Is Subaltern Dance Enough? No; I Feel and Think, therefore, I Am: The Past and the Future of Dance Studies in Sri Lanka

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Abstract **-** Following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, some scholars ask, can the subaltern dance? It is a question worth asking to understand the privilege of dancers. In dominant archives, the dances of the subalterns are not recorded well. Even if they are recorded, they are recorded from an elite point of view. However, it is not enough to study subaltern dance as long as it includes only visual analyses. Therefore, bringing subaltern dancers to the centre of attention is not enough. Drawing on dance studies written in Sinhala and the work of Sri Lankan writers who researched on dance performed by the Sinhala people, I demonstrate the limitation of some of their approaches. In historical or anthropological approaches to dance studies, scholars analyse how dancers look – the visual aspect, but are rarely concerned about how dancers feel – the felt aspect. This paper examines how Eurocentric methodologies dominated dance and theatre studies and discarded indigenous knowledge. Performers' sensory and felt dimensions have been ignored and devalued due to the dominance of textual and visual culture and the methods of analysis that stem from them. Eurocentric approaches to knowledge have historically privileged the mind – thinking – over the body – feeling. Therefore, in research, visual observations and positivist methods have been highlighted. Embodied experiences and feelings have been neglected and discarded as invalid knowledge. In this paper, I argue quite the opposite. I argue that I exist as a dancer because I feel and think. Therefore, as a researcher, I use my embodied experience, including feelings, to interpret performance history. As a method, I suggest using the sensory (smell, taste, sight, sounds, touch) in performing arts research.

Keywords *– Eurocentrism, Dominance of text, Affect, Feel and think, Sensory experience*

Introduction

In this paper, I want to take you on a quick journey through my personal experience, reflections, and critique on dance education and research in Sri Lanka. I grew up in Kandy, the historic city of the Central Province. Although I had Tamil and Muslim friends in my school, primarily my education was in Sinhala. Later, I became friends with many Tamil dancers and dance teachers. However, I am not qualified enough to talk about Tamil dance education in Sri Lanka. Therefore, this paper mainly discusses dance research and education in Sinhala medium schools and universities in the "south". However, even with my limited knowledge, I can assure that some of the points I make here are applicable to Tamil medium dance education in Sri Lanka.

In historical or anthropological studies on Sri Lankan dance, scholars mainly analyse how dancers look – what the researcher sees and hears - but are rarely concerned about how dancers feel – the felt aspect to both dancers and to the researcher. In this paper, I demonstrate the significance of the felt aspect of dance. Opposing the French philosopher René Descartes, I assert that as a dancer, I not only think but also feel. Therefore, as a researcher, I use my embodied experience, including feelings, to interpret performance history and the history of the performers. As a method, I suggest using the sensory experience (smell, taste, sight, sounds, touch) in performing arts research.

You may wonder why the first part of the title of this paper reads, "Is subaltern dance enough?" The history of dance studies in Sri Lanka has been dominated by elitist academic studies, studying dance from above. One thing we could do to deviate from elite dance history is to focus on the subaltern or the dance of the subaltern. This is a path that dance researchers in Sri Lanka are yet to explore. However, going another step forward, I question whether focusing on subaltern dance is enough. While I value the subaltern studies approach to dance, I assert that it is not enough. Therefore, I emphasise the felt dimension in dance studies in this paper.

First, to historically situate current research on dance in the country, I outline some approaches Sri Lankan writers have adopted in studying dance. Then I demonstrate how dance studies in Sri Lanka are taking an elite/colonial approach and the need for a subaltern approach. However, instead of elaborating on the possibility of a subaltern studies approach, I move on to discuss the need for a "felt" dimension in dance research.

Some Approaches Adopted to Study Dance

To understand the history of dance studies in Sri Lanka, here I pay attention to Sri Lankan writers who researched on dance performed by Sinhala people. Historically, the dance of Sri Lanka has been mainly studied from an elitist point of view. In dominant archives, the dances of the subalterns were not recorded well. Even if they are recorded, it is done from an elite point of view. By analysing the history of dance studies in Sri Lanka, I demonstrate that most of the dance studies undertaken during the colonial and postcolonial periods can be categorised into three approaches: composing descriptions of collections and forms, presenting history chronologically, and the use of the colonial anthropological lens. The first two approaches are similar to describing objects in museums.

One of the early approaches to studying dance was to compose descriptions of collections and forms. An example of a study with this approach would be Kandyan elite Mahawalatenne Bandar's article "Kandyan Music", which was published in *The Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* in 1908 (Bandar, 1908). Although Bandar calls it "Kandyan Music," the essay includes descriptions of collections of performing art practices, what we now call Kandyan dance. This approach was later adopted by traditional dance scholars like J. E. Sedaraman (1979), who wrote in Sinhala.

The public-school curriculum in dance presents dance history chronologically. Like the country's history, in Sinhala medium public schools, dance history is taught using periodisation from the "Pre-Buddhist" through the Anuradhapura period to what is called the "Colombo period" (*Additional Reading Book - Dance - Grade 12*, 2018, p. 119; *Additional Reading Book - Dance - Grade 13*, 2018, p. 88). This approach to studying dance history creates many limitations. Since this periodisation is driven by Sinhala nationalist ethos, it has even missed the dance history during the colonial period. In the additional reading book published by the National Institute of Education for grade 13 dance students, the "Colombo period" comes after the Kandyan period (*ibid*, pp. 87–88) without the British colonial period.

The next approach we discuss is using the colonial anthropological lens to study dance. Here, I emphasise two characteristics of the colonial anthropological approach to dance studies. First, it looks at dance from a bird's eye view: it tries to describe what you see as if you are looking from above.

Second, it presumes that non-western dance is primitive and is in the evolutionary process of becoming "theatre" in the western sense. Drawing on veteran Sinhala theatre scholar Ediriweera Sarachchandra, I demonstrate the colonial anthropological approach he adopted, perhaps (un)knowingly, for his research.

Most colonial writings on Sri Lankan theatre and performance have contextualised theatre and performance as primitive religious magic or exorcism or rituals that deal with devils, demons or evil spirits. Instead of taking them on their own merits, colonial writers saw ritual theatre as an under-developed performance practice stuck in their progression towards modern Western theatre. The local intellectuals then adopted this attitude. For example, in his book *Exorcism and the Art of Healing in Ceylon*, German anthropologist Paul Wirz describes some Sri Lankan dances as "devil dance" (Wirz, 1954), continuing the labels created by the early colonist. The categorisation of Sri Lankan ritual dance as "devil dance" is based on Eurocentrism. Paul Wirz's colonial research methodology has influenced Ediriweera Sarachchandra. Introducing his most influential theatre history book *The Sinhalese Folk Play* Sarachchandra praises Wirz. He says,

> My work on the religious background of the Sinhalese folk drama has, fortunately, been greatly simplified by the work of certain European scholars who attach great value to such studies than we have been doing so far. The most comprehensive among these is the work of Paul Wirz, entitled *Exorcismus und Heilkunde auf Ceylon.* Wirz has covered the ground so thoroughly and so completely, in respect of the field he has chosen for himself, that I was able to depend almost entirely on the information supplied by him wherever it was relevant to my purpose (Sarachchandra, 1953, p. ii).

Later in 1966, Sarachchandra modified his book and published it with the new title, *The Folk Drama of Ceylon*. In this book, describing Sri Lankan folk theatre, Sarachchandra states that "many of the plays are still in a rudimentary stage in which the dance has not yet become drama…" (1966, p. 1). Here Sarachchandra assumes that Sri Lankan dance is not a mature art. According to him, the maturity of dance ends in drama, and Sri Lankan dance is in the evolutionary process. This is a primary colonial assumption about non-western people and their performing art practices.

Therefore, I claim that the three approaches mentioned above promote the study of dance from the point of view of the elite – top-down approaches.

However, very few dance studies in Sri Lanka have not looked at dance from a top-down approach. To counter and to challenge the elitist approach to dance, researchers could take another approach focusing on the subaltern. One way to do this is to focus on traditional dance and performing arts practitioners, their archives, artefacts, family belongings, oral histories and memories. Unfortunately, we have not explored this subaltern studies approach in Sri Lankan dance studies.

However, I assert that even the subaltern study approach to dance can limit itself to an elitist/colonial methodology if it relies only on textual and visual analysis. Dance is primarily an embodied practice. It cannot only be known through the "thinking mind." Therefore, I critique the famous French philosopher René Descartes when he asserts *Cogito, ergo sum*, I think, therefore, I am. I advocate incorporating feelings, felt aspects, sensory aspects, emotions and affect into dance and performance research. As opposed to elitist/colonial methodologies to study dance, this approach can also help to develop a decolonial methodology through the body, sweat, blood, materiality, senses, and affect – and not merely through mind and text. Instead of I think, therefore I am, I propose to incorporate feeling when studying dance, because, as a dancer, I feel and think, therefore I am.

I Feel and Think, therefore I am

Although the "feeling" aspect of a study has been suppressed by academic and scientific discourse, with new studies in neuroscience, the centrality of logical reasoning started to drift. Portuguese-American neuroscientist and philosopher Antonio Damasio identifies the intervention of Descartes as Descartes' error which is "the suggestion that reasoning, and moral judgment, and the suffering that comes from physical pain or emotional upheaval might exist separately from the body. Specifically: the separation of the most refined operations of mind from the structure and operation of a biological organism" (1995, p. 250). This assumption that the mind is separated from the body and the body has nothing to do with reason has dominated the western sciences and humanities. European colonialism imposed this dominant narrative about the separation of the body and the mind on countries like Sri Lanka. Theravada Buddhism has also emphasised the importance of the mind. Therefore, it would be interesting to know whether Theravada Buddhism has indirectly supported Descartes' error in the context of Sri Lanka. Without an extensive study, I cannot comment on this further. Contrary to Descartes, Damasio asserts that "we are feeling creatures that think and thinking creatures that feel" (2021, pp. 1–5). Therefore, thinking cannot be

separated from feelings. As a dance researcher, I combine rationality with feelings.

Dance researchers in Sri Lanka generally ignore feeling or emotional aspects in their research. Emotions are so vital to the very existence of our lives. So why don't we consider them seriously? And why don't we consider them when we research? As the philosopher Robert C. Solomon in his book *True to our Feelings* claims, "we are not only "rational" creatures as Aristotle famously defined us, but we also have emotions. We live our lives through our emotions, and it is our emotions that give our lives meaning" (2007, p. 1). Therefore, not just the rational mind but bodies and emotions are crucial for human existence. In general, dancers train their bodies in the realm of feelings and emotions. Therefore, the dancer can adopt her/his body as a research tool.

The study of dance cannot and should not be isolated from what is going on around us in Sri Lanka and the globe. Based on theoretical frameworks in phenomenology and dance studies, I assert that as a dancer, both my body and mind work as the primary tools to connect and inquire about the world around me. I agree with the anthropologist Monique Scheer when she emphasises that "the body is not a static, timeless, universal foundation that produces ahistorical emotional arousal, but is itself socially situated, adaptive, trained, plastic, and thus historical" (2012, p. 193). Therefore, our body is a living archive. As a researcher who is also a dancer, I use my body as an archive. Next, I will bring a case study where a dancer uses his body awareness to connect with his environment and understand the interconnectedness between humans, animals and the ecological system.

Robert Bingham and Dancing in the Woods

Dance scholar Robert Bingham shares his daily dance practice in Wissahickon Park in Philadelphia, where he researched how dance might serve as a foundation for understanding and responding to the current environmental crisis (2019, p. 67). When he dances in the woods, dance allows him to explore the relationship between human and nonhuman nature (*ibid*). His practice-led research, where he used his body, dance and sensory aspects, shows us that methods in dance studies can give insights into more significant global issues such as climate change. According to Bingham, after practising dancing in the park for some time, he felt an "encompassing sense of sensual and emotional entanglement with the woods" including its animals, trees, rocks, and waterways (2019, p. 74). By reading Bingham's article, his notes, or listening to him, we can

try to "understand" what he tries to describe. However, without feeling the experience through our bodies, we cannot know it. Moreover, Bingham claims that,

> By engaging the phenomenological method somatically, as an improvising dancer, I accepted my bodily-affective entanglement with the world while at the same time endeavoring to maintain an open center and allow predeterminations to fall away. I entered the woods each day with an intention to create space for the world-as-represented in Anthropocene literature to give way to an immediate experience of world-in-itself. Ultimately, I sought to integrate knowledge received in the woods with knowledge received from the page (2019, pp. 71–72).

This is an excellent example of a dance researcher merging textual knowledge with his/her embodied knowledge. Here the researcher is using the "felt" dimension of the event. As dance scholar Deidre Sklar asserts, knowing through the "felt" dimension provides a researcher with a different kind of information than visual perception alone or symbolic analysis (1994, p. 15).

To develop the bodily sensibility for research, different researchers use different methods. Bingham practised mindful techniques such as walking meditation. I benefit from the mindful practices I have trained in, like movement meditations, and Tai Chi, when I do movement-based research. However, according to Sklar, "there is nothing mysterious here" (1994, p. 15). She suggests developing what she calls "kinesthetic empathy," a skill that involves bodily memory and bodily intelligence. According to her, "it is a matter of re-cognising kinesthetically what is perceived visually, aurally, or tactilely" (*ibid*). Since we are surrounded by various mindful movement practices in Sri Lanka, I suggest that, as researchers, we should take advantage of them.

Concluding Remarks

Elitist/colonial methodologies dominate (d) dance studies in Sri Lanka during the colonial and postcolonial times. This legacy in the education sector, mainly in universities, has led Sri Lankan dance studies to develop in bubbles within academia and function in isolation. Within such insular bubbles of dance research, they still carry colonial/orientalist baggage. This insular nature of dance studies in Sri Lanka has prevented it from concerning and focusing on contemporary socio-economic and political developments in Sri Lanka and crises at the global level. Most dance studies do not communicate across disciplines. Phenomenology and dance studies have shown the importance of body, feeling

and emotions in research. Through these approaches, we can develop research tools and approaches where textual/visual knowledge merges with embodied knowing and knowledge forms related to feelings and emotions. In Sri Lankan traditional performing arts practices, we have mindful practices. I propose that we can develop them as bodily tools for dance and performance-based research. Therefore, deviating from the Cartesian approach, I claim that I dance, read, think, and feel, therefore I am (a dance researcher).

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