

Towards the end of my week learning with Venku in Kuchipudi village, I mustered up the courage to ask him what seems to me the obvious question: Doesn't he ever feel strange dancing on stage dressed up like a woman? "No" he replied matter-of-factly. I was surprised, but I did not pursue it further. We were browsing photographs of older Kuchipudi artists who specialised in streevesham: Venku's uncle, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sharma is the most famous of them today, and enchanting in female costume!

Bhamakalapam, is the item in which Kuchipudi dancers find most challenge and greatest praise, especially in streevesham. In one dialogue of this play, tired of Krishna's neglect, Bhama says to Madhavi, "Oh what a curse it is to be born a woman! A woman is like a tender leaf. A man is like a hard thorn. Whether the thorn falls on the leaf or the leaf falls on the thorn, it is the leaf that gets damaged!" I cannot ignore the innuendo that the line contains, especially when spoken with the hand gestures as it is performed. There are many levels of interpretation possible of this situation of a man costumed as a woman, overacting the feminine arrogance of this character, bemoaning the plight of a woman's life, pining for a male god.

Consider this line keeping in mind the conclusion of the drama- once Bhama rids herself of her ornamentation, she is reunited with Krishna. Divinity can be achieved only once we have rid ourselves of the ornaments that cover us. It is symbolic of shedding the ego, personalities, and assumed identities that obstruct and complicate the connection between the core of the individual and the wider world.

Kuchipudi, like other classical Indian arts, operates on a metaphorical concept of gender. In all of us there is a male aspect and a female aspect, which are two principles by which to access the universal. This is the concept of Ardhanarishwar, of Shiva and

Shakti, Radha and Krishna. One cannot exist without the other. In dance, it is portrayed as the individual nayika (female) longing to unite with the ultimate divinity (male). The woman is the one who pines, regrets, reminisces, desires. Male subjectivity is almost absent in Bharatnatyam or Kuchipudi pieces. There are few poems that elaborate the man's agony in separation from his beloved, or his jealousy at her going with another man. There may have been sociological or political reasons, perhaps related to patronage, that resulted in this imbalance, and the prominence of the female subject. Bhamakalapam too, is written by a male poet, Siddhendra Yogi, but with a prominent female character/voice.

However, this imbalance does not seem so jarring if gender is thought of metaphorically- a coming together of complementary energies of male and female; a yearning of the material, physical being for a union with the spiritual, eternal principle. These principles are personified as male and female, and characterised as Krishna or Bhama or Radha and so on. It could be the yearning for a complement in our regular lives, for some it is the search for a partner, for others it is the frustration with a lucrative but mundane job, or the desire for strength and independence. Neither physical nor spiritual are innately 'better' or 'higher' than the other. They are only complete in their union. But it is the tension and play in their separation that gives rise to emotion, stories, drama, and dance.

I suspect that Venku's comfort with playing the role of Bhama in women's costume arises out of an intuitive understanding of this metaphor of gender, an intuitive understanding that most of us have lost, maybe in exchange for black and white categories, linear progress; unimaginative, but practical, either/or dualities. Streevesham, Kuchipudi and Venku's performance are not based on a distinctive division between men and women, but on complementary principles which are complete only in their union.

While watching venku do Bhamakalapam, I was struck by the ease with which he assumes the role and the unconscious choices that must have gone into shaping this

character. I wonder which aspects and movements of femininity are crucial to the portrayal of Bhama? And how does this idea of gender help in the process of learning a woman's role from a man?

A general accusation on Kuchipudi as a dance form is that it looks 'crude' or 'vulgar'. It used to be a dance form performed only by men. Much of the vulgarity lies in the misunderstandings and indiscretions involved in the transfer of the dance from a man to a woman, and more complicated, from a man dancing as a woman, to a woman taking on a female character. The other part of the vulgarity comes from many dancers' tendency to dwell on and indulge in the profane erotic undertones of the sahitya, like the innuendo that is so clear in the dialogue above, in the belief that the ability to elaborate in classical dance movement such erotic undertones reflects the freedom and modernity of the artist.

Besides content, there is a risk of vulgarity in the movements themselves. The traditional male Kuchipudi dancers enacting Bhama or any other female character are trying to be convincing in their femininity, with exaggeratedly coy glances, overuse of the hips. Such movements can look crude performed by a woman! Male Kuchipudi dancers enacting a female role are concerned with the conviction of their femininity in portraying a female role, but these are not the concerns of a woman learning that same role. A woman's characterisation of Bhama requires a different aesthetic and sense of propriety. In addition, the male Kuchipudi dancer's ideas of femininity, female movement and emotion arise out of a patriarchal setting in Kuchipudi village, where women belong strictly in the home! Women are not allowed to dance. The dialogue comparing a woman to a damaged leaf is clear indication of this.

There are many possible interpretations of the line above, comparing a woman with a man to a leaf damaged by a thorn. The dancer has license to show this line in a way that brings out its sexual undertones, and perhaps this adds spice to a performance. But the most tasteful, and wholesome, portrayal of Bhama cannot neglect the metaphorical

idea of gender as male and female principles complete only in their union, with which this play, and the otherwise anachronistic technique of streevesham, can be most enjoyed

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