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Book Review

Impersonations: The Artifice of Brahmin Masculinity in South Indian Dance, by Harshita Mruthinti Kamath. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019. xv + 225 pp., $34.95 (pb). ISBN 9780520301665.

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Kuchipudi is a genre of southern Indian dance, originating in the Telugu-speaking (a Dravidian language having a significant mix of the Indo-European Sanskrit) region of the state of Andhra Pradesh. Dr Harshita Kamath's monograph with its extensive bibliography demonstrate the undeniable fact this subject has been well-furrowed as a field of scholarly investigation. The author's claimed contribution to the burgeoning literature on this south Indian dance style is a 'theoretical contribution' for interpreting brahmin masculinity through the lens of *māyā*' (p. 5). The author is not interested in the usual connotation of *māyā* as 'magic, illusion, deception, or creative power' but as a vernacular category or 'constructed artifice' thereby countering the actual participants, that is, the Kuchipudi dancers who invoke *māyā* for its theological import (connected with the lurid love lore of the folk god Śrīkṛṣṇa and his wife Satyabhāmā).

Apparently, the author's real purpose is to discover how brahmin masculinity (whatever that means as the study provides no clear definition except repeating the phrase, relentlessly, throughout the book) works its hegemonic power out by the brahmin male dancer 'impersonating' woman by 'guising' in *strībeśaṁ* (p. 7). Then Dr Kamath makes the amazing claim that these brahmins undergo their *rite de passage* not through the pan-Indian (referring to Hindu India) 'baptismal' ceremony of *upanayanam* but, idiosyncratically, 'by donning the *strīvéṣam* (diacritics as used by author) of Satyabhama, the wife of the Hindu deity Krishna and the heroine of the dance drama *Bhāmākalāpam*' (p. 13). The author appears to have gone a long way, even out of her way, to posit the unique practice in a single iconic dance drama depicting Satyabhāma's erotic grief or gripe, generally considered a work of the celebrated savant Siddhendra Yogī (*fl.* fifteenth and sixteenth centuries).

The monograph under review brings in a plethora of titles on the theories of gender, feminism, and hegemony crowding almost every paragraph of the entire text with a view to explaining and interpreting a simple and outdated dramatic practice in Andhra Pradesh. But the Kuchipudi example is neither unique nor remarkable. As far as I know up until the 1960s in West Bengal and Orissa, the *Yātrā* [open air opera/drama] parties in rural regions or *Yātrā* companies in urban centers routinely employed and trained men as actresses to perform in their typical repertoire of mythological and historical lore. The Calcutta theaters, however, had begun recruiting female actors from the city's red-light quarters named after the Muslim saint Sanaulla Ghazi [*Sonāgāchhi*] district for public shows since the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1970s onward middle- and upper-middle-class women, even film stars, began participating in *Yātrā* performance on a regular basis. The Kuchipudi repertoire was affected by similar trends.

Thus, there is hardly any scope for importing feminist, gender, or Foucauldian hermeneutic to a drama tradition that in its pristine androcentric form is in visible decline in postcolonial India. In the author's preferred terminology, the innocuous practice of males in female role is interpreted as expressions of caste and gender hegemony. Similarly, the author's understanding of the role of the character of Mādhavī (the *dūtī* or the handmaiden of Satyabhāmā as the male *viduṣaka* (jester) or *sūtradhara* (literally, wirepuller, but signifying director of the *kalāpam*) is a bit obfuscating (pp. 80–103). According to an online Indian-based encyclopedia, *viduṣaka* the jester (though never a buffoon or a fool), is a veritable gadfly and hence played by a *brāhmaṇ* actor (see www.indianetzone.com/34/vidushaka_indian_theatre_character.htm). Mādhavī as Mādhava, *viduṣaka*, and *sūtradhara* may have been devised to economize on the casts rather than deliberately designed to depict the enigmatic play of *māyā*.

From among numerous instances of the author's multi-referencing resulting, unwittingly, in obfuscation instead of illumination, let me cite just one. Dr Kamath writes (p. 57):

> By excelling in the one factor central to traditional Kuchipudi performance—the donning of Satyabhama's *strī-véṣam*—Satyanarayana Sarma establishes the norm that epitomizes hegemonic brahmin masculinity in Kuchipudi village ([Raewyn] Connell 1995). Satyanarayana Sarma's mythic practices of impersonation create the paradigmatic ideal for his gender and caste community, an ideal that is ultimately illusory and impossible for any other performer to fully embody. In their failure to impersonate in the manner of their famous predecessor, younger performers like Venku [Vedantam Venkata Naga Chalapathi Rao] adhere to *normative* brahmin masculinity as emergent form of hegemonic masculinity that is always in process but never fully hegemonic ([Marcia C.] Inhorn 2012).

Let me paraphrase the above indented paragraph with my annotation. We are told that by wearing the female outfit the famous female impersonator

Sarma establishes 'hegemonic brahmin masculinity' in the Kuchipudi village. This outlandish claim is buttressed by a reference to Raewyn Connell's work *Masculinities* (having nothing to do with Kuchipudi brahmin males). Then we learn that Satyanarayan Sarma's 'mythic practices of impersonation' (whatever that is) constitute a 'paradigmatic ideal for his gender' (another outlandish claim) but it is 'ultimately illusory and impossible' for any other person to emulate (how could an ideal be at once paradigmatic and unreal and hard to follow?). However, Kamath's young interlocutor, the renegade Venku, persuades her to believe that he has the ability to bypass the 'hegemonic brahmin masculinity' of the master by adhering to 'an emergent form of hegemonic masculinity'. Needless to mention, this mumbo jumbo of 'brahmanic' and 'emergent' masculinities —the book is full of such niceties—is enough to bamboozle unsuspecting readers.

A much simpler and more commonsensical explanation for the reticence of the 'male brahmin dancers' in sharing their skill might be they do not wish to lose their livelihood by creating rivals. Further, they may be fully and disturbingly aware of the precarious fate of their female impersonation when real women would start taking up female roles on the stage. It's the sheer economic consideration rather than masculine hegemony that is the crucial factor. We need to invoke the political economy of Karl Marx instead of the social psychology of Michel Foucault.

According to the author, the practice of male cross-dressing and make-up to act female role is 'a practice of power that creates normative ideals of brahmin masculinity' (p. 2). This is interpreted incorrectly as a *monopoly* [my emphasis] of the males to enact female roles as an instance of hegemonic patriarchy, but, curiously, as 'highly contingent ... in urban contexts' 'from the mid-twentieth century onwards' (pp. 2–3). The author here unnecessarily interjects banal ideological perspectives ignoring the simple fact that prior to the onset of the twentieth century 'female performers were hardly visible even in performing female roles' (Rachana Pandey, 'Men in Theatrical Performance', 2017, p. 4).

Just to refer to the author's understanding of Kuchipudi male dancer's 'impersonation' it must be noted that the illustrations supplied by the author do not depict a credible impersonation either by a male dancer in female role or a female dancer in male role. The male dancers as shown do not 'impersonate a female torso despite their rather harsh and garish facial make-up, reminiscent of the *Nō* musical drama of medieval Japan, and so is the case for 'impersonation' of a male figure. As we see in the photo supplied by the author, the actor/dancer in the role of Mādhavī looks more like a hermaphrodite than a woman (84), though the author has duly deferred to what Vempati Chinna Satyam along with his students Manju Bhargavi and Anuradha Jonnalagadda have ruled on Mādhavī's gender (pp. 118–20). The inclusion of the photos of the actor playing the dual (Mādhavī/Mādhava) role sadly belie the author's clear statement about the indispensable requirement

for a pretty face rather than a 'wooden face' [*cekka mukham*] (p. 150). By the same token, the photograph of the dancer in Kṛṣṇa's *veśam* and *ahārya* resembles a more naive and pretty teenage girl (p. 129) than the super alpha male of folklore who made love to sixteen thousand cowgirls (thus outshining or outsmarting the Greek demigod Herakles who is said to have succeeded in managing with just fifty females in one night).

It seems the author is not quite at home with the culture of her native land as is evident by her constant references to 'hereditary *brāhmaṇ* families', (without clarifying what exactly this designation implies), *brāhmaṇ* interlocutors (why particularly this caste of 'interlocutors'?), through whom she obtains her information and insights, her first ever bus ride *et cetera*. It is also evident that author is prone *de rigueur* to use neologisms and jargons in consonance with postcolonial, postmodernist, and feminist scholarship. Select pertinent samples of this word play are: *bhakticization* (p. 40), cis (p. 13), 'embodied knowledge' (p. 149) and the like. Then the author uses Sanskrit terms with meanings in English that appear idiosyncratic at best: *māyā* [constructed artifice] depicted in the double character Mādhavī, the female confidante of Satybhāmā, becoming Mādhava the male confidant of her husband Śrīkṛṣṇa; *abhinaya* ['acting' becoming 'mode of mimetic expression'] (p. 57); *sampradāyam* ['sect' but described as 'tradition' and 'tradition of authority'] (pp. 56, 50); *gambhīram* ['*gravitas*' translated as 'strength'] (p. 65), and the most perplexing of them all *mukham* [face] printed as *moham* (see above). The book would be more useful if it provided a glossary of Sanskrit and Telugu terms. Just to provide a single example (out of a host of such others), nowhere in the book does the author supply the meaning of *kalāpam* except describing it as a dialog cum dance performance (pp. 18–19). In this context, let me point out Sunil Kothari and Avinash Pasricha's magisterial study *Kuchipudi: Indian Classical Dance Art* (2001) for an expert explanation of *yakṣagānam* and its derivative *kalāpam* (dance drama or *nṛtyanātya—nṛtta* [dance], *nṛtya* [expressional dance] *nātya* [drama]. The author's neglect of consulting this important work is a regrettable and unconscionable oversight.

No doubt Dr Kamath provides a detailed (though all too familiar) accounts of this traditional dance form including biographies of its founder Siddhendra Yogī of late medieval India and its famous modern proponent the late Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma as well as her conversations with some dancers including, especially, Pasumarti Rattaya Sarma and Venku. Nevertheless, her work calls for a drastic revision. Evidently, it bears all the marks of a dissertation with repetitions of names and expressions. The author's textual accomplishments, quite effective for a successful dissertation, needs further rethinking, revision, and refinement, and at places some re-write to transform it into a proper scholarly monograph as well as a college text. To this effect she is advised to make a planned and judicious use of pronouns and go easy on first person references. Several thesis statements sprinkled over different pages ought to be gathered together in clearly and

coherently crafted sentences. Then the entire text of *Impersonations* needs to be trimmed and rescued from the morass of overcrowded references proffering theories, interpretations, and terminologies of a host of scholars of gender studies, humanities and the social sciences.

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