need not necessarily fit either the 'ideal' Kathakali female figure or the expectation of female 'goodness'. If the social expectations of 'gentle power' Devika identifies redefine the structural remits of Mandodari, Bhanumati and other *minukku* characters, Asti displaces the very notion of gentleness in her exercise of power. Krishna even criticizes Asti for not stopping her husband Kamsa from killing Devaki's sons because he is convinced of Asti's capabilities. But she would do no such thing because Kamsa's sexual drive and her sexual pleasure are dependent on his slaughters.

Asti, then, is a complex character. On one level, she is chaste and faithful to her husband and, on the other, she has equal investment in her husband's murders. She is a multilayered character who further complicates the dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' in Kathakali. She is both or neither. She combines the character traits of *minukku*,

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lalita and *kari*. Yet she is a princess, born to a king and a wife of another king. She is not a demoness. In this way, Asti questions the limitations of current female *minukku* characterizations and demands innovations in their style and structure.

Asti, the Stage Character

Two aspects of Asti's stage appearance to be looked at here are her 'curtain-look' and her costume. She is the first female character in Kathakali to perform a 'curtain-look'. Functionally, this accentuates the dramatic entry of a male character – typically a 'knife' character – in a play for the first time. Phillip Zarrilli states that:

> The most complex and exciting use of the curtain is the 'curtain-look' (*tiranokku*) used by the non-heroic characters such as the demon-king Ravana (a 'knife', *katti* character), bearded characters (whether the valorous 'white beard' Hanuman or the 'evil red beard' Dussasana), hunters, demonesses such as Simhika [*kari* character], or animals. For these entrances a set piece of choreography is performed as the curtain is manipulated to accentuate the character's inner-nature before he is finally revealed. (2000, p. 50)

The high-ranking, non-heroic, royal male characters such as Ravana, Duryodhana, and Keechaka have significant status in Kathakali performance history and are grouped as 'knife' characters (*Kathi vesham*). Choreographic structuring, multilayering in characterization, and melodic song-texts are all given exclusively and abundantly to the 'knife' characters. Such excess of dramatic qualities and the medley of visual and auditory attributes blend to bring out the flamboyance of the Kathakali drama.

As such, their entry has to be deliberately colourful and appealing to the visual and auditory senses of the audience. After all, it is the celebration of male prowess of all sorts. Hence the 'curtain-look' of a 'knife' character is the singular most distinctive convention in Kathakali. A further deeper analysis of the 'knife' costume and the reasons for the partiality towards it in Kathakali are beyond the remit of this essay, but a reference to 'knife' costume is relevant to my analysis of Asti.

Asti's 'curtain-look' and its new choreography fully retain the structural conditions of Kathakali. During her 'curtain-look' she performs the *suchikamukha* hand gesture (*mudra*) with both hands.[12] This is the hand gesture when all fingers except the index finger are folded, touching the palm. The thumb then holds the three fingers in place while the index finger is kept upright. The gesture is very similar to the daily expression of 'one' or 'pointing at something'.

She does not hold the tips of her veil as customary to a *minukku* entry. A new choreography is adapted from one of the two preliminary dances in Kathakali called *thotayam*, when a student learns 'all the basic non-interpretative elements' such as the 'foot patterns, body movement, use of the hands, and rhythm' (Zarrilli, 1984, p. 135). This is a lengthy piece of pure dance that the students learn in their first year of training.

Traditionally, *thotayam* is never performed on stage as part of a choreographed piece, though beginners often employ it behind the curtain, on stage, as one of the many performance preliminaries. No choreographed movements are included in a conventional 'curtain-look' once the character is revealed, as it involves the manipulation of the curtain by the character himself (herself, if it is a *kari*) by holding it, shaking and/or lowering it or pulling its corners and throwing the arm over it to reveal himself/herself.

It is the character who manipulates the curtain. In Asti's case, she does not do this herself, but performs her dance in *suchikamukha* hand gesture within the curtain. Harikumar states that the *suchikamukha* entry is adapted from the pre-'curtain-look' rituals of a 'knife' character behind the curtain and before he reveals himself. This auditorily signifies his entry before he reveals his form by roaring behind the curtain while holding the *suchikamukha* hand-gesture. Harikumar adapted this pre-'curtain-look' ritual to frame Asti's entrance (2018). Therefore, it can be argued that Harikumar infused a female strand into the structural conventions of the 'curtain-look' by giving it a female texture.

Analyzing Asti's costume is a complex task. The upper part of the costume follows

The noble hero costume in Kathakali. Photo: courtesy of Hari Menon.

the typical female costume, complete with veil, orange facial make-up, false breasts, and female ornaments, but the lower part is an adaptation of the masculine *uduttu kettu* – the particular way of wearing a skirt by male characters in Kathakali.

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The skirt is neither worn as high and heavy as that of the male characters (knee-length usually) nor as low as the toe-length of the *minukku*. My seasoned eye for Kathakali immediately found this a problem because I initially translated the costume as that of a transgender character and later interpreted it as an effort to 'masculinize' Asti in view of her character traits. Asti, after all, is an atypical female character and 'masculinizing' non-conventional female activities is a socio-cultural problem, as discussed earlier. And it is an easy criticism to level against Asti at the outset.

But when, in my long discussion on Asti's costume with Harikumar, I asked him why he had attempted to 'masculinize' Asti's character, he denied doing so, and explained what challenges a conventional Kathakali costume for such an unconventional female character presented to him.

> Asti is conceived as a *minukku* character in terms of face make-up, with some subtle changes. The major difference is the *uduttu kettu*. . . . There is an apparent difference in my choice of clothes depending on the type of activity that I am engaged in. My choice of clothes for an activity involving physical labour will significantly differ from my clothing choices when my activity does not involve that. It does not bother me if people term such costume as 'male' or 'female'. The bandit Phulan Devi wore pants and shirt and not a sari because her activities involved running and jumping.[13]
>
> Male clothing generally allows more freedom to move, whereas a sari physically limits the range of activities. . . . As far as Asti is concerned, she has to perform war preparations in the play. It is very inconvenient for the actor to perform vibrant war movements by wearing an overtly feminized, toe-length sari. The rear of the *minukku* costume is also very feminized, reminding the audience of a typical *minukku* character, which Asti is not. For example, the head veil of *minukku* is a costume element that wraps a woman into the cocoon of cloth. The concentration of the actor is to prevent the veil from slipping away. A head-veil is the most restricting costume element for a *minukku*. Masculinizing was not my interest, but the practical aspects defining the character of Asti were the guiding factor behind the adaptation of *uduttu kettu* for her. (2017; translated from Malayalam)

Harikumar foregrounds two issues here: the restrictive characterization of *minukku*, which does not accommodate multilayered female characters in Kathakali; and the existing *minukku* costume that simplifies the female character and over feminizes 'her'. Using layers and layers of clothes is perhaps necessary for female impersonators to hide their male physical features during performance, but such over-dressing also is a key feminizing element of *minukku*. This is the politics of female costume and the way in which a female costume socially defines the ideal feminine, and culturally codifies ideal female activities and behaviour. It physically restrains the movement of a female character and constrains 'her' range of activities on stage – an ideal woman of limited mobility and freedom is 'built' by Kathakali on stage, step by step, using various means, including costume.

Since Asti performs war preparations that involve vibrant physical movements, her skirt cannot extend down to her toes. Even though she is a *minukku*, her costume must adapt to her characterization. Later in the play she performs a quick dance circuit known as *eduthu kalasam*, typically performed for the entry of male characters when their actions following the dance emanate from an angry or agitated mental state. These are really swift sets of physical movement to a specific rhythm, evidently displaying the character in an emotionally agitated state. Women are not socially expected to display any agitation or anger and, swift physical movements such as the ones in *eduthu kalasam* are never choreographed for *minukku* characters. Performing it in *minukku* costume may therefore pose practical difficulties for the actor in terms of having to display quick actions with ease.

Harikumar's experiments in designing Asti's costume only confirm Kathakali's restrained female character norms and the issues that a *minukku* costume presents when attempting to conceive an atypical Kathakali woman. Starting from costume, Harikumar had to rethink the ways in which he could present an 'active' female on a Kathakali stage. A female 'curtain-look', a female *manodharmam*, and a female *eduthu kalasam* all highlight the need to design and create a new female character, perhaps a female 'knife'

character in Kathakali, appropriate for the twenty-first century.

Asti radically unsettles the current conceptualization of the Kathakali woman and requires innovations to its limited range. On close examination, her character integrates several performative and structural traits of the 'knife' character. She is a trained warrior, not a home-bound woman. Both her husband and her father are 'knife' characters. She is not scared of blood, war, or slaughter, and takes sexual pleasure from all three. She is set to avenge the killing of her husband.

On stage, her 'curtain-look' is adapted from the actions of a male 'knife' character. The only other character who engages in a long monologue prior to the beginning of the song-text is the 'knife' character Ravana in *Ravana's Rise*. In conversation, Harikumar mentioned that the creation of Asti's monologue prior to the beginning of the song-text was intentional and that her resemblance to Ravana in *Ravana's Rise* was not accidental (2018).

Harikumar related Asti to Unniyarcha, a brave female warrior in the Northern Ballads (fictional folk songs about brave warriors of the north of Kerala) and he clearly pictured a female prototype for Asti's characterization. 'Knife' is the recurrent, overarching character feature of Asti, who makes her own trajectory in Kathakali history. With more refinement, she can chart the beginning of a new female character formation in Kathakali – a female 'knife'.

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Notes

1. Scholars disagree on the time period involved. Here I take that suggested by the Kathakali scholars Namboodirippad and Namboothiri as well as K. P. S. Menon, who wrote *Kathakali Rangam* (1957). In determining the chronology, Menon took the Malayalam calendar into consideration, which differs from the Roman calendar. Writing an astrological chart according to the Malayalam month and year was a traditional system to record the dates of birth and death of people in old Kerala. *Kathakali Rangam* is still considered as the most authentic historical record on Kathakali.

2. *Kulastree* is a term used in Kerala that denotes an elite woman born in a respectable, preferably aristocratic, family (*tharavad*) and it resonates well with the high-born, upper-class, socially affluent characteristics associated to a well-born woman. *Chantapennu*, a rowdy wench, is typically a loud, uneducated, and rough woman from a lower social strata who engages in street trading, selling fish or vegetables, and uses foul language. The term *chanta* in Malayalam means 'market' and *pennu* is a less respectable term used to denote a woman. Literally, *chantapennu* means 'the market woman' – equivalent to an 'orange wench' in Restoration England. A 'good' woman is always a *kulastree* who, importantly, is not involved in any rowdy trading activities. The distinctions between both define the respectability associated with the women of Kerala society even today. J. Devika's book is written in Malayalam, the language

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spoken in Kerala. All translations of her words are mine.

3. Nair, also spelt as Nayar, is a caste in Kerala who traditionally followed the matrilineal system. A Nair joint family included sisters and brothers and sister's children. Neither sister's husband nor brother's wife belonged to the family and the children born to a sister through marriage legally belonged to her family and not to that of her husband. The oldest female member of the Nair family held significant power, while the oldest male member managed affairs on her behalf. Having said that, 'the uncles' of the Nair families were extremely powerful and controlled all economic and familial affairs almost single-handedly.

4. *Tali* is a symbol of marriage worn by married women around their neck, usually made of gold.

5. Some of the main male character tropes are known as *katti* – knife costume; *pacha* – green costume; *tadi* – beard. There are variations to *tadi* characters depending on the nature of the character. For an in-depth discussion see Zarrilli, *Kathakali Dance Drama,* p. 53–7.

6. These are the popular lines of Nala. The verse in Malayalam goes like this: '*Kulavadhoonam Kopamakaa, / Palarille Lokasakshikal / Ubhayabhuvana sukhamallayo vannukooduvathavarkku mel*' ('Well-born women should not be angry. / There are several gods as witnesses / Husband-devotees will be bestowed with comfort in both worlds – earth and heaven.')

7. '*Nalaniloraparadham pol undennakilum / Kulanarikkaruthu kopam pol.*' ('Even though Nalan has made a mistake / A well-born woman should not be angry.')

8. Nala loses his kingdom in a game of chess and is exiled to the forest along with Damayanti. He is infected by Kali, the demon who now controls his emotions and thinking. Nala leaves Damayanti while she is sleeping on his lap, thinking that she would somehow reach the safety of her father's palace. In the turn of events, Nala rescues a divine snake from a forest fire and he blesses Nala with a figure to disguise himself in his exile. The snake also gives a special cloth to wrap around himself when he needs to present his true form. Nala take refuge in King Rituparna's kingdom as his trusted charioteer, who then teaches him the art of gambling. Through espionage, Damayanti identifies the secret location of her husband, although he is in disguise. By controlled spreading of false news about her intention to remarry, Damayanti entices Rituparna and Nala to her palace.

9. Variously translated as 'love' or 'erotic', *sringara* is the first of the eight *rasas*. When the erotic is not expressed in the right place in a modest manner, it is considered to be odiously erotic. Any expression of sexual desire that is not modest is classed in that way.

10. The text for Kathakali known as *padam* is sung by two musicians on the stage. They are trained classical singers who learn all major Kathakali texts during their course of study at Kathakali institutes.

11. Unniyarcha is a female character featured in Kerala Northern Ballads. Belonging to a warrior family, she is a brave warrior known for her many victories over men.

12. Kathakali's hand gestures known as *mudra* are based on twenty-four finger patterns that can be made by their folding or unfolding, forming the vocabulary for non-verbal acting. Words and sentences are formed by combining hand gestures.

13. Phoolan Devi, popularly known as the 'Bandit Queen', famously avenged her gang rape at the hands of upper-caste villagers of Behmai, India, where she lived. She lined up twenty-two of her rapists and shot all of them in cold blood. India's political establishment was shaken by these events. Charged on forty-two counts and jailed for eleven years, she later became a politician in India and was an MP until she was assassinated in 2001. All major newspapers in India published her story, and a film was made about her life.