Royona Mitra

Cerebrality: Rewriting Corporeality of a Transcultural Dancer

The body, regardless of its cultural specificity, with its strictly monitored and encoded *cultural experiences* has become a primary subject of discourse in the recent years within cultural studies. Susan Foster's notion of corporeality explains this phenomenon as,

> "[…] the study of bodies through a consideration of bodily reality, not as natural or absolute given but as a tangible and substantial category of cultural experience […] From the beginning, the body is capable of being scripted, being written. In that writing, the body's movements become the source of interpretations and judgements […]."[1]

These social and cultural encodings of the body are essentially an extension of the brain, an apparatus which is conditioned into a culturally specific pattern of behaviour. In an attempt to amplify Foster's notions of corporeality, by extrapolating the implicit presence and function of the cerebral in the construction of this holistic *bodily reality*, I want to introduce the term *cerebrality*. I should clarify that the introduction of this term does not replace Foster's notions on corporeality. I simply wish to acknowledge that the relationship between the body and the brain is one of complex symbiosis, where one cannot be considered without the other. Additionally, for the purpose of this yearbook, the notion of cerebrality (which encompasses the *bodily reality*) sets up the discourse more appropriately.

The body, particularly the dancer's body, has also been recognized to harbor an innate capacity to transgress the cerebral or cultural control over its behavioral patterns through its physical expressivity and *articulability* in movement. However, it is worth noting that the purist view of a dancer has largely distinguished her body from her brain in a fairly Cartesian way. Ian Burkitt elaborates on Descartes' view of the body/brain dualism by stating that,

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1 Susan Leigh Foster (ed.): *Corporealities : Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power*, London 1996, p. xi.

> "according to Descartes, people experience and understand themselves in two ways: first as bodies occupying a specific location in space and time, and, secondly, as persons of selves who are associated with the process of thinking."[2]

This separation of embodiment and thought in a dancer becomes somewhat limiting, because in reality, it is the brain (thought) that is a manifestation of social inscriptions which it emblazons upon the dancer's body (embodiment). Burkitt substantiates this by arguing that the "thinking body"[3] acknowledges embodiment as a necessary prerequisite of thought and its very basis. Therefore, to move away from the Cartesian model and acknowledge the body/brain relationship in a dancer as a singular entity and a symbiotic reality is of paramount importance to this article.

Historically, dancers' bodies have been primarily studied only within their own cultural contexts. This has been limiting for those dancers' bodies that cannot be identified within a singular cultural framework. In recent years, dance practice has seen a significant number of practitioners who are using their bodies to reflect the diasporic transition between their cultures and the disciplines that arise out of them. These dancers' realities are complex and their status within these cultures is marginal because their hybrid condition threatens the purity of a singular performance discipline. However, Homi Bhabha theorises and empowers their hybridised reality as

> "such a form of liminal or in-between space, where the cutting edge of translation and negotiation occurs."[4]

Bhabha calls this liminal reality the "third space",[5] which he regards as a dynamic and articulative "space that engenders new possibility".[6]

Further, adopting Pavis' term, these dancers possess what I choose to call "transcultural" realities.[7] According to Pavis, *transcultural* entities are those that operate beyond cultural specificity in search of finding universality of

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2 Ian Burkitt: *Bodies of Thought: Embodiment, Identity & Modernity*, London 1999, p. 8.

3 Ibid.

4 Homi K. Bhabha quoted in: Paul Meredith: *Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa (New Zealand)*, available from: http://lianz.waikato.ac.nz/PAPERS/paul/hybridity.pdf p. 2 (accessed 11th February 2005).

5 Homi K. Bhabha: *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, p .6.

6 Bhabha as quoted in Meredith: op. cit. 2005, p. 3.

7 Patrice Pavis (ed.): *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, London 1996, p. 6.

physical expression. I argue that while the individuals that form the subject of my discussion are in principle working beyond cultural definition, in reality, they cannot escape the rigors of ideological scrutiny. This is because they are constantly defined by the parameters of the cultures they are working with. Thus, outside Pavis' utopian vision, finding universality in movement is an impossibility. Instead, while working beyond the specificity of singular cultures, these *transcultural* individuals are constantly negotiating cultural borders, social identities and their embodied realities in movement. They are working in Bhabha's liminal "third space" which

> "demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present."[8]

The dynamic, hybridized and progressive practice of diaspora dancers such as Shobhana Jeyasingh and Akram Khan in the UK and *new dance* innovators such as Daksha Seth and the late Ranjabati Sircar in India, exemplify the above discourse within the Indo-UK realm. Working beyond her classical training of *Bharatnatyam* in India and Malaysia, and attempting to evoke the multiple strands of realities that pervade her UK existence, Jeyasingh is renowned to

> "explore this tension between classical and personal styles, alternating between the precision of Bharatnatyam and more waywardly idiosyncratic movement."[9]

Akram Khan, trained as a classical *Kathak* dancer in the UK, explores the points of collision between *Kathak*, British contemporary dance and South American martial art forms through the international profile of his *Akram Khan Company*. His work explores in motion the dialogues between the personal and the social of which Khan says,

> "To bring together a Company of such diverse cultures, experiences and voices is a blessing for me and to the work. It is a reflection of what I am today, which is to be in a state of 'confusion': where boundaries are broken, languages of origin are left behind and instead, individual experiences are pushed forward to create new boundaries."[10]

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[8] Bhabha: op. cit. 1994, p. 7.

[9] Sanjoy Roy: "Growths and Outgrowths", in: Sunil Kothari (ed.): *New Directions in Indian Dance,* Mumbai 2003 p. 160.

[10] Akram Khan in Akram Khan Company website: *Personal Profile*, available from http://www.akramkhancompany.net/html/akram_home.html (accessed 18th February 2005).

At home, in India, another *Kathak* dancer, Daksha Seth, focuses on the evolutionary power of new dance language as found in collaborative contact work. Her work is characterised by the exploration of physicality that arises out of close contact between male and female dancers, resulting in bold sensuality. Seth says, "However eclectic my works appear, there is growth",[11] implying a conscious move away from the preservation of the rigidity and structure of classical idioms.

Paralleling the hybrid practice of several such innovative artists, through this paper I trace the journey of my own translocated performing body, through Indian classical dance paradigms and western physical theatre practice, eventually locating my current practice in Bhabha's liminal "third space". My body's first contact with a culturally specific performance idiom was with *Kathak*. As a *Kathak* dancer, my body was closely monitored and functioned within rigidly implemented confines of Indian ideology of femininity and female sexuality. As a result my body was asexualised. I went on to train in the technically precise, physically demanding and fundamentally intimate art of contact work that formed the basis of my European physical theatre training. In this new context, my asexual body was allowed, indeed expected to openly express my sexuality. In an attempt to bring together subjective experience and analysis of the same, I am interested to see how I had to recondition myself to allow for my body to freely move between training methods that not only demanded the mastering of vastly different physical techniques, but also necessitated cultural and social reconditioning of my embodied sexual self.

The north Indian classical dance form of *Kathak* in which I trained from the age of six is renowned for its artistic virtuosity. Rendered through complex footwork of mathematical precision, extreme speed in motion and controlled and successive spins of the torso, *Kathak* is elegant, subtle and sensual. However, it is fascinating that this sensuality is conveyed through a single dancer's body alone, working in complete isolation. The spinal column of the *Kathak* dancer is upright and the use of the extended arms marks out a very clear personal space which is never invaded. This demarcation of physical space, this deliberate denial of physical contact reflects the post-colonial conditioning of India that pervades the cerebrality of the Indian dancer and constructs her as

11 Daksha Seth: "Search for my Tongue", in: Kothari: op. cit. 2003, p. 105.

pure and abstinent.[12] As a result no physical contact or any form of intimacy is ever expressed with another dancer.

Even as the dancer narrates stories of love and passion, the lover is merely a projection of her imagination through physical imagery and accompanying lyrics. Passion is highly codified and depicted through precise physicality. *Kathak*, like all Indian classical dance forms, focuses more on superior rendering of technique through a gruellingly trained body, and less on the identity of the self that resides in this body. In my opinion, this lack of freedom and choice to move beyond the rigid codification of the classical idiom makes the Indian classical dancer's body a victim of ideological power. Such a body appears apparently powerless against her brain and simply imparts through repetitive movement the internalised social inscriptions written upon it by cerebral control. In reality the body becomes a symbiotic extension of the brain. We learn from Foucault

> "that power not only acts on the body but also in the body, that power not only produces the boundaries of a subject but pervades the interiority of that subject."[13]

Ironically, in recital, the dancer's body becomes the only tool of expression and appears to lose its capacity to think. It simply moves, and in a Cartesian manner appears to embody an isolated existence removed from the brain. Through training, the Indian classical dancer's body becomes capable of virtuosity in rendering technique, but is denied an identity and a sense of the thinking self.[14] The extreme codification of the body by the brain makes the expression of the self an impossibility as

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[12] After independence, India found the need to desexualize the image of the nation and its people, particularly its women. If one was to metaphorically represent the colonization of India as rape, or forced entry, then it becomes easier to perceive the desexualization of the nation as a cleansing process from all things contaminated, foreign; as a process of healing wounds inflicted upon the nation. To purify the national identity of all associations with the profane, the image of Mother India as the non-sexual, strong and proactive protectorate was advocated. For further information, see for example: Partha Chatterjee: *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton 1993; Nandi Bhatia: *Acts of Authority, Acts of Resistence: Theatre and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India,* Ann Arbor 2004.

[13] Michael Foucault paraphrased by Judith Butler: *The Psychic Life of Power*, Stanford 1997, p. 89.

[14] I am fully aware of the critique I invite in holding this view. My awareness of the "self" as a performer may be mistaken as a result of my "Westernization" and the consequent fetishization of the "self." I argue that while my Western education has shifted

> "within the formulaic processes of classical Indian dancing, the free expressions of personal experience has not been an issue of importance."[15]

This manifestation of self-less and non-expressive femininity as embodied by the female classical dancer is an extension of the myth of Indian femininity as propagated by the patriarchal society. Jasodhara Bagchi says of this:

> "Myth is not opposed to reality but its re-enforcing agent. Myths of Indian womanhood act on the reality of the lives of the women of India and are, in their turn, acted upon by the same reality. […] Indian womanhood is transfixed on the essentialist notion of 'purity' that was used in a particular historical juncture to define Indianness."[16]

I argue that it is precisely this notion of "purity" that denies Indian women not only a sense of their identity, but also negates their sexuality. Cerebrality of Indian womanhood is closely linked to the extreme codification of her corporeality. The brain, as an extension of the social conditioning of postcolonial Christian values, governs the physical reality of every Indian dancer. Indian cultural codes do not allow for the *pure* and the *profane* to coexist in the same female body.

Thus, governed by the feminine essence of *lajja*, an attribute of this purity that is inherent in every virtuous Indian woman, in the first eighteen years of my life, my identity never developed a sense of the self, but was a mere mani-

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my focus to the "self," it has more significantly made me aware of the importance, but apparent absence of the spiritual "self" in current Indian classical dance training. In theory, most non-Western performance traditions nurture a dedication to the art, enabling the artist to access a state of spirituality when in contact with their art; in practice, however, this is rarely the case. During my own training, the relationship between the art form and one's spirituality was never intimated. We were simply taught the importance of rendering technique at a level of perfection and through this, instead of experiencing a heightened "self", we lost sense of our own identities in an attempt to imitate our *guru*. A plausible reason for this current practice of disassociation between spirituality and art could be attributed to India's post-independence focus on secularization of the nation and the art forms in a way to embrace modernism (Cf. Raymond Williams: *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists,* London 1989, pp. 83–84). In my experience, the training did indeed negate the expression of the self in favour of technique. It is important that liberal Western academic studies, in their attempt to understand and embrace non-Western performance traditions, do not end up "exoticizing" the spirituality of these practices, but become aware of their secular reality.

[15] Mandrakanta Bose: "Gender and Performance: Classical Indian Dancing", in: Lizbeth Goodman with Jane de Gay (eds.): *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance,* London 1998, p. 252.

[16] Jasodhara Bagchi (ed.): *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*, Calcutta 1995, p 2.

festation of Indian cerebrality. I was expected to be passive, shy, pure and asexual.

With an identity that echoed such a specific cultural history, I arrived in England in 1997 to pursue my higher studies in Western performance practices. I chose to specialise in physical theatre. A genre that is aesthetically explosive and thematically challenging, physical theatre has claimed its own dynamic space in contemporary performance. Primarily driven by a response to postmodernism and its need to deconstruct the absolute, physical theatre principally uses dance as its main apparatus of communication. The hard-hitting style focuses on issues of social relevance to the dancers themselves as experienced and expressed through their bodies. I speak here specifically of the style that is rendered by companies like UK based *DV8 Physical Theatre* and *Frantic Assembly* and the Belgian choreographer Wim Vandekeybus and his company *Ultima Vez* who explore the points of conflict and dialogue between movement and text, the personal and the political and the emotional and the physical. An understanding and willingness to expose one's *self* is integral to the performer in physical theatre, as the genre attempts to "provide glimpses of the dancer's subjectivity in motion."[17] It acknowledges the symbiotic and singular reality between the brain and the body in all its politicised and socialised manifestations through its exploration of

> "[t]he dialectic between who one is, what one lives through and how one makes sense of all that, (which) creates a particularly complex interweaving of identity, experience and representation."[18]

Integral to the training of physical theatre is the use of one's body in physical response to other bodies in space. These bodies share intimate physical contact. This technique of contact improvisation enables performers to understand the use of their spinal column to support and carry weight, to give into gravity to support a fall, or even resist gravity to achieve lifts. However, what distinguishes physical theatre from pure dance is the use of the dancer's body to express subjectivity and emotions; emotions as experienced by the dancers' bodies, and emotions which are manifestations of their own feelings, cultural

[17] Ann Cooper Albright: *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*, Hanover 1997, p. 2.

[18] Ibid., p 10.

conditionings and personal experiences.[19] In physical theatre, personal space is substituted by shared space. Physical intimacy and tensions between performers characterize the very essence of this genre. But perhaps most importantly, physical theatre explores the performer's own narrative, her own identity and self. Ken Martini claims that

> "Contact improvisation is not just another dance technique or discipline. It is a forum for discovering who we are beneath our skins. It is a place where our self concept is questioned [...] It makes us compromise our reality – pushes the boundaries of our self awareness."[20]

Inevitably, with this level of physical intimacy, the exploration and expression of sexuality becomes an accepted part of the performance text. Recognizing the symbiotic relationship between dance and sexuality and acknowledging the body as its common medium of expression, physical theatre encounters the sexual, the erotic and the self, in honest and intimate ways. This is further intensified as contact improvisation uses all surfaces of the body as shared surfaces, including the sexualized body parts. Steve Paxton[21], to whom we attribute the form of contact improvisation, says of this:

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[19] European Physical Theatre was a reactionary response against the somatically idealised nature of post-modern dance which is largely guided by the Cartesian dualism of separating the dancer's mind and body. Physical theatre searches instead for a symbiotic expression of body and mind trying to evoke the vulnerability and the extremes in human relationships. In its lineage, therefore, physical theatre has more in common with modern dance (the diametrically opposite predecessor of post-modern dance) which was conceived to rebel against the aestheticism and idealism of ballet (that in some ways was reinstated within post-modern and neoclassical dance) and pushed to manifest in choreography, emotive and meaningful movement. The emerging patterns of modern dance on both sides of the Atlantic which influenced the emergence of physical theatre, have been manifold. In North America, Martha Graham's contraction and release and Doris Humphrey's method of fall and recovery illustrate the repetitive pattern of human nature. In Germany, Mary Wigman was in search of a ritualistic mode of expression through a more abstracted and primitive form that expressed the soul of the dancer. Decades later, Pina Bausch reinstated the use of voice and story-telling against the need for ritualized pedestrian movement to capture the rawness and vulnerability of human relationships. Over the years, no doubt, these formal vocabularies have become representational in nature. Contemporary physical theatre companies like *DV8*, *Frantic Assembly* and *Ultima Vez* successfully explore the points of collisions between dance and theatre in their use of extreme contact-work and visceral dance technique to embody human relationships and the awkward tensions of sexual and gender relations.

[20] Ken Martini: *Contacting the Soul*, available from: http://nurturedance.org/contactimprov.htm (accessed 1st November 2004).

[21] As developed by Steve Paxton and his generation in the US during the 1970's, contact improvisation – while reacting against the stylisation of American modern dance – was also creating a new space and vocabulary for social interaction. Although Paxton ac-

> "Touch sensitises, promotes awareness [...]. Touch and sex lie in close proximity. But they are not alone. Touch, along with the other senses, integrates our physicality [...]. It is difficult to imagine that while grazing each other's minds in touch and movement we would not bump into some of its manifestations."[22]

Paxton's words imply an essential symbiosis between the cerebral and the corporeal experience of a performer engaged in contact. Hence, to return momentarily to Burkitt, in physical theatre, the performer's body functions as a "thinking body".[23] Thus,

> "the fragile suspension bridge that once seemed a lone crossing between mind and body now appears as a superhighway."[24]

During my physical theatre training, I was hit hard by the cultural context of the West that was so diametrically opposite to my own reality. Here, feminism had long created the space and given agency to the female body to reclaim her identity and her sexuality. The woman's body in the West, particularly in dance, had finally been re-written by the likes of Ruth St Denis, Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman and Martha Graham since the early twentieth century. They cast off the symbolic restrictions of ballet shoes and corsets, and danced barefoot in free flowing tunics and fabrics to allow liberated physicality, implying a confidence and fulfilment in their female form that could only come from sexually experienced selves. These dancers achieved this by acknowledging the potency of the intellect, by freeing their bodies from social/cerebral control and by allowing the body liberated expression. Their brain was no longer a social monitoring machine, but an extension of the very "site of resistance".[25]

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knowledges the sexually intimate nature of contact, he negates the use of contact improvisation as a tool for the exploration of sexuality. Instead he identifies its uses within a socially therapeutic environment that heals and connects people. However, when dance artists in search of new physical vocabularies began to encounter contact work, they recognized in it the potential to embody with great veracity the complexities of human relationships, the dynamics of sexual power and the visual appeal of bodies colliding with bodies in space to tell their own stories. Sexuality, intimacy and power-play then became a central narrative for the way companies like *DV8*, *Frantic Assembly* and *Ultima Vez* manifested contact improvisation in their work. It is in this context that I encountered contact work.

22 Steve Paxton quoted by Thomas Kaltenbrunner: *Contact Improvisation*, Oxford 2004, p. 61.

23 Burkitt: op. cit. 1999, p. 8.

24 Foster: op. cit. 1996, p. xi.

25 John Fiske in: Sally Banes (ed.): *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*, Middletown (CT) 1994, p. 46.

Finding myself in this new space, I recognized the new demands it made of me to recondition myself. However, I did not feel comfortable in this mode of practice. It seemed inappropriate to share physical contact with another body, to feel someone's breath on my skin, to experience intimately other bodies in my personal space. Suddenly, I could no longer extend my arms and safely define my personal space like I could within the safe confines of *Kathak's* codification. I struggled. I found myself avoiding physical contact, and would often try to sustain the use of my formulaic physical vocabulary to express myself in this new context. Inevitably, my Indian physicality did not translate into the Western context. I was not comfortable with the close association of my performing body with my sexuality and was threatened by physical invasion of my personal space. In finding myself in an unfamiliar situation I considered threatening, my cerebral self, governed by my Indian cultural values, developed an extreme level of control over my struggling corporeal self, trying to cope with new movement vocabularies and physical realities. I did not realize that as a result of this, I was blocking all creative impulse, spontaneity and physical improvisation, the basic principles which constitute contact improvisation.

I soon realized that the negotiations that were going on between my brain and my body were being dictated by my Indian cerebral self which refused permission for my body to start imbibing a new corporeal vocabulary. It also refused to accept at a cerebral level the need to re-evaluate my identity and my sexuality, by embracing my newfound Western ideology. Ann Cooper Albright would sum up my condition as "profound somatophobia".[26] Although she uses this term to talk of bodies marginalized through gender stereotypifications, it can be applied to bodies that are marginalized due to lack of cultural authenticity and purity. She questions,

> "what happens then, when people who are already marginalized as being only their bodies enter an artform that is similarly positioned as physical, intuitive, emotional […]?"[27]

To suddenly become aware that my physical and emotional body could perform in a simultaneous capacity, where intellectual thought and the consequent access of emotions and physical sensations were not only possible, but a necessity, was a revelation. I began to recognize my body as an iconic, somatic powerhouse of personal, sexual and cultural experience that desperately

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[26] Cf. Cooper Albright: op. cit. 1997, p. 6.

[27] Ibid., p. 7.

craved expressive agency. I also began to acknowledge that if physical theatre was indeed about the point of dialogue and conflict between the personal and the political, then I had my own narrative to relate through this new found physical medium. My narrative didn't need words. It was enough to place my ethnically explicit and politicised body in a performance space, negotiating between classical vocabularies and contact improvisation, intellectualising, thinking, performing, feeling, emoting and growing through the self, all at once. These explorations of the performing self soon became a metaphor for my social self. The negotiations between my Indian and Western identity were gradually beginning to find a comfortable point of hybridized reality,[28] and I wanted illustrate this condition in my work.

Fig. 1: Royona Mitra: "On Shifting Grounds" (2000).

[28] I acknowledge that my translocated experience as a performer is not unique and that many practitioners before me have articulated both in practice and in academic terms their hybridized reality. I further recognize that to the academic eye, my narrative may appear naïve and simplistic as it appears to grapple with the challenges of syncretism. To this critique I have a considered response. Where artists like Akram Khan, Shobhana Jeyasingh, and Daksha Seth have expressed their globalized identities by experimenting with form, thereby challenging classical idioms and generating new physical languages, in my practice I have chosen to inject the form (be it physical theatre or classical dance) with content driven by my personal politics and my subjective experiences of encountering translocation.

With this end in view, in the summer of 2002 I co-founded *Kinætma Theatre* with my colleagues Nigel Ward and Paul Brownbill at the University of Wolverhampton. An amalgamation of the Greek word *kine* which means movement and the Sanskrit word *atma* which means soul, *Kinætma* became an aesthetic and an intellectual apparatus and laboratory where cultural histories, cultural memories and cultural traditions collided and narratives unfolded in the bodies of performers.

In “Sita” (2002), a retelling of the Hindu epic of the *Ramayana,* as the protagonist I sought a physical language to voice Sita’s story of idealized love, wisdom, rape, abstinence and rejection which has traditionally been largely silenced in favor of *Rama*, her husband’s story of kingship, valor, conquest and benevolent rule. Created and performed in the largely Indian populated city of Wolverhampton, our production aimed to interrogate the ancient myth of Sita, to situate this mythical woman within contemporary India and to locate her role as a

> “‘new Indian woman’ […] a construction which serves [...] to reconcile in her subjectivity the conflicts between tradition and modernity.”[29]

I used classical idioms to symbolize Sita’s isolation, her trauma and her rejection. However, to embody Sita’s passion and her sensuality, I sought pedestrian movement, culminating in moments of contact work. Sita’s story is one of juxtaposition; the intimate and sexual woman on the one hand and the abstinent, loyal and pure wife on the other. The two performance styles I worked with embodied this concurrence. “Sita” became a vehicle for my own questioning of the myth of the abstinent Indian woman. Moreover, just as in the original text, Sita’s purity and authenticity were challenged through her trial by fire, my own hybridized and contaminated identity became a metaphor for a modern extension of the same myth that favors authenticity over hybridization. Chandralekha, an Indian dancer known for her beautifully provocative juxtaposition of classicism and modernity, talks of the importance of addressing the conflicts between internal politics of the dancer and the external aesthetics of the form she uses to reflect globalization and hybridization:

> “The internal relation between the dance and the dancer and the external relation between dance and society are questions that cannot be taken lightly.”[30]

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[29] Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan: *Real & Imagined Women,* London 1993, p. 129.

[30] Chandralekha: “Reflections of New Directions in Indian Dance”, in: Kothari: op. cit. 2003*,* p. 50.

Fig. 2: Royona Mitra "City of Desire" ("The Silk Route: Memory of a Journey"), 2004.

In "The Silk Route: Memory of a Journey" (2004), *Kinætma* continued to explore cultural dialogue in a promenade site-specific performance, devised and performed with local performers in the sprawling grounds of a colonial country club in Kolkata, India. Supported by the *British Council*, this project used as its starting point Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities,* a rich and provocative rendition of Marco Polo's travels through Asia.[31] As the audience traversed through a metaphoric re-creation of Polo's journey, they encountered images of desire, despair, hope, hopelessness and trapped memories through the successive "Cities of Desire", "Despair", "Innocence", "Memories" and "Reflection".

In the "City of Desire", surrounded by terracotta pots containing fire and lying in a bed of jasmine, I journeyed from desire to despair. Juxtaposed against a classically choreographed and rigidly synchronized movement of my two

[31] Italo Calvino: *Invisible Cities* (trans. William Weaver), London 1997.

accompanying female dancers, my own physicality moved from the erratic to the sensual to the violated. Contact work characterized the choreography; at first the earth supported my falls and my lifts, and then the other two performers became a part of my physical and emotional journey through contact improvisation. I was eventually driven out of the circle of fire in despair, not finding acceptance in the attractive and desirable environment where I began my journey. Once again, I had found a personal, physical and emotional connection to the work we were creating. In *Invisible Cities* Calvino writes of the "City & Desire 2"[32] where the inhabitants' bodies are entrapped by desire that finally enslaves them. This tale had translated to me in a very personal way. The use of classical idioms on bodies other than mine was a deliberate choice to denote my liberation from the rigidity of physical articulation. The initial delight of free and uninhibited physicality that had been made possible by my Western training stood for the liberating Western culture that gave me agency as a woman and as a performer. The ultimate despair and rejection from the beautiful environment that eventually turned ugly, symbolized my impure and contaminated status within the Indian cultural context, as a result of my obvious Westernisation. Chandralekha questions these same purist values of Indian dancers and critics alike who negate hybridism in favor of purity, authenticity and preservation.

> "Why have classical Indian dances become so insular and unresponsive to the dramatic social, historical […] human changes that have occurred in the world around us over the past forty years? [...] What makes them resistant to contemporary progressive social values?"[33]

Towards the end of the journey, in the "City of Reflection", encased in a hall of mirrors, entrapped in classically trained bodies, devoid of identities and embodying death, three women traversed the space through repetitive falls and recoveries. Stripped of all subjectivity and embodying a perfect yet mechanical existence, I associated my entrapment within classical paradigms to death, to echo Chandralekha's frustration against preservation and authenticity. My subjective experience of suffocation and demise aimed to fuel the representation of Calvino's "City & the Dead 3", haunted by the reflections of trapped souls of the indistinguishable living and dead.[34]

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[32] Ibid., p. 12.

[33] Chandralekha, in: Kothari: op. cit. 2003, p. 54

[34] Calvino: op. cit. 1997, p. 109.

Where most diasporic Indian dancers in the UK situate their practice and art within the British context, I am yet to find a permanent space for my work. When working in the UK, I deny the pressure exuded on diasporic artists to move towards a hybridized global identity.[35] At the same time I feel an urge to experiment and progress and challenge the notions of classicism by embracing hybridism when working in India. As Andree Grau suggests, my cerebrality acknowledges that

> "Diaspora and home are not separate entities and any line of division between them is artificial and thus permeable."[36]

In negotiating between diaspora and home through my practice, I find myself differing on yet another level from other diasporic artists. Where the likes of Khan, Jeyasingh, and Nahid Siddiqui (all renowned for their experimentation with and progressive treatment of classical dance forms) have chosen to work with the singular medium of dance, primarily in its purely technical manifestation, I have chosen to express through the medium of physical theatre, hybridized in itself in trying to integrate dance, theatre, personal histories, text and the expression of subjectivity through the *self*. Technique in physical theatre functions beyond virtuosity and enables the collision of personal identities and politics of the performer and the world we occupy. In negotiating constantly between classical idioms and contact improvisation, I deliberately wish not to simplify the complexities of my social reality by choosing a homogenous identification with authenticity. Physical theatre mirrors appropriately the complex heterogeneous roots that are me.

Locating my practice in Bhabha's liminal "third space" feels appropriate. This stage in my practice is precisely that: a point of transition, a *rite of passage* between what was and what lies ahead. It is almost impossible to try and ascertain the future of my work, for it would be presumptuous to *cerebralise* in writing a process I am yet to embody. However, I do know this. In addition to straddling multiple cultural roots and multiple performance traditions, I am also straddling multiple articulative opportunities; that of a performer and that

[35] Alessandra Lopez y Royo: "Dance in the British Asian Diaspora: Redefining Classicism", available from: http://pkp.ubc.ca/pocol/viewarticle.php?id=138 (accessed 10th March 2005).

[36] Andree Grau: "Political Activism, Art, and the many Histories of Indian Classical Dance" available from http://www.soas.ac.uk/ahrbmusicanddance/newsletter/musicanddance2.pdf (accessed 10th March 2005), p. 9.

of an academic. In this fortunate space between *doing* and *articulating doing*, I am able to inject intellect and cerebrality into my practice, while simultaneously listening to my body when attempting to document its journey through the "third space". In doing so I am attempting to reinstate the dancer as a *thinking body* who embodies and articulates thought, history and experience through her art.

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