

Evolution of Studies on Dance: On the Sidelines

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 13 March 2019

Keywords

Dance, culture, history, sociology.

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ABSTRACT

India presents itself as a hub of diverse performing traditions such as dance, music and drama. Among these, dance as a subject of inquiry, has been ignored for quite a long span of time across disciplines. It was never considered as a serious subject of study, especially under the purview of objectivist methodologies. The present paper discusses the emergence and evolution of studies on dance and the factors and conditions which fuelled this process. It further specifically focuses on the domain of sociology and its nature of investigation on dance entails. Sociological analyses of dance understand dance traditions in wider social, economic and political contexts in which they emerge and develop. It also underlines the interaction of dance with other social structures such as religion, gender, caste, class and how they shape each other.

1. Introduction

Dance has mostly been sidelined and was treated as trivial and unimportant for a considerable period of time. It has largely been explored in fields of anthropology, choreography, cultural studies and dance scholars. It was partly due to its relation with body which was looked at as obvious and often as an arena of women or marginalized groups. Also, owing to its non-static aspect, it was never considered as a serious subject of study. These impeded the development of literature on dance (Farleigh & Hanstein, 1999). Dance, as an area of inquiry, was gradually taken up by fields like anthropology and cultural studies. Sociology of dance was an addition to this set of diverse approaches towards dance later. Dance is still seen to be explored more by cultural historians, anthropologists and aestheticians who have also partially informed and shaped theoretical framework of Sociology of dance.

The emphasis of anthropologists on primitive societies brought dance to the forefront as dance was an integral part of those societies. The arena of cultural studies pressed on dance in 1970s and 80s while investigating youth culture where dance was a common phenomenon. The inclination towards dance also developed with the analysis of working class sub-cultures under cultural studies. Dance was seen a significant activity in marginal groups and subcultures- as a means to get sexual gratification, as a source of fancy and sometimes as a form resistance as well. Feminist studies gave a cursory attention to dance, in spite of concerned with portrayal of women's bodies as their major concern. Body is the primary instrument through which dance is expressed, thus central to it (Thomas, 1995). These disciplines affected growth of sociological studies on art and dance which focus on their interrelationships with other wider social aspects. The research on dance grew gradually in aforementioned disciplines.

2. Contributions from different disciplines

The scholarship on dance is enriched with contributions from diverse fields such as dance ethnography, anthropology, phenomenology, movement analysis, feminist studies, dance history, cultural history and sociology of dance. This broad array of fields is based on varied theoretical underpinnings and

employ diverse methodological approaches, however they share certain similarities amongst themselves as well. The significance of context in which the performance or dance or movement is grounded is considered as imperative and is common across these fields. Dance ethnography focused upon understanding dance in its cultural context. Dance ethnography was also influenced from anthropological point of view which focused on dance to understand the society, choreography which stressed upon the content of dance and ethnology which focused upon the context to highlight upon dance. The two main advocates of dance ethnography are Franziska Boas, an American anthropologist, and Gertrude Kurath, an art historian, who employed functionalist approach to dance stressing upon its role which it plays in primitive societies that have dance central to them (Frosch, 1999).

The feminist scholarship has been concerned with historical constitution of the category gender as a way of social categorization and its ultimate relationship with all aspects of human endeavors or its impact on them like economy, culture, art and religion. The gender divide is taken from the biological divide and is so much naturalized that it many times seems obvious. Though dance has body at its focus, it garnered feminists' attention much later. Feminist analyses on dance stresses on the way dance practices are gendered and the way they create gender categories. Gender can affect ways of movement by dividing them into male and female steps, male and female costumes. Ann Daly's study of classical ballet shows that gender binaries have affected dance at every juncture. The pleasure and fancies in ballet through its aesthetics is based upon gendered practices (Daly as cited in Farleigh & Hanstein, 1999: 310). These observations reveal an interrelation between gender and dance which demands some consideration. Arts or performing arts can be viewed as one of the important domains of ideological production. Art can normalize gender via its performative content.

Dance history suggested new ventures to examine dance, underscored important issues and supported an all-encompassing approach to analyze art and culture, which is called as historiography of art. There had been many examples

of marginalization of some dance forms which had contributed to art and culture significantly. Such erasure conveyed that dance could also act as a means of domination and power contests over representation. These forms of marginalization needed to be pointed out and analyzed by focusing on wider historical context. West (1999) brought attention towards new lines of difference along axes such as race, age, class, gender, sexual orientation which often shaped art. An example discussed by him is the contribution of African American dance to American art and culture which had gone unacknowledged. Racial differences mainly affected this ignored contribution of African American dance in American dance tradition (West, as cited in Farleigh & Hanstein, 1999: 338). Dance historians also gave importance to contextual information around dance as contextual factors often shape its historical development which is further connected to larger socio-political factors. Studies on dance, in earlier times, mainly emphasized upon aesthetics of dance, sidelining its political, economic and social context. The European-American theatrical dance is a testimony to this which merely focused on aesthetics of its dance which often are influenced by categorization of high and low art. This demarcation is largely shaped by powerful groups in society (Perpener, as cited in Farleigh & Hanstein, 1999: 347). The analyses of dance historians gave significant insights into the politics of espousal and ignorance with regard to art or dance forms.

Cultural history is yet another field which has magnificently shaped the dance scholarship. Lata Singh (2017), a cultural historian, contends that culture can be viewed as a prime domain for contests over domination. It can also be an important area of research to focus upon women performers in this context. She highlights that aesthetics of theatrical performances has been analyzed enough but understanding them in their wider contexts still remain comparatively untapped. She further underlines the ignorance feigned upon artists or performers, specifically women performers whose contribution further remains unacknowledged. The feminist writings also kept these artists at bay as those were largely written by upper caste and upper, middle class women. Subaltern women have begun to get some mention in these writings but women performers seem to occupy the lowest rungs of the subaltern group even and hence are often ignored. To define the position of women performers also poses a challenge as they are hierarchized along caste, class or racial differences as well as private/public paradigm. They do not fit in the traditional gendered boundaries as they work in a different sort of workspace wherein their work or dance is in public space, subjected to all kinds of gaze. They are often referred to as 'other' women or women with poor character, mostly because they are the public women. Thus, performing traditions offer another axis along which women can be divided and ranked. These differences need to be mapped and recorded in order to understand the social context in which women performers perform and the challenges they face with respect to personal and professional lives. These points have so far remained less explored.

Singh addresses these gaps while mapping the history of courtesans in India. In her examination of historical background of courtesans, Singh cast light on transformation in

their position from well-reputed artists to prostitutes. This transition was shaped by colonial rules put in effect by the Britishers and their following by the Indian elite class and middle class. The colonial narrative considered Indian indigenous forms of art inferior and labeled them as low art and mere source of amusement (Chatterjea, 1996; Angellilo, 2012). They also considered their arts and traditions superior and tried to affect upper-class natives and their theatrical activity. This way they attempted to demarcate their traditions from indigenous ones by giving them inferior status. The discourse of middle class for reform which was majorly derived from the influence of colonial perspectives, also saw indigenous art and traditions as derogatory and low. In such a context, the growing middle class at that time acted as the supporter and carrier of modernity while claiming its own cultural traditions as respectable and relegated the artistic traditions of courtesans as debased, obscene and linked it with sexual promiscuity. They tried to enforce a hierarchy between lowly prostitutes and other women artists. These discourses propagated by colonial forces, in conjunction with those of upper caste and middle class of India, continually shape the link between dance, caste and women. There have been still some laws existing in the Indian state on morality which end up conveying dance as an immoral activity. Dance traditions of low caste women are often either marginalized or are considered as of ill-repute. The historical trajectory of classical dances such as *Bharatnatyam* and *Kathak* reflect upon somewhat similar experiences of their women artists.

In a similar way, the popular theatrical forms like *nautanki* and *tamasha* performed by women in North India and Maharashtra were considered inferior by the upper caste and middle class as women performed them publicly and also because they were affiliated to lower castes. The middle class discourse contrived a strong link between women performers and low caste status, in a way, that it is mainly the women who were affiliated to lower castes who performed publicly and were thus inferior and immoral. The women of *bedia* and *kolhati* communities mainly performed these dance and theatrical activities. Owing to their occupation, they were prohibited from marrying according to the caste practices informed by brahmanical order which regarded the lower caste women bodies as attractive and obscene and thus apt only for dancing and good as the substantial earners in their families. This traditional norm of marriage became a significant benchmark in creating a hierarchy within the category of women performers of different and within the same caste backgrounds. Also, the unconventional workspace as well as sexual norms due to their involvement with different men they worked with, made them somewhat unacceptable in the societal institutions of marriage and family. Many of them wished to get married as the normative structure of marriage assigned them superior position in society. This reveals that the lives of these women performers was also actually quite affected by normative structures of marriage and domesticity. This also shows dominant impact of middle class morality and respectability discourse in relation to marriage, family and domesticity. In examination of these above art forms and traditions, Singh (2017) highlights the hegemony of colonial discourse, brahmanical beliefs, middle class discourse and their overall impact on the status or position bestowed upon these art

traditions and the performers who perform them. Such hegemonic discourses imposed great deal of stigma on these women performances.

Instead of challenging the conventional boundaries, women artists in many dance performances are assigned to play inferior and weaker roles whereas their male counterparts mostly play dominating parts. Indian classical dance is one instance in this context studied by an anthropologist named Judith Hanna (1999). The messages conveyed in Indian Classical Dance forms are often about female marginalization and submission and male superiority. While giving a historical background of Indian Classical Dance, Hanna elaborates that dance, in the beginning, was used as an integral means to preach Hindu philosophy as majority of the Indian population was unlettered. The texts (*Vedas*) describing Hindu philosophy have portrayed male gods and sages as lecherous and have objectified women and are discussed as things to be possessed. Hanna underscores that these texts also discuss about temple dancing and feminine erotic styles related to it which later gave way to prostitution and source of entertainment for Hindu *rajās* due to growing interest of people in women bodies rather than their dance. This reflects upon diminishing status of women performers, they are either considered as source of amusement or means of sexual pleasure. This linkage of dance with Hindu religious texts further showed men and women in performing their stereotypical gender roles and reinforcing them. The stress on women as things to be regulated and possessed to gratify sexual desires of men in dance forms relegated the status of women dancers to extremely low level.

The field of sociology of art can also be seen as a larger framework for sociological understanding of dance. Bourdieu (2010) substantially contributed to sociology of art and explicated upon processes of socio-political construction of art forms with the help of state and market, hierarchical arrangement of art forms and their reception (Zolberg, 1990). Initially, the fields of Sociology and arts were also at crossroads for sometime owing to their contrary orientations. The domain of arts and aesthetics espoused extraordinariness of an art and artists whereas sociologists challenge this aura of uniqueness by analyzing art and artists as socially influenced also and arts works as result of collective actions of many, not merely an individual's efforts or creation (Lang, 2000). It was in 1960s that these contrary beliefs merged to certain measure and the field of sociology of arts began to grow. Sociologists consider that nothing is natural to art forms or objects and see art as a tag or label put by interested influential social groups (Inglis & Hughson, 2005). They prefer use of terms like cultural product and producer over art work and artist. The labeling process is political in nature endorsing the purposes of particular social groups whereas sidelining others. The categorization of art forms and their labeling process can reflect on social circumstances of a society they are rooted in. The categories like popular, classical or folk with which a performance or tradition is linked shapes how it is perceived or received in public. Its consumption also cast light upon the taste of people which is another marker of social position or status in society, as underlined by Bourdieu. Thus, art cannot be analyzed in isolation but has to be understood as part of

wider social world. Bourdieu has elaborated upon artistic production and consumption at length using his concepts of habitus, field, cultural capital and taste (Wilkes, 2010). Becker, Gans and Adorno are other sociologists who describe art in similar manner (Zolberg, 1990).

Adorno, like Bourdieu, focused more on economic aspect- production and consumption- of art works under the capitalist regime. Both of them supported the 'production/consumption paradigm' (McCormick, 2012). Becker (1974) perceived art production as a collective effort of many people with specific division of labour, in accordance with artistic conventions and sometimes different from them leading to artistic innovations. Thus, sociologists invariably showed stronger inclination towards social or extra-aesthetic features of cultural products. In this regard, Wolff (1981, 1993) argues that a sociological approach towards art must take into consideration the aesthetic aspects of any cultural product as well and not reduce it to a product merely resulting from certain social, economic or political situations. She has, at the same time, also critiqued traditional aesthetics which gives primacy to nature of art, aesthetic experience and essential features of art works because they are also historically contingent, result of power relations, institutions, established practices and conventions. The aesthetic tastes, preferences and evaluations also vary over a period of time and are shaped by wider social forces. Bourdieu's work on taste holds significance in this context. Both aesthetic features of a product as well as its social situatedness are imperative to understand. Zolberg (1990) is also critical of narrow approaches of both social sciences and aesthetic disciplines. According to him, an art should be understood in terms of aesthetics, institutional norms, professional training, rewards, patronage and other supports. These theoretical arguments must also determine analyses of dance, being one of the art forms. Such an analysis seems to provide a holistic understanding of an art form, be it dance, music or theatre, which is very imperative and is a significant contribution.

3. Sociology of Dance: Emergence and Influences

The field of Sociology also marginalized dance as an area of inquiry for a considerable period of time. Sociology took birth in response to the processes of industrialization and modernity and mainly dealt with modern societies. Dance was considered as an irrelevant aspect in modern societies and thus remained ignored under the field of Sociology. Art and culture could finally make some niche in Sociology in 1970s but their aesthetic component still remained sidelined. Dance, among other arts, remained further ignored because of its transient quality as it is not fixed and there were not enough resources to record and protect it. Dance came in limelight in Sociology due to the influences of feminism, cultural studies and postmodernism. Feminists and postmodernists were very critical of the sociological tradition for ignoring culture and women as considerable and legit subjects of investigation (Thomas, 1993).

Brinson (1983) and Thomas (1993, 1995) were the main proponents who worked towards coherent study of dance and endorsed development of the discipline Sociology of Dance. They underlined the scarce research on dance under the

purview of Sociology of Dance and the concern to develop a systematic approach to analyze dance. They also suggested approaches to study the subject of dance from sociological perspective. They contend that any dance form is grounded in a certain social context and to understand the dance it becomes imperative to analyze its social context. Thomas (1993), in order to understand dance sociologically, gave two approaches in her analysis of American modern dance- extrinsic and intrinsic. The extrinsic perspective concerns the socio-historical context in which a certain dance was formed and developed, how it evolved over time and with respect to larger social structures in the societies. Only extrinsic approach will be able to give a very simplistic and incomplete analysis of dance. The extrinsic approach shall be complemented with intrinsic approach which concerns the aesthetic aspect of a dance form. Dance is also viewed as a means of bodily communication which can generate meanings. The expressive and symbolic aspect of dance can be highlighted by intrinsic approach.

Brinson (1983) extends deep insights in sociological investigation of dance forms. He underscores that dance has an integral role to play in a society. It can also be viewed as a social response to existing or current scenario or situations and circumstances in societies, for example, dance performances often support pre-existing traditional beliefs, customs and attitudes, while sometimes they act as way to assertion of identity by a certain community, or social group or to foster community strength. Dance has different implications and manifestations- racial, sexual, class and others. Dance, as a social force or response, and its causes and implications can be a significant arena of sociological inquiry. Dance is also encapsulated in a certain socio-cultural context and by its expressions and representations, it often expresses that context. Hence, examination of dance could lead to a coherent understanding of social and cultural milieu of a society. Some of the integral aspects of inquiry in sociological analyses of dance can be looking into the way society look at dance, the situations that lead to genesis of a dance form, reflection of the social context through dance (Brinson, 1983).

The need for a sub-field of Sociology of dance was in the beginning underscored by Peter Brinson who introduced this subject at the Laban Centre for Movement and Dance in B.A. Honours dance degree in 1978. The need to study dance as a significant social force was also pressed by John Blacking in Social Anthropology department at Queen's University. Both of

them proposed for comprehensive social theory and methodological approaches to study dance.

Further, among the sociological perspectives towards dance, Thomas (1995) emphasized upon the interrelationship between dance and gender while feminist studies sidelined dance as an area of inquiry in spite of their preoccupation with portrayal of women bodies. She emphasizes upon how dance forms respond to or question existing gender roles and gender differences dominant in the societies. In this respect, Polhemus (1995), hints upon an intersection between dance, gender and culture which is significant to be highlighted. He contends that dance is a refining and sometimes re-enactment of mundane movements and postures. He brings these gestures and movements under the purview of physical culture as body and bodily movements are not completely innate or natural, they also entail a cultural component as well. Hence, dance, with body as its central aspect, through refining of physical culture, represents nuances of a culture. Culture, as a way of living, is lived and experienced by individuals in different ways and it is affected by different factors with gender being one of the other social axes such as caste, class, race or ethnicity. This differential experience of cultural aspects by men and women often gets reflection in the dance performances. Hence, dance can also be seen as a way to analyze social differences along class, race, gender and caste.

4. Conclusion

The above examination of impact of various theoretical perspectives over sociology of dance, its genesis, gradual evolution and main theoretical tenets reveals that Bourdieu, Adorno, Brinson, Wolff and Thomas have mainly contributed to the growth of Sociology of dance. Since it is comparatively a newly developed field, its pre-existing literature unveils its less charted territory. In the last few decades, overall studies on dance have increased which are also interdisciplinary in nature. The earlier gaps in literature and empirical evidence are getting addressed to certain extent and more studies on historical background of performing traditions forms are coming to forefront. Also, some studies have begun to focus on role of political and economic institutions such as state and market in shaping performing traditions. The interaction between content or aesthetics and context in which certain dance or musical forms, is also paid attention to. Such all-inclusive investigations shall be welcomed further to fill the void. The wider social, economic and political context in which an art or particularly dance form is rooted in, is essential for a coherent and complete understanding for any art form.

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