

The Dumb Dancer: A Quest for Identity

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Abstract

The Dumb Dancer is a story of a Kathakali (an Indian classical dance that has highly stylized gesture language) dancer Bhima, who plays the mythological role of Bhima and over identifies himself with the role to the extent of forgetting his own identity in this world. He gradually turns insane and becomes a patient in a mental asylum. Bhima, the kathakali dancer is under the delusion that he is the real Bhima of *the Mahabharata*, who had avenged the humiliation of his beloved wife Draupadi by killing Duryodhana. He becomes mentally deranged at the thought of his having become a murderer, the victim in his insane fantasy. Dr. Prema, the psychiatrist who treats him, becomes so strongly involved emotionally with his problem that, instead of curing him, she herself becomes insane. While treating him she gradually starts identifying herself with Draupadi, the beloved wife of Bhima and slowly turns insane.

Key Words: Kathakali, sane and Insane, mythological, identification, psychiatrist, mental Asylum, shock therapy

Introduction

The Dumb Dancer, a highly acclaimed Psychological play of an Indian playwright Asif Currimbhoy, is a fascinating story of a Kathakali dancer's emotional plight in the competitive world. The central characters in this play seem to be affected with Schizophrenia. The text has elaborate footnotes and numerous illustrations to explain to a foreign reader the history and tradition of *Kathakali* dance. The play was written in 1961 and was staged in 1965 in United States later it was staged at the British Drama League Festival. The kathakali dance with the accompaniment of drums, cymbals, gongs and songs can easily hold the foreign audience spell-bound. Currimbhoy recalls its effect on the audience when it was staged at the British Drama League Festival:

The timing and the tone of the play were just right. Everything was bizarre to the point of fascination and the audiences were absolutely thrilled. I don't think we will ever forget the experience. (18)

The play begins with a scene in the operation theatre of a mental asylum where 'a dance sequence from Duryodhana's slaughter' is enacted with the sane (doctors, interns and hospital personnel) on one side and the insane (the patient in mental asylum) on the other side as its audience.

The surprising thing is Bhima, a *Kathakali* dancer but an inpatient in the hospital plays the role of Bhima. No one knows this fact till Prema, the doctor who is treating Bhima reveals it to Dilip a house surgeon. Through the conversation between Prema and Dilip, one comes to know the illness of Bhima and his over identification with the mythological character Bhima to the extent of forgetting his real identity. The condition of Bhima is revealed in the words of Dr. Dilip thus:

“Your patient is a Schizophrenic who calls himself Bhima and identifies himself with a mythological character in a historical play. The case is not an uncommon one...even to a doctor” (20)

When Dr. Dilip asks Dr. Prema why she had allowed the patient to enact the violent scene, Dr. Prema explains: “It was not merely to prove a point that I got Bhima to enact this role. The purpose went further than that. I wanted him to live through the experience again to recollect that the guilt he bears was not his... you know what I mean. Shock Therapy.” (text, 22) To give Bhima a shock treatment Dr. Prema wishes him to go through the performance again, as close to reality as possible.

Act II is a flash-back which takes us to the training center where Bhima is exposed to the strict and rigorous training in kathakali center. He often lapses into contemplation and tries to identify himself with Bhima of *The Mahabharata* who stands for courage, strength and ferociousness. He is very ambitious to achieve perfection in his art. In “thundering accents” he recites a few verses from the vow of revenge from *The Mahabharata* and performs the kathakali dance. His competing with a co-student, the singer Madhu a blind one, his intimacy with Guru’s daughter Shakuntala, his mental illness in the budding stage which from time to time is corrected by Guru, his fierce act of cutting his tongue to become greater than Madhu and the greatest in the art field, he gradually turning insane and becoming a patient in asylum are seen in the second act.

The verses chanted by Madhu, a blind pupil in the kathakali training centre, and a rival to Bhima are intended to give the background of the play.

“Pardon, empress, ‘quoth the menial, ‘royal Pandu’s righteous son,
Lost his game and lost his reason, empress, thou art staked and won.
Prince Duryodhan claims thee, lady, and the victor bids me say, thou shalt serve him as his
vassal, as his slave in palace stay!’ . . .
Dragged her in her slipping garments by her long and trailing hair, . . .
Stooping in her shame and anguish, pale with wrath and woman’s fear,
Trembling and in stifled accents, thus she spoke with streaming with tear...(27-31)

In a moment of elation, Bhima asks his Guru if he will ever attain the greatness of Madhu at all. The teacher says ‘No’. Then Bhima becomes upset and insists his Guru to explain why and how Madhu is greater? Then the Guru says, perhaps Madhu’s genius is due to his blindness, as those who lack one of the senses develop an unerring accuracy in another. He advises Bhima to – get back to work ‘since there can be no greatness...without sacrifice, speech interferes for you...practice being dumb dancer’. (45) Bhima who wants to excel Madhu is instructed by the Guru to practice dance ‘silently’. He grows restless, contorts his body into an agonizing dumb dancer and cries out. The dumb dancer...the dumb...dancer ...These words electrify the situation and express the mental agony of Bhima. Immediately, he recedes into darkness, cuts his tongue and emerges again into the flickering light, dancing with the shock of one about to collapse and throws his severed tongue at the feet of his Guru.

The III Act consists of Prema’s efforts to bring Bhima back to normalcy. She wants to place a dead corpse with torn abdomen in the place of Duryodhana to give a kind of shock therapy to Bhima to bring him back to normalcy. As a part of shock therapy, Dr. Prema keeps the corpse

with a mask of Duryodhana on it when Bhima is playing the role of *roudra* (ferocious) Bhima getting ready to kill Duryodhana.

Dr. Prema's fascination for Bhima grows stronger and stronger and she slowly starts identifying herself with Draupadi, the beloved wife of Bhima. Her identification is interrupted by Shakuntala whom Bhima identifies as Draupadi. She feels jealous of her. Sensing that she is drawn very much towards the dumb dancer, Dr. Dilip wonders at her behaviour and asks her to come out of this illusion. He says: You seem as much engrossed in your patients as they seem to be in their own malady. I'm not so sure that's a good thing. It wears you down... makes you behave most unexpectedly. (64)

In the final scene, Dr. Dilip finds Dr. Prema standing with her tresses dripping blood, on her head with the hands of Bhima who stands impassive. With wild eyes she declares that she has killed Shakuntala for her complete identification with Draupadi. The play ends with Prema turning insane, identifying herself with Draupadi. Prema, the superintendent of the mental asylum murders Shakuntala, her rival in order to own Bhima who mistakes her for Draupadi. In her ecstasy of identification, she puts Bhima's arms around her, making his hand caress her hair.

The drama symbolically displays the indispensable struggle between the real self and the self that is projected and takes the audience to the inner depths of mind to show the alienation an indispensable factor in the human life. Bhima the kathakali dancer and Prema the psychiatrist who treats him are the characters that show this inner struggle which in turn turns them insane. Christopher Gomez calls it "self-alienation". When they understand the conflict as the indispensable factor of human existence, lapsing into the inner depths of mind, they identify themselves with the characters they are comfortable with. Through these two characters Currimbhoy presents the conflict between the self and the projected self in human mind which leads to the contemplation of human existence.

Bhima feels comfortable in the dark and feels it difficult to come into light. This symbolically presents the conflict of real self and projected self in Bhima and he retreating himself into the inner depths of mind to find the real identity. As the degree of identification grows he forgets his existing identity in the world and becomes insane in the eyes of society.

Prema is another rare and sensitive individual who is aware of the conflict between the natural self and the image projected. Dr. Dilip comments on the tension in her mind: "I'm not joking Prema. You seemed part of the play. The tension in you was unmistakable."(17) The more she thinks in terms of exercising her psychiatric skills the more she grows restless and is drawn towards Bhima. She tells Dilip about the restlessness in her mind:

No greater passion was there than this stalwart God. I lip-read his mind. It was gigantic. When I touched him, I felt the element of his distraction grow within me. (75)

She develops emotional intimacy with her patient and even feels jealous of Shakuntala for her hold on Bhima who considers Shakuntala as his Draupadi and is very tender to her. Such behaviour is against her professional ethics as dictated by the society in which she lives. Hence springs the conflict and she lapses into the inner depths of mind and searches for her real identity. Her real self is at home with Draupadi.

She slowly starts identifying with Draupadi. The identification becomes complete with the killing of Shakuntala as she is the constant reminder to her of the projected self in the world – a career woman who orders her behaviour as per the social code. She becomes Draupadi now and for the society it is an insane act. Her inner struggle is revealed through her words to Dilip:

Identification. I searched for it. But the other image of myself lay in this world...not mine. Shakuntala interfered. She kept returning... reminding. And all the time I was thinking of what was missing... Death merely came as a fourth dimension. (75)

Prema is equally unhappy with the arrival of Shakuntala. This leads to the external conflict between the two women as both of them aspire to own Bhima. They get entangled in a verbal scuffle:

Shakuntala: I want to see Bhima get well.

Prema: And what makes you think he wouldn't get well here! He'd get everything here. Everything....and more. (61)

In his attempt to draw Dr. Prema's attention, Dr. Dilip too becomes a victim of tension. He tells her: I feel angry...angry that you should think they deserve more of your attention ...than I. (18) He grows restless when he sees Dr. Prema in the arms of Bhima and looks at her "uncomprehendingly" and asks her:"Get away from that beast. Get away from him! Bhima!"(75)Thus the play lives in conflict.

Currimbhoy uses one of the moods in the Kathakali dance "Distraction" it is the mood that symbolizes the man growing mad by lapsing into the inner depths of mind. When Shakuntala asks Bhima to show the mood Distraction, he immediately recedes into darkness and tells he can't come out of it. He invites Shakuntala to come into it. Shakuntala rejects as it is a terrifying world full of darkness and so many masks hanging on the wall. Shakuntala goes back but Prema ventures, she goes into it comes with the mask. She is comfortable in. Inner depths of mind are a vertex. Once you get into it, there is no point of returning. Prema explains to Dilip:

I tried Dilip. Really tried. But it drew me closer. Instead of further. The vertigo...the vortex ...I found myself slipping into the terrifying abyss of darkness ...slipping. Slipping without being able to hold myself back... No words can tell you what its discovery means because it lies beyond ...the point of no return ...when I touch him, I felt the element of his distraction grow with in me. For Prema "Distraction reaches higher than Sanity. (74-75)

The element of suspense makes the play more and more interesting. In the very opening scene one does not know why the pantomime is tried and why the psychiatrist is very anxious to make clinical assumptions about the dancer. The audience may be very much interested to know why Dr. Prema asks Dr. Dilip to conduct a shock therapy. The audiences are kept in suspense in act III where the nurse tells Dr. Dilip that a scalpel is missing. After the conduct of autopsy, one hears a scream in darkness and Dr. Prema tells Dilip that she has killed shakuntala because she thought that she stood as a snag in reaching Bhima. In the end, she goes to Bhima and puts his arms around her. A faint echo Draupadi... Draupadi is heard and we do not know who has called out the name. Thus suspense engages the audience throughout the play.

Currimbhoy uses some effective theatrical devices in the play. He uses kathakali dance as a powerful dramatic device. As Philip rightly says, “*The Dumb Dancer* is a form of experimentation in which kathakali serves literally, metaphorically and theatrically as a source for creating an experiment in which kathakali represents ‘itself’ as an identifiable genre and tradition of performing traditional epic stories...” Light and shadow, music, and masks are used to draw the narrow line between the two worlds – the sane and the insane; conscious and subconscious; external and inner life. By using all these modern theatrical devices and experimenting with the form and content Currimbhoy displays the universal questions related to human behavior and existence.

And the play has attracted a great deal of critical attention, an interest which is certainly due to Currimbhoy’s attempt to combine the theatrical code of kathakali with western dramatic form. “The alienated outsider is a fascinating figure in Western drama. The outsider in drama embodies the intellectual and socio- cultural conflict of the age. He may be the ‘other’ on whom the fears and secret desires of his age are projected and probed.” (Gomez, 2) The central characters in the play suffer from alienation. They dramatize man’s need for belongingness and the sense of identification. Commenting on Currimbhoy’s plays, Fabian Bowers, researcher of Asian drama, has written, “It will take a generation to realize the true worth...of his plays....” It is hundred percent true in case of **the Dumb Dancer**.

According to Bayapa Reddy,

The Dumb Dancer is a swiftly moving play of suspense, presenting a conflict between the world of sanity and the world of myth and make-believe. It is highly entertaining and superbly theatrical, achieving a perfect synthesis of the art of kathakali and drama. Though it is conceived of a pre Indian world, it has a wider and universal appeal. (141)

In the words of M. Pushpa, *The Dumb Dancer* dramatizes man’s need for belonging that is, his sense of identification. She says:

Sanity is a thin dividing line between the real world and the unreal world. The real world is a make- believe world where one has split personality, but in the real world the person identifies himself with the make-believe. Life is a maze and every man spends his time trying to read this mystery. (75)

Thus the play *The Dumb Dancer* portrays the frustration of the kathakali dancer, Bhima to achieve perfection in his art, his sense of insecurity, and his inarticulate groping for identity in the competitive world. And Dr. Prema identifies herself with Draupadi but in the process she finds Shakuntala as an obstacle, and to make her identification complete, she murders Shakuntala. The play ends with the sane psychiatrist turns insane.

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