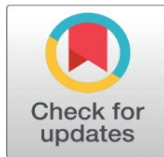
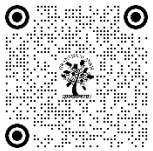


POEM IN MOTION: A UNIQUE BLEND OF EAST AND WEST IN SANDHYA RAJU'S PERFORMANCE POETRY OF MAYA ANGELOU'S POEM 'PHENOMENAL WOMAN'

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ABSTRACT

Dance is an ancient, universal art form that stirs the souls of the performer as well as the admirers. Dance has the power to heal, nourish, teach, and spread joy and peace. In India, a multicultural and multilingual country, innumerable folk, and classical dance forms have flourished and continue to be practised across villages, towns, and cities. Religious festivals, cultural gatherings, social movements, and youth programmes are incomplete without the rhythm and beauty of music and dance. On Feb 2, 2022, the eminent Kuchipudi danseuse Sandhya Raju launched a terpsichorean rendition of the famous poem 'Phenomenal Woman' written by the American poet and activist Maya Angelou and published in 1978, as a tribute to the former's mother on her birthday. Raju, with her co-dancers from the Aayana Dance Company, made a creative interpretation of the poet's powerful words, while adding a verse of her own which in turn emphasised the concepts of inner strength of a woman and the depth of mother-daughter bonding. The choreography largely borrows from Kuchipudi, a dance form with its origin in an eponymous village in Andhra Pradesh and founded in the classical Sanskrit treatise Natya Sastra. Angelou's emphatic paean to the confidence and inner beauty of the woman fuses with the Indian performance art form to weave a mesmerising visual-aural experience to the viewer, bringing in an East-West blend that surpasses the boundaries of language, culture, and race.

Keywords: Phenomenal Woman, Kuchipudi, Performance Poetry, Womanhood

1. INTRODUCTION

Dance is an ancient, universal art form that stirs the souls of the performer as well as the admirers. Dance has the power to heal, nourish, teach, and spread joy and peace. In India, a multicultural and multilingual land, innumerable folk, and classical dance forms have flourished and continue to be practised across villages, towns, and cities. Religious festivals, cultural gatherings, social movements, and youth programmes are incomplete without the rhythm and beauty of music and dance. In [Massey \(2004\)](#) view, excavations from the remnants of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa civilisations of the 6th Century BC have discovered the statuette of a dancing girl which suggests that dance practices have a very long history (p. 26).

Indian dance aficionados consider Bharatha's *Natya Sastra*, an Indian encyclopaedia on performance arts written around 2000 years ago, as the fifth Veda, which encompasses a story of epic magnitude, and envisions human virtues, spiritual liberty and offers divine bliss. In the words of [Vatsyayan \(1995\)](#),

“...through a beautiful and complete language of movement, Indian dance provides the most concrete manifestation of the inner state and vision. The dance, like poetry, music, and sculpture, seeks to communicate universal, impersonal emotion and through the very medium of the human form, it transcends the physical plane: in its technique, it employs the technique of all the arts” (p. 2-3).

Indian classical dances with their associations with temples and Hindu rituals and values have been closely complemented by lyrical poetry. The creative imageries and metaphors in the *kavya* or poem are explored by the dancer's creative interpretations and explorations. As noted by [Gangopadhyay \(2020\)](#), “Artistic thoughts, emotions, feelings depicted in literature are expressed through each and every muscle of the face (*upangas*), the single (*asamyuta*) and double hand gestures (*samyutahastas*), *angas* (major limbs) and *pratyangas* (minor limbs) of the body” (p. 40). The notes in the melody and the words in the poem synchronize with each other to evoke a particular emotive state called the *rasa*, which is visualized through movement and expressions by the dancers. Customarily, classical dance forms in India were accompanied by verses from the *puranas*, other epic scriptures, and religious literature to depict stories of gods and goddesses and occasionally preach moral lessons to the spectators.

In recent times, the Indian classical dance scenario is encountering paradigm shifts not only to democratize the art form but also to buttress certain ideological concepts related to the modern society. By incorporating contents from different art forms like poetry, painting and music, classical dance has benefitted immensely in terms of creativity as well as popularity. ‘Imprint,’ an event held in Delhi in 2019, to commemorate the birth centenary of renowned artist Jaya Appasamy witnessed a unique confluence of the visual and performing arts. As reported by [Sahai \(2019\)](#), the Kathak recital by Gauri Diwakar was accompanied by live art-making performance by four artists who tried to capture the dancer on the huge canvases placed in the circular open-air stage, providing an ethereal experience to the spectators. On February 2, 2022, acclaimed Kuchipudi artiste Sandhya Raju released a dance video titled ‘Phenomenal Woman: A Modern Kuchipudi Presentation’ as a tribute to her mother on her birthday, for being a phenomenal woman all her life. The terpsichorean rendition of the famous poem ‘Phenomenal Woman’ written by the American poet and activist Maya Angelou and published in 1978 was choreographed by Manogna Balraj and Aayana Dance Company.

Angelou crafted the poem ‘Phenomenal Woman’ to underscore her stance against the society's tendencies to compartmentalise the quintessential woman, relying on her abilities to fit into what is deemed as the feminine ideal. The narrator in the poem establishes that a woman's true beauty lies in the mesmerising charm of her character and her talent rather than a contrived persona, tailored to suit other people's expectations. The poem asserts that a woman who exudes pride in her personal charisma is unarguably a phenomenal woman. This article analyses how this powerful poem has been envisioned through Kuchipudi more than forty years later, from an entirely different socio-cultural context. A multimodal analysis of the audio, video and the lyrics is essential to ascertain how the dancers execute the message in the poem. Attempts are also made to explore how the dancers interpret the poem and to examine the liberties taken in order to integrate the social and

cultural plurality involved in the interpretation. The article also explores how the universally relevant theme of gender sensitisation is manifested by using the bodily movements.

2. ANALYSIS

In her short poem 'Phenomenal Woman,' Angelou seeks to emphasise that as a woman, the narrator is phenomenally powerful, and it is her inner mystery and elusiveness that surprise the world. The enigma is hidden all over her body: "It's in the reach of my arms / The span of my hips / The stride of my step / The curl of my lips..." Each of the four sections of the poem describes where the secret lies and how men and pretty women fail to comprehend her inner grace. This beautiful power enables her to hold her head high and face the world with no animated talk or action. Once the world acknowledges the magic embedded in her, they will understand her worth and feel proud in the presence of the 'phenomenal woman.' The poem attempts to redefine a woman's beauty and strength in the context of racial and social discrimination and offers an alternate perspective to inspire marginalized women to see themselves in a new light. Parts of the woman's body like arms, hips, lips, teeth, eyes, breasts, and waist are only pointers to discover the grace and warmth of her soul. Beauty, hence, transcends the physical and resides in the metaphysical. Kuchipudi danseuse Sandhya Raju and her troupe of dancers have performed the poem, experimenting with an ancient classical dance form to convey this socially relevant message in the twenty first century through the digital platform. All these components make this dance video a unique juxtaposing of arts, ideas, media, and forms. The video is a joint venture by the artists of Nrishinkala Dance Academy and Aayana Dance Company, based in Hyderabad and Bangalore respectively. The shooting was executed at Taramati Baradari, a majestic Persian style monument built by the Muslim rulers on the banks of the Musi River in Hyderabad, and named after a famous Kuchipudi dancer Taramati in the 17th century.

The video begins with a close up of the sparkling adornments like earring and necklace and the bowed head of the dancer followed by the voice-over mentioning the title 'Phenomenal Woman.' The title is enacted using the *mudra* of a lotus blossoming and joy spreading on the face of the dancer. She runs pass a few onlookers and wave at them, but they fail to recognize her true inner spirit. But undeterred, the lead dancer, accompanied by her sprightly cohort, presents the graceful Kuchipudi steps and *mudras* to highlight those distinguishing features which make her stand out as phenomenal. Phrases like "the fire in my eyes," "the grace in my style," and "the need for my care" and the refrain "I'm a Woman, Phenomenally" are performed with such depth and grace that it appeals to both the trained as well as the untutored aesthete alike. The mise-en-scene with rich tapestries, ornate dressers and lamps, the grand open pavilion and the earthy visual composition serves as an ideal backdrop for a classical performance of yore; the location also witnesses the confluence of tradition and modernity, of the old ideas giving to the new and a renewed look at womanhood itself. The lead dancer addresses the camera, speaks to it and smiles and winks at it occasionally. Her attire and accessories are in bright hues which mark her off from the other dancers who wear shady black themed attire. Towards the end of the video, an image of the ten-armed Indian goddess Durga, who is believed to symbolize divine feminine energy, is evoked by the dancers in a spectacular visual while also evoking the ideas that women transfer this same *shakti* from one generation to the next, that this cosmic energy is cyclical and that every woman is phenomenal.

The dance video deviates from the original poem on a few occasions. Angelou's poem begins by mentioning "pretty women" who often wonder where the secret to her charm lies. But in the choreography, the narration replaces the phrase with "many women." While Angelou's protest was against the ideals of beauty set by the White supremacism that deemed themselves "pretty" and superior to all other races, classes and ethnicities, the narration accompanying the performance embraces "many women" signifying one gender. But considering the multicultural context of women in India, Raju and her coterie of dancers are probably addressing women of all castes, classes, and ethnicities rather than those who are deemed "pretty" by the society. This amendment in fact throws light on the fact that women in India are oblivious to the patriarchal stereotyping that have dallied with their confidence and capabilities for centuries and that most women are naïve and dumbstruck at the sight of this transformed, liberated 'Phenomenal' woman. They have never realized their true potential. They have never realized how the dominant male supremacy has been clipping their wings for so long. The last line of the refrain – "Phenomenal Woman/ That's me" – is not narrated or visualized till the end and a new verse is included towards the end of the poem. While the original poem asserts the uniqueness of the inner core of the narrator as a woman, the added lines accentuate the universality of female power by recalling the umbilical bonds between daughters and mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers. While each generation of women embrace and caress each other, the energy seeps into the new generation and the final assertion is "All you women and Me – Phenomenal Woman!" In short, the narration engages with phrases and visuals that powerfully augment the original theme envisaged by Angelou. The rewordings broaden the canvas to encompass a wide spectrum of underprivileged women, cutting across different classes, races, castes, geographical spaces, and time periods, thereby fortifying the universal appeal of the poem. Angelou's vision of highlighting the plight of marginalized Black women in America escalates to an all-inclusive and all-permeating cosmic philosophy of selfhood.

3. CONCLUSION

Several studies have authenticated the physiological and psychological benefits of dance [Tao et al. \(2022\)](#), [Sheppard & Broughton \(2020\)](#). The performance poetry selected for study authenticates that the medium of dance when converged with the medium of poetry can have artistic, sociological, and most importantly an inspirational impact on the viewers. Age-old traditions are to be altered and rightful dignity to be won back. In other words, the video is a remarkable colligation of several factors: an ancient classical Indian dance form Kuchipudi, an American anti-racist, feminist poem of the 1970s, the historicity of the Hyderabadi monument, and the personal becoming the social. Moreover, the dance video also exemplifies a perfect confluence of three artistic media – the word, the body, and the sound. The lyrical, aural, and visual contributions of Sandhya Raju and her team augment the powerful theme that Maya Angelou had envisioned. The latter's words are revised to impact a larger community of disillusioned women who have been persuaded for centuries to be ignorant of one's own self-worth, capitulate to hegemonic agencies and thereby to feel inferior. The body is performed through graceful movements to transcend the physical to reach the metaphysical plane of spiritual energy that permeates everything in this universe and to state the truth that has been erstwhile concealed. The meaningful narration buttresses the power wielded through the body and the words. This rare synergy between poetry and dance also highlights

that art is a continuum whose boundaries overlap, and the resultant beauty and meaning is all that matters.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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