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## The Embodied Universe: An Analysis Of The Portrayal Of Women's Character And Emotions In Indian Dance

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### Abstract

Indian dance, a vast and intricate tapestry of classical and folk traditions, serves as a profound repository of cultural expression, particularly for the depiction of women's inner lives. This research paper argues that Indian dance is not merely performance but a sophisticated language of emotion (rasa) and narrative (abhinaya), through which the character, agency, and emotional spectrum of women are articulated, celebrated, and preserved. Through an analysis of key classical forms like Bharatanatyam, Odissi, and Kathakali, and folk forms like Lavani and Giddha, this paper will explore how dance narratives move beyond simplistic archetypes to present complex female personas -from the divine and devotional to the heroic and transgressive. It will examine the technical apparatus of dance, including mudras (hand gestures), navarasa (the nine emotions), and the thematic tradition of the Ashta Nayika (eight heroines), as tools for constructing a nuanced emotional architecture for its female subjects. Ultimately, this paper posits that these dance forms have historically provided a sanctioned space for the expression of female subjectivity, desire, and power, making them a vital and dynamic field for understanding the construction of femininity in Indian culture.

### Introduction

**The Body As Text.** Indian dance is a universe where mythology, spirituality, aesthetics, and social commentary converge. To view it solely as entertainment is to overlook its primary function as a storytelling medium and a vehicle for emotional and philosophical exploration. Within this realm, the portrayal of women holds a position of exceptional significance. For centuries, when textual narratives were dominated by male voices and perspectives, performative traditions like dance became one of the primary channels for articulating the female experience in Indian culture.

### ***Literature Review and Theoretical Framework.***

1. This paper seeks to analyze how Indian dance forms depict the character and emotions of women. This depiction operates on multiple levels:

(a) **The Narrative Level.** The stories chosen from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and from devotional poetry.

(b) **The Technical Level.** The use of codified gestures (mudras), facial expressions (mukharaja), and body movements to embody specific emotions.

(c) **The Archetypal Level.** The use of recurring character types, most notably the Ashta Nayika, which provide a framework for exploring different emotional states.

(d) **The Social Level.** The context of performance, whether in temple rituals, royal courts, or village squares, which shapes the expression of femininity.

We will begin by establishing the theoretical framework of rasa and abhinaya, the essential tools for conveying emotion. Subsequently, we will delve into classical traditions, using specific examples to illustrate the depth of female characterization. Finally, we will contrast this with the earthy, assertive, and collective expression of women in folk dances, demonstrating the diverse and complex landscape of female representation in Indian performative culture.

2. ***The Theoretical Framework: Rasa and Abhinaya.*** To understand the portrayal of emotion in Indian dance, one must first understand the foundational concept of Rasa. Literally meaning "juice" or "essence," rasa is the aesthetic flavor or emotion evoked in the audience. The Natyashastra, attributed to Bharata Muni, enumerates the Nava Rasa (Nine Emotions):

- (a) Shringara (Love, Beauty)
- (b) Hasya (Laughter, Joy)
- (c) Karuna (Sorrow, Compassion)
- (d) Raudra (Anger)
- (e) Veera (Courage, Heroism)
- (f) Bhayanaka (Fear, Terror)
- (g) Bibhatsa (Disgust)
- (h) Adbhuta (Wonder, Amazement)
- (i) Shanta (Peace, Tranquility)

A performance is considered successful when it can generate these rasas in the heart of the spectator. The mechanism for generating rasa is Abhinaya. Often translated as "acting," abhinaya is far more nuanced; it is the art of "carrying forward" the meaning to the audience. It is divided into four aspects:

- (a) **Angika** : Expression through the body (limbs, gestures, postures).
- (b) **Vachika** : Expression through speech (song and lyrics).
- (c) **Aharya** : Expression through costume, jewelry, and makeup.
- (d) **Sattvika** : Expression through involuntary physical manifestations (goosebumps, tears, trembling).

It is through the meticulous application of abhinaya, particularly angika and sattvika, that a dancer builds the character and emotional world of the women she portrays. A slight quiver of the lower lip (sattvika) can convey immense sorrow (karuna), while a specific glance and a turning gesture (angika) can perfectly embody the shyness of a heroine in love (shringara).

3. **Archetypes and Agency: The Ashta Nayika in Classical Dance.** The most explicit framework for exploring women's emotions is the concept of the Ashta Nayika (The Eight Heroines). This taxonomy from the Nattyashastra categorizes a nayika (heroine) based on her emotional state in relation to her lover (nayaka). This system prevents the reduction of female characters to monolithic types, instead offering a nuanced spectrum of experience:

- (a) **Abhisarika** : The courageous one who sets aside her modesty and fear to venture out into the dark and stormy night to meet her lover. This archetype embodies initiative, desire, and veera (courage), challenging passive stereotypes of femininity.
- (b) **Vasakasajja** : The one who adorns herself and her home in eager anticipation of her beloved's arrival. She is the embodiment of hope, joy, and eager shringara.
- (c) **Virahotkanthita** : The one who is languishing in separation. She is consumed by longing, despair, and karuna. Her world is bleak without her beloved.
- (d) **Svadinabhartruka** : The one who is loved and is in command of her partner. She is confident, happy, and secure, representing a state of fulfilled shringara and female agency within a relationship.
- (e) **Kalahantarita** : The one who is estranged from her lover after a quarrel. She is filled with regret, remorse, and a complex mix of anger (raudra) and longing.
- (f) **Khandita** : The enraged one whose lover has been unfaithful. She confronts him directly, her emotion being pure raudra (anger), mixed with pain and pride. She is a powerful figure of accusation and wounded dignity.
- (g) **Vipralabda** : The one who is disappointed and deceived. She waited, but her lover did not come. Her emotion is one of betrayal, hurt, and disillusionment.
- (h) **Proshitabhartruka** : The one whose husband or lover is away on a journey. She pines for him, counting the days until his return, immersed in a steady state of karuna.

A master dancer does not just show these states; she embodies them. The Khandita Nayika's eyes will flash, her gestures will be sharp and accusatory. The Virahotkanthita's movements will be slow, her gaze distant, her body drooping with the weight of sorrow. Through this system, classical dance acknowledges the

complexity of a woman's emotional life, granting legitimacy to everything from righteous anger to transcendent joy.

#### 4. *Divine and Mortal: Female Portrayals in Key Classical Forms.*

(a) **Bharatanatyam** : From Devadasi to Divinity Originating in the temples of Tamil Nadu, Bharatanatyam was historically performed by devadasis, women dedicated to the service of God. This context is crucial. The primary emotion is Bhakti (devotion), which is often expressed through the lens of Shringara (love). The female dancer adopts the persona of a soul (Atman) yearning for union with the divine (Paramatman), or more specifically, a devotee like Meera Bai yearning for Krishna.

In a padam or javali (lyrical poetic compositions), the dancer might depict a nayika complaining to her mother (sakhi) about her lover's absence. On a spiritual level, this is the soul lamenting the absence of God. This layered expression allowed for the articulation of intense, even erotic, human emotion within a sacred, sanctioned framework. The female body, through dance, became a conduit for the most profound spiritual and emotional expressions.

(b) **Odissi** : The Sculptural Grace of Feminine Power Odissi, from Odisha, is inspired by the sculptures of temples like Konark and Bhubaneswar. Its fundamental posture, the tribhanga (a three-bend stance of the head, torso, and hips), is inherently feminine, graceful, and fluid. Odissi repertoire is replete with portrayals of strong female characters. A quintessential example is the portrayal of Radha. Odissi does not present her as a mere consort but as the empowered, central figure of the divine play. In the masterpiece "Ashta Nayika" compositions, the dancer meticulously embodies each of the eight heroines. Furthermore, Odissi often draws from the poetry of Jayadeva's Gita Govinda, which is celebrated for its sensuous and deeply emotional descriptions of Radha's state of being—her longing, her jealousy, her ecstatic union. The dance form thus captures the entire spectrum of feminine divinity, from the maternal and fierce Durga to the compassionate and loving Radha.

(c) **Kathakali** : The Grand Spectacle of Archetypal Passions Kathakali from Kerala is a dance-drama known for its grandiose makeup, costumes, and precise movement language. Its female characters, though often played by men, are powerful archetypes. The portrayal is less about realistic individuation and more about embodying universal emotional states (rasas).

Characters like Kunti (from the Mahabharata) embody Karuna Rasa (pathos) as she laments the consequences of her actions. Draupadi, another pivotal character, is a fountain of emotions. She is the epitome of wounded honor and rage (Raudra Rasa) during her disrobing (Cheer-Haran), and of profound sorrow (Karuna Rasa) throughout her exile. Kathakali uses its exaggerated costumes and expressions to externalize the immense internal emotional power of these mythological women.

5. *The Folk Idiom: Earthy, Assertive, and Collective Expression.* If classical dance often explores emotion through divinity and mythology, folk dance grounds it in the daily lives, struggles, and joys of ordinary women. The expression is more direct, collective, and frequently assertive.

(a) **Lavani (Maharashtra)** : Dance of Protest and Sensuality Lavani is a powerful form that combines powerful rhythm, expressive movement, and provocative poetry. Historically performed for weary

soldiers, it evolved into a sharp, witty commentary on society, politics, and gender relations. Lavani dancers are known for their strong eye contact, swift spins, and assertive footwork.

Through Lavani, women express emotions and themes often taboo in polite society: sexual desire, frustration with neglectful husbands, and criticism of corrupt leaders. The emotion is rarely subtle; it is raw, bold, and confrontational, channeling Raudra (anger) and Hasya (satirical laughter) as tools of empowerment and social critique. It is a celebration of feminine energy (Shakti) in its most earthy and powerful form.

(b) **Giddha (Punjab)** : The Circle of Sisterhood Giddha is the female counterpart to the male Bhangra. Performed in a circle, it involves clapping, singing, and spontaneous dancing. The songs (boliyan) are its heart. They are composed collectively and cover a vast range of themes: the joy of marriage, the pain of leaving her parental home (veyah), mockery of arrogant in-laws, teasing of husbands, and commentary on social issues.

The emotional expression in Giddha is collective and cathartic. It is a space where women, through laughter (Hasya) and sometimes shared sorrow (Karuna), build solidarity. The dance movements are energetic and free, reflecting a spirit of joy and resilience. It is an expression of emotion not for an external audience, but for the community of women themselves, strengthening their bonds and providing a safe space for emotional release.

### ***Conclusion: A Living Language of Emotion***

The analysis of Indian dance forms reveals a cultural complex deeply invested in articulating the interiority of women. From the codified, spiritualized emotions of the classical sadhana (practice) to the robust, earthy expressions of the folk tradition, these art forms provide a sophisticated vocabulary for female experience.

They move far beyond one-dimensional portrayals. A woman in Indian dance can be divine and mortal, vulnerable and powerful, loving and wrathful, individual and collective. The technical systems of rasa and abhinaya, and the narrative frameworks like the Ashta Nayika, provide the tools to explore this complexity with nuance and depth. These dances demonstrate that Indian cultural traditions have long recognized and celebrated the vast emotional landscape of women, offering them a voice, an agency, and a power that has been, and continues to be, essential to the cultural fabric of the nation.

Indian dance, therefore, is not a relic of the past but a living, evolving language. Contemporary choreographers are increasingly using these traditional idioms to tell modern stories—of urban loneliness, of feminist resistance, of LGBTQ+ identities. In doing so, they ensure that this ancient art form remains a vital and powerful medium for expressing the ever-changing, yet eternally complex, character and emotions of women.

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