



Use of Choreography in the Staging of the Epic Poem Meghnadbadh Kavya by Michael Madhusudan Dutt: A Study of Gautam Halder's Theatrical Production

Anindita Niyogi,

Research Scholar, Department of Performing Arts,

Pondicherry University.

Abstract: Michael Madhusudan Dutt is a luminous figure in the firmament of Bengali literature. His notable creation, '*Meghnadbadh Kavya*', was composed in 1861. The work is regarded as an epic. Although inspired by the narrative of the Sanskrit epic '*Ramayana*' by Valmiki, its perspective is entirely unconventional. In a radical shift, the protagonist of this epic is Meghnad, the son of Ravana. The central theme of the poem revolves around Meghnad being treacherously slain by Lakshmana while he is unarmed and performing a yajna at *Nikumbhila Yanjagar*. Over time, '*Meghnadbadh Kavya*' has been adapted into theatrical performances in various forms. Renowned theatre personality Gautam Halder has brought a novel approach to the stage adaptation of this epic. In his production, he performed solo, assuming the dual role of actor and narrator. Through a seamless blend of acting, music, dance, and instrumental accompaniment, he created a unique atmosphere on stage. Choreography emerged as a vital component of this production. The primary objective of this research paper is to examine how choreography has been employed in the staging of '*Meghnadbadh Kavya*' and how it functions as a bridge between the director, the performer, and the audience.

Key Words: *Choreography, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Meghnadbadh Kavya*

Introduction: The term "choreography" literally means "dance-writing," derived from the Greek language. It generally refers to the composition and arrangement of dance. In theatre, choreography is used to convey the essence and emotion of the narrative. It is a structured sequence of physical movements and gestures.

The principal aim of staging a play is to effectively present the theme and emotion of the drama to the audience. To communicate the playwright's vision, various techniques are employed—acting, dance, music, stage design, and lighting all play integral roles. Directors often incorporate diverse artistic strategies to connect with their audience.

Methodology:

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to investigate the use of choreography in Gautam Halder's theatrical adaptation of '*Meghnadbadh Kavya*' by Michael Madhusudan Dutt. The focus lies in examining how physical movement, gesture, and dance function as interpretive tools in performance, particularly within a solo theatrical framework. The following sources and methods were employed:

Available video recordings of Gautam Halder's solo production of '*Meghnadbadh Kavya*', accessible via platforms such as YouTube, were studied in detail. Repeated viewing allowed for close observation of choreographic sequences, use of space, gesture patterns, and transitions between characters. Published Interviews and Commentary: Interviews with Gautam Halder—published in newspapers, theatre journals, and online platforms—were analyzed to understand his creative intentions, interpretation of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's work, and insights on choreographic choices. Performance Reviews: Reviews and critiques published in Bengali and English theatre journals, blogs, and cultural portals were examined to understand audience reception and critical interpretation of the production's choreography. Textual Analysis: A close reading of the original epic poem '*Meghnadbadh Kavya*' in its Bengali version was undertaken. This provided contextual understanding of the poetic imagery, symbolic metaphors, and thematic undertones, which informed the analysis of how choreography was used to embody these literary elements on stage.

Body of the study: In the production of '*Meghnadbadh Kavya*', Gautam Halder used choreography to depict dramatic scenes on stage. He drew from various traditions—hand gestures (*mudras*), Indian classical dance forms, folk dance, Western dance styles, and martial arts—all of which enriched his theatrical presentation. He contemporized Michael Madhusudan's Created characters for the modern stage. For instance, the character of Indra and the goddess Maya were portrayed with the mannerisms and behavioral traits of contemporary antagonists.

To shape the characters and establish the theatrical setting, Halder used both traditional and unconventional choreography. *Mudras* described in *Natyashastra* by Bharata were used alongside elements from Western dance. He used gestures and costumes to distinguish characters in his solo performance. The *uttariya* (a traditional drape) became a symbolic and versatile theatrical prop.

As Ravana, the *uttariya* was draped across the back; as Rama, it hung over one shoulder; for Hanuman, it was tied diagonally like a warrior's strap; as Durga, it was worn like a veil; and for Maya, it covered the head. This effectively differentiated each character.

The *uttariya* was also employed choreographically—whirled to depict the valor of the demon army, spun to suggest a wildfire, or used to represent actions like a door opening or stormy weather.

In the lamentation scene after Meghnad's death, the *uttariya* became a symbolic corpse, with Vibhishana placing his ear on it to listen for a heartbeat. When Maya appeared at heaven's gates, the *uttariya* was drawn aside like a curtain to signify the gates opening. During a dream sequence, Maya disguised as Sumitra covered her face and body with the *uttariya*, enhancing the illusion. When Lakshmana approached Shiva to perform a

puja, Gautam Halder, portraying Shiva, stood in a Nataraja-like pose with an *uttariya* dangling from his outstretched hand—symbolizing Shiva’s silent complicity and internal guilt. Similarly, Vibhishana's guilt was expressed through a dangling *uttariya* when he blocked Meghnad’s path to the yajna site. The *uttariya* also became a weapon in some scenes—Lakshmana held it like a sword, or waved it to simulate thunder. As Ravana, Halder spread the *uttariya* over his back and posed with his arms parallel to the ground, resembling Kathakali dance gestures—augmenting his presence and portraying Ravana’s grandeur.

When portraying the characters of the assassins Lakshmana and Vibhishana, their faces were partially covered with the *uttariya* to express their guilt.

Use of Classical Mudras from Bharata’s Natyashastra:

In this production, many gestures from classical dance forms rooted in Bharata's Natyashastra were used to heighten dramatic impact. For example:

When Ravana addresses the ocean “What a beautiful garland you wear today, *Prachetas!*”—a garland is shown using appropriate mudras.

In the line “Are you shackled for a sin?” both hands are used to depict bondage.

Queen Chitrangada’s line about the serpent’s wrath is portrayed using the *sarpa-shirsha* mudra, showing a snake’s motion and attack.

The line “Drunk with the fragrance, the bees swarm” is accompanied by the *bhramara* (bee) mudra.

During Shiva’s disturbance from meditation, the swirling of both hands over the head represents his matted locks.

To depict lightning flashing in the eyes, specific hand gestures are used around the eyes.

In battle scenes, the *tripataka* mudra is used in the right hand to represent a frenzied elephant.

During flower picking by Promila and her companions, appropriate mudras are applied.

In the scene where Meghnad, entrapped by Maya’s illusion, sees Vishnu and Shiva at *Nikumbhila Yanjagar* (sacrificial altar), the mudras for *Chakra*, *Shankha*, and *Gada* are used.

Use of Innovative Mudras and Gestures are Not Prescribed in Natyashastra:

Many body movements and gestures in the choreography were not classical but expressive and context-driven.

Halder spread his arms like wings to depict Kamadeva flying away.

During Maya’s dialogue—“Protect Lakshmana, O God, in the battle against the demons”—she holds her arms in a gesture reminiscent of a mother cradling a child.

In Michael's lines about Lakshmana failing to shoot his arrow, the choreography blended various styles to depict the tension and frustration. When Maya gives Indra a weapon and when Indra returns with the weapon, the choreography does not conform to any specific dance style. When Chitraratha delivers weapons to Rama, gestures from Western dance are used.

In one scene, Bengali kirtan-inspired dance is also incorporated.

Conclusion:

In this production, Gautam Halder simultaneously assumed the roles of actor and narrator. Through choreography, he translated the complex language of '*Meghnadbadh Kavya*' into accessible, visual storytelling. Choreography became a central and inseparable element of this performance. Rather than adapting the poem into a conventional play, Halder chose to stage it as poetry-in-performance.

The use of choreography enabled him to portray multiple characters and a range of emotions in a solo performance. It facilitated smooth transitions between characters and helped dramatize Michael Madhusudan Dutt's poetic verses. Most importantly, choreography functioned as a bridge between the performer and the audience, making the dense literary work both vivid and emotionally resonant on stage.

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