

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHANDRALEKHA AND MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ: CHALLENGING NORMS THROUGH THE FEMALE BODY IN PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper compares two seminal performance artists, Indian choreographer and dancer Chandralekha and Serbian performance artist Marina Abramović. They both changed how the female body is used in modern art. Even though they came from very different cultural and political backgrounds, both artists used the body as the focus of their creative expression to question mainstream ideas about aesthetics, gender, and politics. Chandralekha used the classical Indian dance style Bharatanatyam as a base and added aspects of yoga, martial arts, and Tantric philosophy to her work to reclaim women's sexuality, strength, and political presence. Marina Abramović, who works in the global avant-garde art world, used endurance, vulnerability, and audience participation to show how power works in violence, objectification, and spectatorship. The study says that both artists used their bodies not as something to portray but as active sites of resistance and change, based on ideas of performativity, embodiment, and resistance. The study looks at works like Chandralekha's Sri and Abramović's Rhythm 0 and The Artist Is Present to see how embodied performance can shake up cultural scripts and provide women and political activists new ways to express themselves. The study ends by saying that Chandralekha and Abramović, although they come from different backgrounds and have different practices, both use the body as a revolutionary tool to challenge and change the definitions of gender, tradition, and presence.

Keywords: Female Body, Performance, Dance, Patriarchy, Gender

1. INTRODUCTION

Chandralekha and Marina Abramović are two revolutionary characters in modern dance and performance art who have used the female body as a powerful place to fight back. Chandralekha came from postcolonial India and Abramović came from post-Yugoslav Europe, but both artists used embodied performance to question gender stereotypes, artistic expectations, and sociopolitical constraints. This essay compares the dance styles of Chandralekha and Marina Abramović. It looks at how each artist's use of her body challenged existing power systems by closely examining works that are representative of their styles, like Chandralekha's dance pieces Angika and Sharira and Abramović's performances Rhythm 0 and The Artist Is Present. In these studies, we will see how the female body in their art becomes both a medium and a message. It is a tool of subversion that questions the rules of culture and the expectations that are put on women's bodies. In the end, this comparative study shows that embodied resistance is a transgressive technique that goes beyond location. For example, a woman's performance of claiming her body can lead to deep re-evaluations of gender, power, and art in Chennai or New York City.

2. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS

Chandralekha grew up in a newly independent India when classical dance was seen as a national heritage. However, this frequently meant taking away its sensuality and making it political. Bharatanatyam, the first dance she learned, had changed from the devadāsī version to a respectable art that fit with nationalist ideas of female purity. Chandralekha fought back against this "sanitized" classicism by bringing back dance that honestly explored the body, sensuality, and power. She used classical dance and indigenous movement practices like yoga and kalarippayattu to build a new kind of physical language with deep roots and bold goals. Her choreography as a form of cultural resistance was directly influenced by the socio-political milieu she lived in, which was a postcolonial country trying to balance modernity and tradition while dealing with gender conventions. She wanted to free the dancing woman's body, take back its sexuality in performance, and bring back the sensory and political aspects of dance that had been pushed down.

Marina Abramović grew up in Yugoslavia, which was a socialist country with a complicated mix of communist collectivism, authoritarian control, and little exposure to Western avant-garde art. In the 1970s, she was one of the first women in Yugoslavia to break into performance art, which was a big deal because it went against both the patriarchy and censorship by the government. In her early performances, she regularly hurt herself or put herself in danger, which was a direct challenge to both political complacency and artistic comfort. By the 1980s, she was working in the art world all over the world, but mostly in the US and Western Europe. The breakup of Yugoslavia and the violence of the Balkan conflicts had a big effect on her work. Balkan Baroque and other performances used the body as a metaphor to talk about war and identity. Abramović utilized her body as a canvas to show how political and gendered power dynamics worked by using endurance and vulnerability as tools of critique.

3. THE FEMALE BODY AS A PLACE OF RESISTANCE

Chandralekha and Abramović both made the female body the focus of their art, utilizing it to fight against and change unfair rules. Chandralekha used choreographed dance based on Indian forms, while Abramović used improvisational or task-based performance art. Even though the media are different, there are some consistent themes: breaking gender conventions, going against aesthetic etiquette, and standing up against sociopolitical control over the body. Institutions and social conventions control bodies, especially women's bodies, to act and look a certain way. Both Chandralekha and Abramović made performances that show how this kind of control works and then fight against it. According to Judith Butler's idea of performativity, gender is not a set identity but something that is made via repeated actions. In her cultural setting, Chandralekha threw off the devout, decorative, and demure parts of classical Indian dance, while Abramović feigned passivity and fragility to show the violence that comes from objectification. Peggy Phelan says that live performance can't be turned into a commodity since it doesn't last long. Chandralekha and Abramović both exploited the body's immediacy and transience as a way to fight back. Their performances made the audience face female agency in real life and in person. This evanescence, or the performance's vanishing once it was done, became a refusal to be objectified or consumed. Chandralekha took the show out of dance. She got rid of jewelry, narrative pantomime, and spiritual expression and instead focused on basic energy, breath, and tension. Her dancers wore very little clothing, not to turn people on, but to show off their strength and honesty. She typically used floor stances, angular movements, and purposeful stillness, which gave her a more meditative and martial look than a graceful performance. She changed the meaning of dance by using eye gestures like the sachi, which are normally used in Bharatanatyam to convey modest flirting, to show anxiety and confrontation. Marina Abramović, on the other hand, made her body very vulnerable. In *Rhythm 0*, she gave the audience 72 things to use on her, such as feathers, perfume, a whip, a knife, and a loaded gun. For more than six hours, people touched, cut, and threatened her still body in a variety of ways, making it hard to tell the difference between art and attack. The audience's change from passive viewers to active participants showed the hidden violence in power and watching. After the show was over and Abramović strolled among them, the audience left because they couldn't face the person they had hurt. This performance made the perils of objectification very clear. By taking on the character of the passive object, Abramović showed how society handles women's bodies when they don't have any power. But her passivity was planned: by choosing to be vulnerable, she kept artistic control and changed the rules of the game. Chandralekha showed her opposition with planned power and symbolic forms. In *Sharira*, the female body was a place of life and sexual power. The dancer's legs spreading in slow, floor-based movements brought back the picture of the yoni, which would not be ashamed or hidden. The audience didn't find the movement sexual; instead, it

was sacred, regulated, and owned by the performer. The choreography was so slow that it required the dancers to pay attention to their own rhythms, giving them full control over their sexual agency. Chandralekha's reluctance to follow nationalist or patriarchal ideas of what it means to be an Indian woman was similar to Abramović's breaking of Western ideas about femininity, endurance, and pain.

4. A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Chandralekha and Abramović provide us two ways to fight back: one is via dance and the other is through confrontation. One is based on Indian philosophical and physical traditions, while the other is based on Western avant-garde performance. Chandralekha's dance was based on her spine, pelvis, and breath. She thought the female form could be a powerful way to show life energy. Her work was based on Tantric philosophy and old Indian ways of knowing, but she looked at them from a feminist point of view. She didn't think of tradition as perfect; instead, she went back to it to find hidden meanings, fighting against the Brahmanical and nationalist connotations of traditional dance. Her dance was a gradual awakening of bodily awareness, renouncing spectacle in favor of being there. Abramović also engaged with presence, but in a different way: via endurance and exposure. Her work often didn't have any choreography at all; it just had a task, a time limit, or a set of conditions. She faced the audience head-on, and their reactions were part of the show. The tension in her work didn't come from stylistic movement; it came from mental and moral pain. Both artists played around with time. Chandralekha slowed down movement so much that the audience had to pay attention to even the smallest change. Abramović stretched time by sitting, standing, or putting up with pain for hours. These changes to time were acts of resistance in and of themselves since they went against a world that values speed, production, and quick satisfaction. The audience played a big part. Chandralekha inspired Indian spectators to think about dance and women in a new way. She took away recognizable cultural signs, which made people think critically. Abramović's work, especially *Rhythm 0*, made the audience a part of the drama and had them face their own guilt. Both employed symbols of womanhood in their art to change the usual interpretations. For example, Chandralekha used the yoni and Abramović used the bare body. These bodies didn't let other people define them; they defined themselves. Instead of being examples of beauty or virtue, they became tools for questioning, fighting, and changing.

5. CONCLUSION

Chandralekha and Marina Abramović changed what the female body could do in performance. They didn't just stand for resistance; they were it. Their art makes us face the truth that the body is a battleground, shaped by culture, power, and memory, but it is also a place of action, presence, and reclamation. Chandralekha's art takes Indian dance back from nationalism and piety by employing old symbols to tell new feminist stories. Abramović's work shows the morality of looking and uses risk and vulnerability as methods of exposure. Both artists ask their audiences to see, feel, and think again. Their legacy are not merely in their performances, but also in the spaces they made for women to move, be still, be seen, and, most importantly, resist.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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