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Female Choreographers And Their Impact On Classical Dance In Last 20 Years: A Kolkata-Centric Study

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Abstract:

Indian classical dance has evolved in the last two decades owing to the contribution of women choreographers in Kolkata, which this paper highlights. These women have worked towards preserving their art-form while simultaneously making efforts to enhance its value through their rich cultural background. The research is centred around choreographic work performed in Odissi, Manipuri, and interdisciplinary style pieces. It also includes examinations of their dance works including mythological themes praise, social issues, reinterpretations of works by Rabindranath Tagore, and blended dance lexicons. Through the qualitative approach of thematic analysis of performances, critiques, and interviews, the paper suggests that these choreographers have reshaped culturally defined possibilities and responded to new cultural movements through innovative ways of body movements. Important exponents include Mamata Shankar, Sharmila Biswas, Dona Ganguly, Sruti Bandopadhyay, Poushali Chatterjee, and Bimbavati Devi. Their works portray feminist and eco-critical interpretations alongside philosophical contemplation while emphasizing the minimalist aesthetic features of the genres within classical forms. The research highlights how vibrant Kolkata still remains at the center of choreographic development processes of classical dance paradoxically becomes frozen in time yet endlessly redefined. Through the collapse of generational silos alongside multimedia, interdisciplinary, and other collaborative ventures, traditional classical dance is preserved while projecting its relevancy in modern society. The paper affirms their vital role in determining the upcoming developments in the Indian dance culture.

Key Words: Choreography, Female Choreographer, Classical dance, Contemporary dance

Introduction:

The cultural practice in Kolkata has been rich and productive for a long period of time owing to its unique artistic traditions and creative practitioners. This place has for years witnessed several artists and practitioners of great repute add to the cultural tapestry of Bengal. There is no dearth of Indian classical dancers in this part of the country who have earned accolades from within the nation as well as abroad. However, this research paper focuses on the works of female choreographers of Kolkata and their contributions to classical dance in the last two decades. In this time span, several celebrated choreographers have made remarkable contributions in diverse dance forms like Odissi, Manipuri, and even contemporary styles, and have redefined classical traditions through novel viewpoints and innovative storytelling.

Methodology:

The objective of this research is to explore the contributions of female choreographers from Kolkata to Indian classical and contemporary dance over twenty years using a qualitative approach. The study is organized with respect to thematic divisions—mythological narratives, contemporary issues, interpretations of Tagore's works, and inter-style or fusion dance—so as to take into consideration the content as well as the stylistic choices of the choreographers. The research is descriptive and analytical in nature.

It includes data gathering from secondary sources, then analysing the data thematically to discover key areas in choreography, creativity, and other relevant activities in dance performances. Primary and secondary reviews, performance videos, recorded and televised performances, published videos and social media posts, as well as magazines, journals and newspapers where the dance works of choreographers were uploaded or discussed.

Analysis of choreography of the choreographers: Among the most striking characteristics that stand out during a study of female choreographers in Kolkata is the awareness of the integration of the two worlds, traditional and modern in relation to movement practices. Although they are deeply rooted in the classical vocabulary, they do not shy away from modernizing these traditions. This has led to new classical movements that are still within the classical form but are beginning to challenge it. Through their work, female choreographers have succeeded in ensuring that classical dance does not become obsolete, rather juxtaposing it with issues of social justice, the environment, or personal identity. Mamata Shankar, who is a descendant of the famous Uday Shankar, has advanced the vision of her father by fashioning a distinct style of theatrical dance that fuses Indian classical and folk with modern dance. Her production 'Sabari', which is based on Ramayana, exhibits both her telling and choreography prowess. So many times the performance is restaged with fresh vigor — telling the story of Sabari, a tribal woman who becomes divinely fulfilled through relentless surrendering devotion to Lord Rama. The first half is about Sabari's childhood as a tribal woman where she is costumed and regionally folk danced into the stage with her innocent eager anticipation.

The latter half of the work deals with her ascetic existence, her spirituality, and final redemption. As Mamata Shankar brings to life the character of aged Sabari, she portrays the role with emotional subtlety and depth, restrained movements, and nuanced expressions. While the production is anchored in mythology, there is an underlying feminist dimension that underscores woman's agency, framed within the devotional context of bhakti and sacrifice. In *Amritasyaputra*, Mamata Shankar presents self realization as well as the theme of life's recurrence. With the playing of Zakir Hussain, the piece's soundscape emphasizes that every being is a spark of divinity from the same source, and is bound in the end for cosmic integration.

Sharmila Biswas, an exponent of Odissi has taken bold thematic risks as well as combined new visual styles and contemporary approaches with classical Odissi. Her production 'Samudrer Prati', draws upon Rabindranath Tagore's poem, interpreting the sea as an archetype of a universal mother whose nurturing and complex personality is always mysterious. The choreography does not adhere to a strictly chronological sequence but rather delves into the emotional and psychological depths of motherhood. While Sharmila Biswas's work is often associated with Odissi, her approach employs a distinct soundscape—Rabindra Sangeet, Sylheti folk, and devotional kirtans—which she uses to build a multicultural sonic environment. In Biswas's choreographic style, the soft elements of abhinaya, and dense formations make the stillness and the violence of maternal existence coexist, underscoring her unwavering commitment to feminine subjectivity and Odissi dance.

Dona Ganguly's choreography and her reinterpretation of Tagore's *nrityanatya* (dance-dramas) value-adding dimensions to the Odissi dance genre have transformed the dance landscape of Kolkata. *Chitrangada*, *Mayar Khela*, and *Tasher Desh* are some of her works that incorporate modern theatrical elements with classical styles. In the portrayal of 'Chitrangada', Dona Ganguly solves the Manipuri princess' internal struggle of which form of sociopolitical conformity to hollow desire she prefers to embrace, through ensemble choreography and expressive solos. In her work 'Mayar Khela' and 'Tasher Desh', she takes Tagore's metaphorical texts and contemporizes them and delves into the exploration of freedom, conformity, and emotional restraint. Her works are characterized by smooth group formations and dynamic lyricism that add layers to the texts' narratives. Her adaptation of Kalidasa's 'Shakuntala' captures the seamless blend of classical Odissi and themes from Sanskrit literature. The production touches upon the themes of love, memory, and separation and uses choreographic embroidery to show the emotional shifts from Shakuntala to Dushmanta, which mark the transitions into her sorrow. In 'Jatayu Mokshya', the dynamic motion and vivid portrayal of the tragic yet noble act of the legendary bird sacrificing himself to protect Sita is realized by Ganguly during the infamous scene of the epic. She also employs splendid expression, surpassing social standing divides with equally sultry yet powerful dance. 'Krishna- Sudama' showcase unconditional friendship through their expressive dancelike gestures and kinship honouring spirit

Philosophically gushing dance interpretations are a forte for a scholar and a practitioner of Manipuri dance, Prof. Dr. Sruti Bandopadhyay. Two of her works 'Bhaktirasasudhasara' and 'Sakhya Prem' focus on bhakti (devotion) and sakhya (compassionate love), two of the essential rasas within the Manipuri aesthetic. The *Gosthalila* as well as *Udukhal rasa* inspired 'Sakhya Prem' while sparkling *lasya* and precise *rasa* expression

elegantly portray Krishna's divine connection with gopis. She emphasizes the subtle yet poignant emotional struggle Radha experiences with Krishna in her interpretation of 'Gita Govinda', employing suggestive movements to portray divinity, love, and yearning. Bandopadhyay has managed to cross boundaries in Manipuri dance by bringing it to the level of a contemplative and theological endeavour.

From mythological retellings to experimental collaboratives, Poushali Chatterjee's work spans a variety of genres. In 'Krishna Leela', she performs crucial aspects from Krishna's life employing Manipuri traditional techniques so all can appreciate it. Her production 'Sama: Harmony' of Life combines Odissi and Manipuri to an unprecedented extent. While Odissi's lyrical quality is subordinated to the subtle devotion of Manipuri, the production uses contrast as a metaphor for unity in diversity. The primary focus on balance and interdependence is nothing less than an eco-philosophy. She tackles 21st century issues in 'Malemgi Wari: An Earth Story' through Manipuri vocabulary. Her 'Bhagyachandra' is a dance-drama encapsulating the life of a Manipuri king and the first storyteller dancer. It demonstrates biographical narrative blended with classical storytelling. In 'Ichhe', based on Tagore's *Suoranir Saadh*, Chatterjee employs numerous different styles of Manipuri including Cholom, Lai Haraoba, and Thang Ta, adding stylistic depth to the storyline.

Through fervent explorations and thematic collaborations, Bimbavati Devi perpetuates the dauntless heritage of Manipuri tradition. In collaboration with others, she choreographed the dance 'Prabhu Amar Priyo Amar' which is performed in Kathak and Manipuri dance, reflecting on destiny, sacrifice, and redemption, based on Tagore's 'Shapmochan'. It is vividly dramatic because of the interplay between the soft, circular rhythm of Manipuri and the forceful linearity of Kathak. Purna Pran is her production and it aims to explore Tagore's philosophies of nature and love. 'Amitajyoti', notes Tagore's essay *Vishwa Parichay*, and so a dance is fused with metaphysics. In her piece 'Footprint in Blood', Bimbavati Devi deals with contemporary social issues and offers acute criticism through classical gaze.

Conclusion:

In Kolkata, Indian classical dance has evolved tremendously in the last twenty years with female creative choreographers taking the lead. Their works demonstrate a commitment to preserving the legacy of Odissi, Manipuri, Kathak, or contemporary fusion while transforming, innovating, engaging with other art forms, and adopting feminist perspectives of the classics. These artists have crafted resonant narratives of love, devotion, identity, and metamorphosis. The choreographic efforts of these women sustain the essence of classical dance forms while broadening their scope of expression. With literature, mythology, and their lived experiences, these women have re-defined the act of choreographing in the 21st century. Kolkata still remains a centre of dynamic cultural production which embraces and furthers its traditions. The effect female choreographers have had on dance in Kolkata is significant. They have redefined the story telling possibilities of classical dance and devised contemporary social structures choreographically. They have also transformed the perception of classical dance, which was thought to be stagnant and outdated.

From the perspective of audience development, women choreographers have integrated multimedia and other art forms to classical dance, thus captivating younger demographics, enabling them to appreciate the

classical dance form. Their innovative approaches to expression and storytelling have transformed classical dance and have ensured its relevancy in contemporary culture.

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