

***La Bayadère's* Nikiya vs. the Indian Hereditary Dancing Caste**

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From the temple door, the High Brahmin watches the woman he loves, temple dancer Nikiya, swear eternal love to the warrior Solor. Shadows from the flames of the Sacred Fire flicker across the High Brahmin's face as he swears revenge on Solor. Unbeknownst to the lovers, the Rajah has decided to reward Solor with marriage to his daughter, Gamzatti, vowing to end Nikiya when the High Brahmin tells him of the love affair. When Nikiya refuses to give up her love and attempts to kill Gamzatti in anguish, the princess plots to murder the bayadère. Her plan succeeds, as a poisonous snake hidden in a basket of flowers bites and kills Nikiya while she performs at Solor and Gamzatti's betrothal ceremonies. In his agony over the loss of his love, Solor smokes opium, dreaming of Nikiya and other bayadère spirits in the Kingdom of the Shades. Later, Nikiya's shade lingers at Solor and Gamzatti's wedding. To avenge Nikiya, the gods destroy the temple, killing all of its inhabitants and reuniting the lovers in death.

A dramatic tale of love and loss in an exotic land unexplored by its audiences: *La Bayadère* has survived the test of time, remaining a time capsule of nineteenth-century Orientalist sentiment in concert dance today. One of many of Marius Petipa's celebrated works, *La Bayadère* premiered on January 23, 1877, in the Bolshoi Theater in St. Petersburg, Russia.¹ Indian Bharatanatyam dancers inspired *La Bayadère*'s title role of the Indian temple dancer, Nikiya. Europe's primary exposure to this classical dance form occurred in 1838, when a troupe of Bharatanatyam dancers visited Paris on a tour of Europe, leading to several (the majority French) choreographers' Western adaptations in ballet.² But these Western recreations of Indian culture all too often misconstrued reality with a fantasized Oriental world, including Nikiya's departure from classical Bharatanatyam dance. Through the lens of India's colonial history and comparisons to Bharatanatyam dance, these discrepancies illuminate European attempts to

¹ Lynn Garafola, *Russian Ballet in the Age of Petipa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 84.

² Molly Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage," *Victorian Literature and Culture* vol. 42, no. 3 (2014): 509-534. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150314000126>.

“civilize” this hereditary caste of Indian women. The Westernization of Nikiya ultimately represents the Western world’s attempt to indulge in the Indian Orient while simultaneously rewriting Indian history. In this essay, I will argue that Nikiya’s character symbolizes Western pursuits of “civilizing” Bharatanatyam dance for the consumption of white audiences.

First and foremost, it is important to define the key terms that I will use to describe Bharatanatyam dancers. The widely used term “devadasi” originates in Orientalist Sanskrit scholarship that was used to accuse Bharatanatyam dancers of prostitution in the late 1800s: a claim that could not have be further from the truth (Pillai 13). New laws aiming to decrease sex work stigmatized the courtesan caste’s hereditary practice through this renaming (Pillai 13). This stigma ultimately altered the future of Bharatanatyam dance and now inflicts violence, intergenerational trauma and “dissuades women from engaging in both their hereditary dance form and its critical history” (Pillai 14). Due to these sexist and Orientalist histories and implications as well as the violence they cause, I will use terms such as “hereditary dancing caste” and “courtesans,” as suggested by Nrithya Pillai, to describe Bharatanatyam dancers.

Similarly, I would like to specify the genre of Bharatanatyam dance archival footage I will use for movement descriptions, since no footage exists of Bharatanatyam dance from the nineteenth century. Today, two dominant Bharatanatyam styles exist : the Tanjore style developed by Tanjore Balasaraswati, and Rukmini Devi’s *Kalakshetra* school.³ Devi believed that Bharatanatyam dance “needed to be cleaned up, purified, and handed over to ‘women of quality.’”⁴ By “fixing” Bharatanatyam and delivering it to middle and upper class women, Devi became complicit in the stigma placed on the classical form through colonization (O’Shea 47). Balasaraswati, on the other hand, inherited the dance form, as most courtesans did, which

³ Janet O’Shea, “‘Traditional’ Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretative Communities,” *Asian Theatre Journal* vol. 15, no. 1 (2008): 46.

⁴ O’Shea, “‘Traditional’ Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretative Communities,” 47.

encouraged her to promote and uphold the traditions of her ancestors.⁵ Because of this commitment to maintaining the authenticity of the hereditary dance practice, I have used archival footage of the Tanjore style of Bharatanatyam dance in my research.

So what is the historical significance of the hereditary dancing caste? According to the Hindu parable, Lord Shiva—god of the dance of bliss—comes down to earth disguised as a pilgrim and wins the love of a woman named Sati. Playing dead, he puts Sati to the test: if she sacrifices herself for Shiva, he will grant her immortality.⁶ Her love for Shiva proves strong as she passes his test, becoming the first courtesan.

Courtesans performed in Indian temples and courts, paid with grants from the upper class and the king, who had to approve of aspiring dancers.⁷ Their religious status granted them divine marriage to a god instead of eternal devotion to a man, allowing the women to resist the typical expectation of chastity for Hindu women.⁸ Liaisons were typically with high status men: Brahmins or elites who funded the temples.⁹ Any children born of these sexual interactions were considered legitimate and belonged to the courtesan mother.¹⁰ Sexual autonomy was not the only privilege granted to courtesans; they were the few women allowed an education, property rights, and they were the dominant figure of the family.¹¹ The courtesan acted as “the vital link between the god, the temple, the priest, and the street,” with her only domestic duties being for her divine husband.¹² The hereditary dancing caste performed at and blessed arati and rite of passage

⁵ O’Shea, “‘Traditional’ Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretative Communities,” 48.

⁶ Engelhardt, “The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage.”

⁷ O’Shea, “‘Traditional’ Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretative Communities,” 49.

⁸ O’Shea, “‘Traditional’ Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretative Communities,” 49.

⁹ Engelhardt, “The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage.”

¹⁰ Jeffrey L. Spear and Avanthi Meduri, “Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2004): 435-448,

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/199553179?accountid=14663&parentSessionId=TzwToIHW0MmWnIJDpACEDDTZcpbh2RUbm9WFRh5ujqY%3D>

¹¹ O’Shea, “‘Traditional’ Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretative Communities,” 50.

¹² Spear and Meduri, “Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West.”

ceremonies such as weddings.¹³ Yet, the courtesan's talent did not stop at dancing; she sang, acted, and played instruments in numerous different contexts and genres.¹⁴ Funeral practices only illuminated the courtesan's significance in society and Hinduism, as "her pyre was lit by temple fire," and the "god's own cloth" covered her.¹⁵

But how did this prominent role in Indian society make its way into Western contexts and interests? Decades before Marius Petipa's ballet, European theater-goers indulged in the exotic presentations of India. Marie Taglioni and Pauline Duvernay both performed as the "bayadère" in *Le Dieu et la Bayadère*, choreographed by Filippo Taglioni during the 1830s.¹⁶ The ballet drew inspiration from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The God and the Dancing Girl* (*Der Gott und die Bajadere*), a poem that illustrated Goethe's Indian fantasy.¹⁷ It is important to note that Goethe never traveled to India himself, rather, his knowledge of courtesans came from Pierre Sonnerat's travel logs entitled *Voyage to the East Indies and China*.¹⁸ Orientalist literature provided Goethe with the legends of Shiva and Sati, but he managed to sculpt the courtesan as a prostitute. Goethe's poem and *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* both diverge from the importance of the hereditary dancing caste in Hinduism and instead focus on the "romantic ideal(s)" of a woman earning her place in the afterlife through sacrifice. By removing the religious significance of the hereditary dancing caste and downgrading the courtesan to a sinful prostitute, Goethe and his influencees behind *Le Dieu et la Bayadère* reinforce the Western attitude that colonization civilized Indian culture.¹⁹

¹³ Spear and Meduri, "Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West."

¹⁴ Spear and Meduri, "Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West."

¹⁵ Spear and Meduri, "Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West."

¹⁶ Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage."

¹⁷ Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage."

¹⁸ Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage."

¹⁹ Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage."

Despite these imagined tales of Indian courtesans, the West encountered dancers from the actual hereditary dancing caste in 1838 when a troupe of Bharatanatyam dancers “affiliated with the Perumal temple of Thiruvanthipuram in Pondicherry, India” performed at the British Adelphi Theater, ran by Frederick Yates, for fourteen weeks.²⁰ Most records of this visit lie in the fabrications and exaggerations of newspapers such as the *Morning Chronicle*, *Times*, and *Morning Post*, which claim to recount every step of the troupe’s stay in London.²¹ This publicity worked, as the public packed the theater on opening night to see the real “bayadères” so often portrayed in ballets. However, critics, afraid of losing the appeal of the romanticized Western versions of courtesans, avoided providing movement descriptions of the dancers and instead focused on their “exotic” makeup and dress.²² In this way, critics could continue to sculpt a Westernized version of Bharatanatyam dance devoid of the significant religious and social contexts of Indian courtesan culture. Perhaps one of the most important of these critics is Theophile Gautier, who later choreographed his own fantasy of India in *La Peri*.²³ Yates himself prevented audiences from seeing the troupe as anything other than a spectacle that would turn him over a large profit by strategically placing their performances in the middle of Orientalist plays, ballets, etc. such as *The Widow of Malabar*.²⁴ Yates also refused to provide programs for his audiences that would describe the significance of courtesans and the various intricate gestures and movements they performed.²⁵

French ballets and French choreographers, like Marius Petipa, in particular had a tendency to mystify courtesans and neglect the true nature of their role in Indian society and

²⁰ Engelhardt, “The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage.”

²¹ Engelhardt, “The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage.”

²² Engelhardt, “The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage.”

²³ Amanda Lee, “Péris and Devadasis in Paris: Orientalist Ballet as Poetic Translation,” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* vol. 41, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/08905495.2019.1539588>.

²⁴ Engelhardt, “The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage.”

²⁵ Engelhardt, “The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage.”

Hinduism. Engelhardt links this disinterest in the reality of Indian culture to France's loss of India as a colony to the British in 1763 with the Treaty of Paris.²⁶ This lack of access to India created a roadblock between French and Indian society, making India "too different for the French subconscious to assimilate, and so became enshrouded with mystery and romance."²⁷ In the case of *La Bayadère*, this mystification of courtesans spread from France to Russia, creating a legacy of falsehood that has survived with *La Bayadère*.

Marius Petipa did not come to St. Petersburg, Russia from Paris in 1847 with his own name. Rather, his brother, Lucien Petipa, used his fame as Albrect in the original production of *Giselle* and other distinguished performances to arrange a position with the Russian Imperial Theaters for Marius.²⁸ Marius Petipa worked his way up the ladder of authority at the Russian Imperial Theaters, taking fifteen years before his first truly successful work, *The Pharaoh's Daughter*, debuted in 1862.²⁹ The success allowed him to become co-ballet master with Saint-Leon, and he became the single authority in 1869.³⁰ Throughout his career, Petipa never learned the Russian language to establish a "mark of prestige," while also "carefully preserv[ing] and cultivat[ing] his ties to the French capital."³¹ His devotion to French values as a way to set European civilization apart and above his "Oriental" setting was not only present in his spoken language, but also in his ballets: *The Pharaoh's Daughter*, *The Nutcracker*, and *La Bayadère*.

Ekaterina Vazem originally performed as *La Bayadère*'s Nikiyia in 1877. She was a white, Russian ballerina who inspired Petipa's creation of the lead female.³² But how could a white woman with no recorded experience or training in Bharatanatyam dance have influenced

²⁶ Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage."

²⁷ Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage."

²⁸ Jennifer Homans, "Tsars of Dance: Imperial Russian Classicism," in *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010), 265.

²⁹ Homans, "Tsars of Dance: Imperial Russian Classicism," 265.

³⁰ Homans, "Tsars of Dance: Imperial Russian Classicism," 267.

³¹ Homans, "Tsars of Dance: Imperial Russian Classicism," 266.

³² Garafola, *Russian Ballet in the Age of Petipa*. 84.

the creation of a courtesan living in India? The simple answer is that she did not: Nikiya's plot, costuming, and choreography vastly differ from that of Bharatanatyam dancers.

Molly Engelhardt uses newspaper articles and the notes of critics from the Pondicherry troupe's tour in Europe in 1838 to describe the dancers' costuming. The women danced in bare feet, wore jewelry on their wrists, ankles, and necks, and had multiple body piercings.³³ Their gums were dyed blue and their teeth outlined and they wore several other decorative garments such as ankle bells.³⁴ Bharatanatyam dancers wear a vibrant multicolored dress called a sari which includes pant legs connected between the legs by a pleated fabric. However, Vincent Warren describes the ballerinas performing Nikiya as wearing "short ruffled tutus and toes shoes" (Warren 103).³⁵ Although several illustrations of ballerinas performing as courtesans from *Yearning for the Spiritual Ideal: The Influence of India on Western Dance 1626-2003* depict the dancers wearing jewelry like their Indian inspirations, wearing strictly Western costumes and performing en pointe creates a visible display of a "civilized" courtesan. This Western version of a courtesan allowed the white audience to care for and invest in the exoticism of Nikiya's story rather than feel unsettled by the actuality of the non-Western conforming Indian hereditary dancing caste. Even modern performances of *La Bayadère* have Nikiya wearing a sexualized version of the Sari, as displayed in the Bolshoi Theater's 2013 production of the ballet. Svetlana Zakharova wears red pants with slits to display her legs and a jeweled bra top during Nikiya's iconic death scene. This display of skin emphasizes the West's sexualization of the exotic Indian hereditary dancing caste, especially in the claims that the courtesans were prostitutes.

³³ Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage."

³⁴ Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage."

³⁵ Vincent Warren, "Yearning for the Spiritual Ideal: The Influence of India on Western Dance 1626-2003," *Dance Research Journal* vol. 38, no. 1 (2006): 103, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20444666>.

Not only does Nikiya's costuming contrast that of courtesans, but her plot line also consists of several inconsistencies. For example, as courtesans are divinely wed only to Shiva, if Nikiya were a correct portrayal of a courtesan she would not have sworn eternal love to Solor even if their relationship would be acceptable by Indian society. However, the most significant deviation from the Hindu and Indian background of courtesans lies in *La Bayadère*'s most notorious scene: "The Kingdom of the Shades."

Petipa's inspiration for the "Kingdom of the Shades" was Dante's *Paradiso* in *The Divine Comedy*.³⁶ Thus, although technically Solor's opium dream and not an actual depiction of the afterlife, the "Kingdom of the Shades" brings the Christian belief of a Heaven and Hell on stage. Hinduism, in contrast, does not have a Heaven or a Hell. The religion teaches that the soul goes through an endless cycle of reincarnation, meaning that Nikiya's soul would be born in another body rather than appear in any heaven.³⁷ Creating a Christian heaven onstage rather than an accurate display of the Hindu beliefs practiced by courtesans connects to the legacy of colonization in which Europeans tried to spread Christianity in an attempt to civilize their colonies. Christianizing a Hindu tradition for white audiences reinforces the concept of Western cultural dominance.

Even Nikiya's physical choreography varies significantly from that of Bharatanatyam dance. Engelhardt uses newspaper articles and critical reviews from the Pondicherry tour to describe Bharatanatyam dance. Courtesans used their feet to accompany the rhythm of their music by stomping into the floor and using the bells on their ankles.³⁸ The mode of expression was through the "eyes, fingers, cheek, mouth, neck and nose."³⁹ In fact, Bharatanatyam consists of

³⁶ Homans, "Tsars of Dance: Imperial Russian Classicism," 269.

³⁷ "Short Answers to Real Questions about Hinduism," Hindu American Foundation, Mittun, December 18, 2020, <https://www.hinduamerican.org/hinduism-short-answers-real-questions>.

³⁸ Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage."

³⁹ Engelhardt, "The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage."

an intricate vocabulary of movements: thirty-one single hand gestures, twenty-seven combined hand gestures, nine facial expressions, twenty-four movements of the head, twenty-six eye movements, six eyebrow movements, and four neck movements that can be combined with footwork, music, and each other.⁴⁰ Each of these specific moves has a specific meaning to go with it. For example, looking up and down with the eyes represents “anger, or friendly invitation.”⁴¹

A documentary on Tanjore Balasaraswati displays young women practicing traditional Bharanatyam dance at the Balasaraswati Classical BharataNatyam School. Five girls, knees bent, repeatedly tap their heels on the floor with the toes facing towards their sides. While their heels stomp to an unheard rhythm, their upper bodies perform a choreography.⁴² Their hands placed a few inches in front of the sternum, elbows supported to the sides as if resting on a high countertop. Each dancer has their thumb and ring finger touching, forming an O shape while the pinky, middle, and pointer finger curve, each one higher than the other. The girls reach first their right then left arm back behind them, with their head following to look at the hand. Then, the right arm sweeps to the side and upward, the elbow slightly folding and the head looking at the hand throughout the journey. At the peak of the sweep, when the arm is above the head, the wrist flexes as the arm returns to the position in front of the sternum and the same movement repeats on the left. The entirety of their choreography follows this complex and detailed structure of a rhythmic lower body supporting the dynamics of the upper body movement. Each movement is intentional and clean as each dancer performs the same head, finger, and arm gestures in a sharp, swift manner.

⁴⁰ Engelhardt, “The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage.”

⁴¹ Engelhardt, “The Real Bayadère Meets the Ballerina on the Western Stage.”

⁴² *T. Balasaraswati Documentary - Youtube*, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibSmDqm-k3o>.

Nikiya's performance at Solor and Gamzatti betrothal ceremonies, on the other hand, begins with the "temple dancer" facing away from her lover, left hand clutching her heart, the right draped across her forehead in a look of despair.⁴³ Her arms slowly melt down to her sides as she steps forward, toe-ball-heel, with her knees and toes facing outward. String instruments begin to play a somber melody while Nikiya, looking at the ground, *rond de jambes* her back leg to the front, crossing it over the other. She lifts her right arm to a fifth position and leans her torso to the right and repeats on the left side. Her crossed leg cuts to a *coupe* to *pas de cheval* onto the box of her *pointe* shoes while her arms flip and lift above her head, wrists crossed over each other and palms flat against the other. She repeats this twice more before taking small steps on her box towards Solor and Gamzatti, and, with a *pique*, she pops onto an *arabesque*. Nikiya runs into a *tour jete* jump, falls into the floor in a *pigeon* pose, and bends backwards while placing her arms in the same hand on heart and forehead position of the beginning. The entirety of her performance consists of this ballet vocabulary, displays of flexibility (particularly in the back), floorwork, *pointework*, and large jumps.

Although *La Bayadère* is a ballet, the only choreographed reference to the fact that Nikiya is not actually supposed to be a European woman is in her slight deviations from ballet technique such as isolating her hips and placing her arms into the stereotypical Indian palm to palm gesture instead of a fifth position. Courtesans do not value the European aesthetics of linear lines and flexibility. Rather, their upper bodies remain strong and upright rather than bending forwards or backwards, and their upper and lower limbs act as separate entities rather than fluidly moving together as in ballet. They place emphasis on the heels rather than the toes, and do not go to the floor as Nikiya did numerous times in *La Bayadère*. So, if Nikiya is supposed to

⁴³ *La Bayadere, Bolshoi Theater, 2013, 2021*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vM3E_tURxAM&t=4855s.

be a courtesan, why is she performing four jetes and arabesques? Why is there little to no reference of the aesthetics of Bharanatyam dance, or the intricate meanings behind each gesture?

In part, Nikiya's obvious contrast from Bharanatyam dance acted as a bridge between classical Indian dance and European values. If a show marketed as a ballet suddenly had Indian dancers with piercings and metal clanking jewelry performing Bharanatyam, then the audience would have been shocked by the vast difference between ballet and the actual courtesans. Westernizing Nikiya through her costuming, plotline, and choreography created an acceptably Orientalized version of the courtesan for Marius Petipa and the other creators of *La Bayadère*, ensuring that their audience would be intrigued, but not appalled.

However, this palatable version was not at the benefit or consideration of courtesans. Nikiya was not a mode of educating the Western world on the complexities of Indian culture or Hinduism, nor was she meant to earn the hereditary dancing caste the respectability it deserved. She was a commodity, a way for European audiences to satisfy their intrigue into India without contradicting the harsh reality that Indian culture was not in fact inferior to Western society. Nikiya's hip isolations, non-balletic arm gestures, and the fact that her title was "temple dancer" were enough deviation from the ballet aesthetic to be considered mysterious and, thus, Indian. Had Nikiya been an accurate portrayal of the hereditary dancing caste in India, then the questions surrounding the mystical India would be answered, and its market value would plummet.

But why, in a post-colonial world, does Nikiya's origins in civilizing the courtesan for the satisfaction of Western audiences matter? Throughout the stigmatization, decline, and restructuring of Bharatanatyam dance that began in the late 1800s, *La Bayadère* became an integral piece of the Western concert dance canon; it is still performed by the largest ballet companies in the world. Due to stigmatization of the hereditary dancing caste in the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries, Bharatanatyam has fallen through the cracks of contemporary Western relevancy. This lack of representation in historical and performance contexts has left *La Bayadère*'s inaccurate, canonized re-creation of the courtesan as the most accessible exposure to Bharatanatyam for Western audiences. Thus, the continued performances of *La Bayadère* and the unchanged inaccuracy of Nikiya carries on the ideology that there exists a civilized West and a "savage other." Modern indulgence in this Orientalist-rich production illustrates the survival of the subconscious hierarchical structures created to justify colonization. The continued portrayal of Nikiya begs the question: Are we really past colonialism?

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