



Visual Semiotics and Character Classifications in Kathakali: An Inquiry into Aharya Abhinaya and Dramatic Identity

ABHIDHANATH.B,

Research Scholar,

Kerala Kalamandalam, Deemed to be University for Art & Culture,

Cheruthuruthi, Thrissur, Kerala

Abstract

In the classical art form of Kathakali, Aharya — encompassing costume and makeup — plays a pivotal role in the transformation of an actor into a character. This metamorphosis takes place in the Nepathya or backstage, a space seldom seen but vital to the theatrical experience. It is here that the actor is visually shaped into the role, long before stepping onto the stage. The backstage is more than a physical location; it represents the holistic preparation behind the performance, including set elements like the stage structure (rangamandapam), seating, props, headgear, ornaments, curtains, lighting (lamps, torches), and even symbolic elements like trees and chariots. Each of these contributes to creating the right atmosphere and conveying the character's state of being. The Natyashastra, the ancient treatise on dramaturgy, outlines thirteen essential aspects of drama, among which Rasa (aesthetic essence) is central. The remaining twelve — including Abhinaya (acting) — serve to support the realization of Rasa. Abhinaya is further divided into four components: Angika (gestural), Vachika (verbal), Satvika (emotional), and Aharya (costume and makeup). This clearly positions Aharya as an inseparable part of expressive performance. As noted by Panditaratnam K.P. Narayana Pisharody in his translation of the Natyashastra, once an actor visually embodies a character, expressive acting becomes significantly more natural and effective. The essence of a king, a madman, or any character is conveyed through appearance even before a single gesture is made — such is the power of Aharya. This visual clarity allows the audience to instantly grasp the nature of the role. This paper delves into how such visual character definitions through Aharya lead to the classification of characters in Kathakali, exploring how external aesthetics reflect internal traits.

Keywords: Kathakali, Aharya Abhinaya, Character Classification, Natyashastra, Visual Semiotics

Introduction

The origins of theatrical performance can be traced back to early devotional rituals. In prehistoric times, when humans lived in constant awe of the forces of nature, fear inspired the creation of worship practices aimed at appeasing these unseen powers. Sacred spaces were designated for such rituals and adorned with naturally available materials. Over time, these spaces evolved into visually symbolic environments, incorporating colors and decorative elements that laid the groundwork for performative aesthetics. Central to these early rituals was the belief that divine or spiritual entities could possess the human body. This resulted in frenzied, ecstatic movements that eventually transitioned into stylized forms of expression, giving rise to structured art forms. As ritual performances began to appear during joyous occasions beyond worship, they evolved into proto-theatrical presentations. This transformation also led to significant developments in Aharya—the elements of costume and makeup—since enacting imaginative or supernatural tales demanded vivid and detailed visual representations. With the emergence of stories featuring animals, birds, and fantastical beings, the need to mimic these forms visually became paramount. Animal hides, horns, feathers, and wings began to serve as costume elements. Performers applied body paint—partially or fully—using pigments derived from natural materials such as red stones, charcoal, and lime. The application of body lines and motifs marked the genesis of Angarachana (body decoration), a critical phase in the evolution of Aharya. At its core, Aharya aimed to achieve a high degree of visual resemblance between performer and character.

As Kerala's traditional art forms—deeply rooted in mythological storytelling—evolved, representing supernatural characters convincingly became increasingly important. This challenge was addressed primarily through a refined and codified visual system of costume and makeup, particularly in Kathakali. The imaginative vision of playwrights demanded precise visual execution, especially when staging lesser-known or novel characters. While established mythological roles required minimal innovation, new roles demanded deeper interpretive insight from makeup and costume designers. In Kathakali, visual identity is not based on social hierarchy, caste, or genealogy, but rather on a character's moral disposition and psychological nature. While art forms like Koodiyattam sometimes provide explicit visual instructions in the script, Kathakali's Aattakkatha generally omits such details. Therefore, the responsibility falls on artists to interpret and represent the essence of each character through carefully crafted Aharya. Characters are classified using distinct visual categories that reflect their behavioral traits—virtuous heroes, malevolent villains, or comical figures—all differentiated by specific color codes, facial patterns, and ornamentation. This study aims to explore how these visual strategies are employed in Kathakali to classify and convey character types, revealing the deeper connection between costume design and character psychology.

Review of Literature

The visual language of Aharya Abhinaya plays a crucial role in the delineation of character types within the performative framework of Kathakali. This connection has been addressed in both ancient treatises and modern critical works. Among the earliest sources, Bharata Muni's *Natyashastra* provides a systematic account of theatrical aesthetics, with Chapter 23 focusing specifically on Aharya—the costumes, makeup, and visual embellishments integral to character portrayal (Bharata Muni, 1987). Similarly, the *Vishnu Dharmottara Purana* expands on the symbolic application of colors and visual motifs, particularly in its discussions found in Chapters 40 and 27, which serve as foundational references for understanding the semiotics of performance (Vishnu Dharmottara Purana, trans. Sharma, 1994).

Modern scholarship has continued to explore this domain with increasing depth. Sri Krishna Kaimal's *Kathakali Vigyan Kosham* is a seminal contribution that offers encyclopedic documentation of the evolution of costume and makeup in Kathakali. It categorizes characters based on visual codes, such as facial designs, headgear, and ornamentation, revealing how visual archetypes align with ethical and emotional roles (Kaimal, 2009). P.M. Ram Mohan's *Nepathyam* provides a behind-the-scenes perspective, exploring the practical

processes through which characters are visually constructed before appearing on stage. His work sheds light on how Aharya serves as the initial and powerful means of establishing identity and intention in performance (Ram Mohan, 2003).

Additionally, various regional journals and cultural magazines, including Keli and Vigyan Kairali, have contributed valuable field-based insights and performance critiques. These publications often document how specific visual features are used to define character archetypes in Kathakali, and how traditional costume norms are adapted or preserved in contemporary practice (Keli, 2017; Vigyan Kairali, 2015). Together, these texts and studies confirm that Aharya Abhinaya functions as more than mere ornamentation. It acts as a vital narrative tool that encodes psychological depth, ethical alignment, and social identity. Through this visual grammar, Kathakali enables audiences to distinguish between heroism and villainy, nobility and deceit, sanity and madness—all even before a single line is spoken or gesture made.

Research Methodology

To explore the nuanced interplay between Aharya Abhinaya and character classification in Kathakali, this study adopts a multifaceted research strategy rooted in both theory and practice. A descriptive lens is used to systematically examine the core elements of costume and makeup, with an emphasis on how these visual tools serve not merely as aesthetic enhancements but as integral identifiers of character archetypes. This method allows for a detailed understanding of how Kathakali's visual vocabulary translates moral alignment, social status, and emotional tone onto the performer's body. A historical perspective supplements this by tracing the evolution of Aharya from its early associations with ritual performance to its elaborate and codified presence in classical theatre. This trajectory is studied through textual references and iconographic evidence, mapping how traditional practices have adapted over time while retaining symbolic depth.

In addition, the research engages in exploratory inquiry by examining contemporary interpretations of Aharya in live performances. Firsthand observations, backstage studies, and interviews with Kathakali performers and makeup artists serve as key tools to understand how visual elements are applied, altered, or preserved in current practice. These experiential insights lend depth to theoretical frameworks, bridging the gap between classical texts and lived performance. A comparative dimension further enhances the study by analyzing visual representation strategies in related Indian art forms such as Koodiyattam and Bharatanatyam. This inter-artform dialogue sheds light on shared semiotic systems and unique visual codes that influence how characters are constructed and perceived.

Data collection for the study combines primary sources—such as performance observations, artist interactions, and photographic documentation—with secondary materials including ancient treatises like the *Natyashastra* and *Vishnu Dharmottara Purana*, scholarly commentaries, academic journals, and curated digital archives. This holistic approach ensures a rich and balanced exploration, positioning Aharya Abhinaya not only as an artistic tradition but as a narrative engine that shapes and classifies character identity in Kathakali.

Analysis and Discussion

The Visual Semiotics of Costume and The Moral Polarity of Characters in Kathakali

Character classification in Kathakali extends far beyond mere aesthetic embellishment. It is deeply embedded in Indian dramaturgical traditions and metaphysical philosophies, particularly the theory of the three *gunas*—*Sattva* (purity, harmony), *Rajas* (passion, egoism), and *Tamas* (ignorance, inertia). The visual manifestation of these philosophical qualities through costume and facial design transforms Kathakali into a living system of signs that guide audience interpretation.

Pacha (Green): Characters like Rama, Krishna, and Arjuna embody sattvic ideals. The uniformity of green-faced makeup, minimal embellishments, and regal headgear signals moral clarity and spiritual nobility. Subtle inflections—such as orange or yellow undertones—introduce emotional nuances within the sattvic framework.

Kathi (Knife): With a red base, chutti border, and aggressive eye extensions, Kathi characters manifest Rajasic qualities—arrogance, power, and ambition. Internal subtypes like Nedumkathi and Kurungkathi help stratify characters like Ravana (intellectually complex) and Duryodhana (brutally impulsive), reinforcing narrative hierarchy.

Thadi (Beard): Visual categories such as Chuvannathadi (red beard for demonic figures) and Vellathadi (white beard for divine monkey figures like Hanuman) highlight character intent and temperament. Using Chuvannathadi for allies like Sugreeva and Bali exemplifies Kathakali's nuanced approach to moral complexity.

Kari and Karuthathadi: These types, often depicting demonic women or forest-dwelling spirits, reflect the Tamasic guna. Their lack of symmetry, black pigmentation, and grotesque features convey chaos and the antithesis of order, civilization, and reason.

Minukku: Female characters, sages, and Brahmins are marked by a restrained visual style emphasizing inner emotion rather than action. Their soft hues and absence of exaggerated forms evoke spiritual calmness and passivity—a stark contrast to the performative masculinity of Kathi and Thadi's roles.

This nuanced hierarchy emphasizes that moral dualism in Kathakali is not rigid. Instead, it reflects layers of intention, intelligence, and dharmic confusion. Each character's makeup thus operates as both symbol and signifier, aiding audience interpretation while preserving dramaturgical complexity. In this intricate semiotic structure, Kathakali becomes not merely a narrative performance but a visual philosophy—one where aesthetics and ethics are inseparable. The audience, often well-versed in cultural and symbolic codes, actively participates in this meaning-making process. Through layers of Aharya Abhinaya (costume and makeup), Natyadharimi performance conventions, and the spatial dynamics of the stage, Kathakali enables a multi-sensory decoding of virtue, vice, and moral ambiguity. This process aligns with Bharata's Rasa theory, where emotional essence (rasa) is not portrayed directly but evoked through suggestion (dhvani) and symbol. As such, even before a character speaks or gestures, their visual presentation primes the viewer's interpretive lens, making costume not just an accessory to drama but a semiotic threshold—a gateway through which narrative, emotion, and philosophical depth converge.

Dramaturgical Implications

This codified visual system is not merely aesthetic; it serves pedagogical and performative functions. In traditional settings, where elaborate dialogues may be in Sanskrit or archaic Malayalam, not all viewers grasp the verbal nuance. Here, the visual becomes the text. By recognizing costume, makeup, and posture, even lay audiences can immediately identify a character's nature and role in the story. This visual literacy becomes crucial in village performances, nightlong rituals, or temple festivals where spectators often come and go. The stark difference between a Pacha and a Kathi, or a Minukku and a Karuthathadi, enables audiences to intuitively follow complex plotlines and moral arcs. Further, Kathakali often uses costume dualities to intensify narrative conflicts. The pairing of Pahlada and Hiranyakashipu—son and father, Pacha and Kathi—creates a visual representation of spiritual innocence versus tyranny. Similarly, the Pandavas, clothed in green and gold (Pacha), stand against the Kauravas, painted in red and black (Kathi and Chuvannathadi), offering a color-coded vision of the Mahabharata's ethical divisions.

The backstage transformation of a Kathakali actor is as dramatic as the onstage performance. Central to this is the chutti—the white facial border that enhances expression and delineates the dramatic mask. Traditionally, chutti was crafted using rice paste, thread, and patience. Artists would spend hours layering and shaping these borders to frame the actor's face as a living canvas. In the 1940s, a shift occurred. Ramakrishna Panicker introduced paper chutti, which was later refined by the legendary artist Vazhenkada Govinda Warriar. This innovation reduced preparation time and improved uniformity while preserving visual impact. Yet, it also marked a philosophical change—from devotional labor to practical efficiency. While some purists lament this as a loss of rigor, others view it as a testament to Kathakali's adaptive spirit. This blend of innovation and fidelity also manifests in costume design. The uduthukettu (waist-dressing), once prepared from starched cloths soaked and folded like waves, has evolved to accommodate easier cleaning and storage. The kupaayam (upper body garment), too, has become lighter and more breathable to meet the physical demands of performance.

From Stage to Backstage: The Art of Transformation

A Kathakali character is born not only on stage but in the workshop—among makeup artists, costume designers, wood carvers, and ornament makers. The transformation begins with the actor applying a base coat of manayola (cosmetic yellow), then lying down for the chutti artist to work. Following this, pigments, charcoal, and mineral pastes shape the face into a divine or demonic visage. Then comes the layering of costume. The voluminous uduthukettu enhances the actor's silhouette, followed by the kupaayam, shoulder drapes, and chest ornaments. These ornaments—made from light kumizh wood—are carved and painted by artisans. They are studded with peacock feathers, glass stones, beetle wings, and gold-like foil—crafting a shimmering visual that catches both firelight and imagination. Perhaps the most iconic element is the headgear. The kireedam for Pacha and Kathi roles, the kuttichamara for red-bearded characters, and the long hair-like adornments for characters like Krishna and Bheema each signal a unique identity. The kireedam comprises three parts—crown (kireedam), halo (prabha), and hair-mass (keshabharam)—painstakingly assembled and secured. Before the final placement of the crown, the actor performs a silent prayer, touching the kireedam reverently. With that gesture, the transformation is complete. The human becomes divine or demonic—not through possession, but through art.

Cultural Legacy and Global Identity

Today, Kathakali is performed not only in Kerala's temples and schools but also on global stages—from UNESCO festivals to foreign universities. Its visual richness has made it the cultural face of Kerala, often featured in tourism campaigns and cultural diplomacy. However, this popularity brings its risks—of simplification, of spectacle without substance. To truly honor Kathakali, one must not only marvel at the stage but understand the depth of its traditions—the workshop rituals, the philosophical underpinnings, the invisible labor of chutti artists and costume makers. Kathakali's roots lie in older performance traditions: Koodiyattam, Krishnanattam, and Ramanattam. From Koodiyattam, it inherits classical stylization and temple-based ritual; from Krishnanattam, its epic themes and devotional tone; and from Ramanattam, the format of expansive storytelling. Over time, it absorbed folk influences—Theyyam's circular face painting, Yakshagana's dynamic energy, and mural art's color palette. This synthesis created a living art form—philosophical yet theatrical, sacred yet performative. And it continues to evolve, sustained by institutions like Kerala Kalamandalam, which standardize costume proportions, train artists, and innovate materials without sacrificing authenticity.

Conclusion:

Kathakali stands as a uniquely encoded theatrical tradition where costume, makeup, and gesture converge into a potent semiotic system. Far from being ornamental, the visual language of Kathakali is a codified structure that reveals character psychology, moral polarity, and metaphysical alignment. Each face color, beard type, and headgear functions as a symbol deeply rooted in classical Indian dramaturgy and philosophy (Bharata Muni, 1987; Vishnu Dharmottara Purana, trans. Sharma, 1994). Through the prism of the three gunas—Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas—characters transcend individual traits to become embodiments of universal principles (Kaimal, 2009). In this way, Kathakali becomes not just a performance, but a visual scripture of dharma and adharma, rendered in color and form. What makes this system particularly profound is its pedagogical clarity. In a cultural context where verbal narrative may be esoteric or inaccessible to the layperson, the visual takes precedence as the primary vehicle of storytelling. The audience need not understand every syllable of the dialogue; they need only read the colors, shapes, and movements to grasp the emotional and ethical essence of the drama. This visual grammar is not simplistic but highly sophisticated—capable of conveying irony, contradiction, and transformation. The moral polarity between characters such as Prahlada and Hiranyakashipu, or Arjuna and Duryodhana, is not merely acted out but visually inscribed through the grammar of costume (Ram Mohan, 2003; Keli, 2017).

The backstage ritual of transformation adds another dimension to Kathakali's profundity. The actor's metamorphosis—from ordinary human to mythic being—is a sacred and collaborative process involving artisans, makeup experts, and costume designers. This transformation is both physical and symbolic, a rite of passage that echoes the ancient idea of art as a bridge to transcendence (Zarrilli, 2000). The craft of the chutti, the shaping of the uduthukettu, and the final anointing with the kireedam together constitute a performative sanctification. It is this seamless blending of artistry and ritual that elevates Kathakali from theatre to spiritual enactment (Vigyan Kairali, 2015). Yet, as Kathakali ventures onto global stages, it must guard against commodification. Its strength lies not in exotic display but in its philosophical depth, ritual roots, and community craftsmanship. To preserve its essence, both practitioners and audiences must move beyond surface aesthetics and engage with the intricate traditions that animate each performance. Innovations like paper chutti or lighter costumes should be seen not as dilution but as part of an evolving tradition that balances reverence with relevance (Kaimal, 2009; Ram Mohan, 2003). The challenge lies in navigating this evolution without severing the cultural and metaphysical threads that sustain its identity.

In sum, Kathakali is a luminous example of how visual culture can convey profound ethical, spiritual, and aesthetic meaning. It is a theatre of signs—every color a value, every gesture a code, every transformation a passage between worlds. To understand Kathakali is to read a living text where myth, morality, and artistic excellence converge. As it continues to adapt to new audiences and modern platforms, its core remains anchored in the timeless vision of art as both expression and embodiment of cosmic order (Zarrilli, 2000; Kaimal, 2009).

References

Bharata Muni. (1987). *The Natyashastra* (Trans. Manomohan Ghosh). Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series.

Keli Magazine. (2017). *Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi*.

Kaimal, S. K. (2009). *Kathakali Vigyan Kosham*. Kerala Bhasha Institute.

Ram Mohan, P. M. (2003). *Nepathyam*. DC Books.

Vigyan Kairali. (2015). *Kerala State Council for Science, Technology, and Environment*.

Vishnu Dharmottara Purana. (1994). (Trans. Priyabala Sharma). Nag Publishers.

Zarrilli, P. B. (2000). *Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play*. Routledge.