

### Reflection of Gender Attitudes in *Kathakali*

In comparison to western culture, a very distinct separation of authority between men and women exists in India. *Kathakali*, a stylized classical Indian form of dance-drama, serves as a representation of these perspectives and reflects the societal attitudes toward both sexes offstage and in society. In *kathakali* dance, women are categorized into two extremes: the ideal wife and motherly figure or the vengeful demoness motivated by the inadequate fulfillment of her maternal potential; in this way, South Indian society's prejudices against women as well as its conviction of intrinsic male authority are revealed through the definitive classifications into which females are placed as opposed to the looser designations awarded to men.

In *kathakali* dramas, women are stereotyped into two rigid groups. These basic categorizations consist of either the idealized woman who conforms to "standardized notions of female behavior" or, her inverse, the demoness who is seen as "lustful, sexually charged, ugly, [and] hysterical..." (53). Demonesses derive from women who did not fulfill their societal duties as wives and mothers and, because of these circumstances, wreak havoc on others in a manic quest for retribution. The fact that impure women stem from this model demonstrates the gravity of the emphasis Indian culture places on women's domestic expectations as well as the inflexibility of their roles in society. One such demoness is Bhadrakali and, as author Phillip Zarrilli writes in *Kathakali Dance-Drama: Where Gods and Demons Come to Play*, she "'never marries, is never tamed,' and remains 'independent and unfulfilled' and whose sexual desire can be quenched only by violence..." (131). The prejudice against women in Southern Indian culture is justified with *kathakali* themes because the idea that women need to be "tamed" encourages males to believe that they are doing society a favor by overexerting their control and further promoting the idea of perfect women as submissive, motherly figures in order to prevent them from becoming evil demonesses.

The discrimination against women in India as well as the corresponding notion of male supremacy is evident not only in the confining character types open to women in *kathakali*, but also in the prominence of males as actors and the connotation of both genders' positions onstage. The most unmistakable prejudice against females from this approach is the fact that women are not allowed to act in these dramas. In fact, because *kathakali* plays mainly depict stories of men and their relationships with women, there are very few female roles; however, those that do exist are played by male actors. This simple circumstance, alone, symbolizes the lack of influence women have in Southern Indian culture. As these plays suggest, women metaphorically do not have a voice or opinion in their society because they must succumb to the dominance of men. This idea also carries over to the actual stage because men tend to stand stage right—the “cleaner” and more “respected” side reserved for characters of higher status—due to the inherent fact that they possess dominance over women. As Zarrilli states, “...when Bhima and Panchali are revealed at the opening of scene 9 in *The Flower of Good Fortune*, as husband Bhima is stage right, and Panchali to his left” (51). Although both characters are considered more or less ideal and, therefore, essentially equal, Bhima automatically supersedes Panchali because of the socially accepted preeminence of males. Once again the unjust allocation of power and assumption that females hold less importance in the culture of India is evidenced, here, on the very stage of a *kathakali* drama.

Another aspect of *kathakali* plays that reveals a certain attitude of partiality towards men over women is the ambiguous definition of men as “heroes” and the tolerance of Southern Indian society toward the violent nature of heroic males. In *kathakali* dramas the males are typically at liberty to push the boundaries of an ideal figure whereas women are expected to find that fine line between being an ideal wife and mother and being overly sensual. In his analysis of *The*

*Flower of Good Fortune*, for instance, Zarrilli mentions that males in the plays “repeatedly display an overweening pride which leads them continuously to test and overstep the boundaries of their authority, power, and/or rightful behavior” (115). Bhima, in particular, is described as a “misfit” (53) because he constantly tests these limits both behaviorally and temperamentally. This idea of indistinguishable male categories sharply juxtaposes the defining confines in which women are placed, thus suggesting a more pardoning attitude toward men. What’s more, these “heroes” are supported and even encouraged to engage in violence and war. For men, it is socially accepted that they are violent because blood is revered as the “fluid of life” (131) that can aid in the growth of an empire. While the bloody pursuits of these men ironically connote nobility, power, and the necessary expansion of their kingdom, this brutality does not hold true with women. In *The Killing of Kimira* the character Sahadeva says, “Women who act indecently deserve to be killed...” (126). Demonesses are the only females to perform violent acts and yet they are perceived as unruly, horrific creatures. In *kathakali*, the actions deemed acceptable for men vary greatly from those believed appropriate for women and these male-oriented leniencies illustrate the male dominance in Indian culture while further emphasizing the two distinct typecasts of females.

Overall, *kathakali* plays contain a number of deeper themes manifested in Southern Indian culture. This type of dance-drama serves as a medium revealing the true injustices presented against women in society and the preconception of men as being intrinsically dominant. Just as *kathakali* has existed in Southern Indian culture for many centuries, so have the stereotypes facing females today. Therefore, it is unrealistic to believe that purging Indian society of its current attitudes toward both genders will be a simple or even succinct process.