



CHARACTER AND SELF IN PORTRAYAL OF THE EROTIC



Eroticism is a gift to Bharatanatyam. The presenting of sringara in a sensitive, intelligent and aesthetic manner blooms with a nurtured performer and audience.

By Vidhya Subramanian

The sentiment of *sringara* is relatable by every human being who has been in love and felt the resultant joys of union or pangs of separation. At this basic level, the intense emotions of two people in love are the simple reasons for *sringara* to exist. *Sringara* is also a yearning that surpasses all others. *Rati* or the erotic sentiment is the *sthai* or foundation for this type of *sringara*, comprising of *sambhoga* (union) and *vipralamba* (separation). The choreography process is the transference and location of this basic human emotion into performance, a delicate development that can create myriad emotions in the performer and spectator. Generous in its offering of sub-emotions such as happiness, jealousy, regret, sadness, anger, and multiple others, *sringara* presents a palette for dramatic interpretation and improvisation in dance. In the art of presenting *sringara*, the performer and spectator must listen to instinct; must follow its music.

Eroticism is a gift to Bharatanatyam. *Sringara*, known as the *raja rasa*, is described in *Samgitaratnakara* as follows: By determinants (*vibhavas*) such as the lover and the beloved (and other exciting determinants or *uddipyanavibhavas*) created by the poet in his work and brought before the eyes, as it were, by the actor by means of his performance, the permanent mood of love (*rati*) is made palatable to the spectators; by means of the consequents such as the *kanta* glance exhibited by the actor, this (permanent mood) is made very intense. The permanent mood, of pleasure with identity, of feeling between a young couple of the highest type arising from perfect happiness, pervading from the beginning till fruition, and filled with sexual love.

Radha is arguably the most erotic among heroines. Jayadeva gave us dancers plenty to work with by creating this strong, sensuous, bold, and self aware heroine. I enjoy the freedom that an *ashtapadi* gives me. I feel unsurpassed joy in being able to express with abandon a love that is almost surreal, the love between Radha and Krishna. Kshetrappa and other *padam* composers present to us some intense *navikas*, while *javali*s give us some spirited heroines as well. In *varnams*, the heroine can communicate her love in a luxurious manner — if the dancer or choreographer focuses on the slow progression of emotions of the protagonist rather than the description of the sought.

The challenges of dancing sringara:

One has to have a strong sense of self when portraying *sringara*. Letting go of inhibition, which is an indication of ego, is integral to depicting characters in love. Penetrating deeper than the skin of any character needs an intuitive sensitivity. As much as the dancer must allow the character to enter her or him, the dancer must also allow herself or himself to enter the character. This requires a certain courage, as it means baring ones soul to strangers. When I am on stage getting ready to do a *varnam*, for example, the moment I stand in that light, I am her, the *navika*, but I am still me. Who she is in that composition enters my being, and who I am colours her being.

When the character is set as a combination of her and me, the ensuing conversation becomes humanised, even if addressing the universal being. Were she to be the only one present, the conversation would be distant. What *sringara* needs distance? Were I to be the only one present, the conversation would be in danger of losing the withdrawal that performance art requires. So the challenge lies in allowing myself to enter the skin of the *navika*, as well as allowing her to inhabit me and embodying a combination of the two. For this, a deep understanding of the lyrics is the first step. Then, I take the entire composition as one long intimate conversation, the universal energy becoming a person in my physical and mental space, listening to my monologue intently. While choreographing it, I am conscious of ideas that perceive her as myself and as the other. I am also aware of the threads that link it from beginning to end. When rehearsing and subsequently performing it, I develop these threads into strong ropes that round out the character in my mind. I see love as supreme among emotions, and therefore, do not feel any self consciousness in its depiction. All this gives me the conviction to dance her with honesty, and if I am convinced, the audience will be as well.

Is sambhoga or vipralamba more challenging?

With union comes joy, but a yearning for more. With separation comes pain. The bliss of togetherness in a Kuru Yadu Nandana, for example, is all consuming. Radha and Krishna have made love, and Radha continues to make intimate demands on Krishna that only she can. Her character is bold, satiated, in command, yet demanding. Does dancing her need me to be all those? Yes and no. Each of us has qualities that mirror Radha's, even if our experiences were not replicas of hers. I am an actor when emoting on stage, and must tap into those sources to be Radha, convincingly. I must enter her skin. I must also remember that I am not Radha, or there is a danger of crossing the line in portrayal of the all consuming love between them. So she is still the other. I merely inhabit her temporarily.

In dancing *sambhoga*, the challenge lies in not allowing myself to be affected by the constraints that the spectator's gaze could place upon me. For this, I must enter a bubble that only I have entry to, but within which, I am visible to the gazer from the outside. In a composition such as *Yahi Madhava*, where a hurt Radha icily refuses to allow the same Krishna, even so much as a touch, Radha is still in control. This is self-imposed *vipralamba* if you will, a result of her hurt pride and ego, although she knows that Krishna belongs to anyone. When I dance *Yahi Madhava*, that universality of Krishna may be at the back of my mind, but in that moment, I am any wronged woman who has been hurt immensely and reacts from the gut. So I am once again painting my own stored memories on to this Radha. However, she permeates my being with her *uttama* nature which checks any desire to lash out uncontrollably. If I were completely myself in the composition, I would be experiencing all those feelings only from my point of view. But since I am Radha as well, I can experience the composition as the other by witnessing her pain as an actor.

Almost every time I perform this composition, there is at least one woman in the audience who cries for herself and for every woman. In *Sa Viraha*, another *ashtapadi*, she is bereft of him in complete *vipralamba*, but Jayadeva cleverly makes the *sakhi* the conduit for the ensuing emotions, emotions that would have descended into overwhelming melancholy had the *sakhi* not been the intermittent go between. The challenge in *vipralamba* then becomes danger of losing oneself in the sadness to the point of forgetting that I am not experiencing it at that moment, but rather tapping into the recesses of my memory that mirror that sadness. Once again, I must place myself both within and outside of her.

Where lies the balance in the portrayal of the erotic?

Every composition comes with its own delicious soul, be it a *Varnam*, *padam*, *ashtapadi* or *javali*. Again, the first step in understanding that soul is knowing the lyrics and their meaning. The *ragam* and musical journey it takes play a big role in my own journey through the composition. When choosing a composition to perform, it is usually something that I naturally find myself dancing to when I hear it. Next, I try to understand the character, as the composer intended, following which, I infuse her with my own emotional history. As we mature, we accumulate emotional encounters; the more we open up to life and its gifts, the more such encounters are translating into a roundedness in character portrayal. In a younger dancer, the choice of composition then becomes very important. If a young dancer chooses, say a *Ninnu Joochi*, it would be a pleasant reproduction of what is taught and not more. The same, when emoted by a mature and sensitive dancer, contains within it nuanced nuggets of layered richness that thrill in the whole. A younger dancer may also not dare to let go as much in a *Ninnu Joochi* as he or she may in, say a *javali*, such as *Apadooru*. This baring of the soul requires a certain indifference to the spectator's gaze, an indifference that perhaps comes with age as one is no longer dancing to please. Therefore, the choice of composition relative to age and experience becomes an imperative part of addressing this challenge. Young or old, if a certain character portrayal doesn't become a part of one's growth, there is the temptation to over compensate, leading to a superficial character portrayal, or worse, an unwelcome vulgarity. In all this though, the biggest challenge is in staying true to the original composition and not battling its soul in any way. Maturity, living in two different cultures, and above all, the many positive and negative forks in this meandering journey called life have infused my thought process with a quality that connects me immensely to my art. I strive to translate this balance in life into my art.

What role does the audience play in the experience with sringara?

The individual spectator, the collective audience comes with preconditioned parameters that determine how each one receives an honest portrayal of *sringara*. Gender, age, cultural conditioning, and life experiences, all determine the response. Art is subjective and what is aesthetically acceptable to one is not always to another. We all know that the performer cannot please everyone. Does he or she cater to the lowest or highest common denominator? Does the dancer cater to all in any way? We dancers are actors who engage in role play on stage. In *rati sringaram*, this role play becomes more personal, as the act of love is not discussed openly, or performed in modern Indian society. What the dancer gives should be an honest representation that is not conditioned by one's perception of the spectator's reaction. I perform to the audience, but the audience does not shift my compass for the character I am dancing. I am aware of the spectator's gaze and receipt of what I present, but I do not allow it alter my awareness of the character I am dancing. My honesty in the characterisation stems from my intimate knowledge of her, based on my research and choreographic process. In other words, I know the character I am dancing in any composition best as she is painted by me.

Sharing this intimate knowledge with the audience requires courage as I place myself in all vulnerability before an unknown blend of minds. The spectator requires a certain sensitivity to receive and nurture such an honest portrayal. The joy of performing *sringara* in a sensitive, intelligent and aesthetic manner is to be shared and experienced by an equally sensitive, intelligent and aesthetically nurtured spectator. This sharing between performer and spectator creates *rasa* — the goal of our dance forms.

“In art as in love, instinct is enough”

– Anatole France (French poet and novelist)



In the art of presenting sringara, the performer and spectator must listen to instinct; must follow its music.

— Vidhya Subramanian is a well-known exponent of Bharatanatyam.

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