

# Vignettes Relating to Kathakali and Shakespeare

## What Readers Say....

‘A MUST read for all professionals and students.’

—Kalamandalam Mohana Krishnan, Kathakali singer,  
Vellinezhi, Kerala

\*\*\*

‘A well-written book with an unusual perspective.

I enjoyed reading it.’

—Sivakumar Mathada, Registrar, Indian Institute of  
Management, Udaipur, Rajasthan.

\*\*\*

‘I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in  
critically dissecting characters. Mohan at his best.’

—Dr. Dolphy M. Abraham, Professor (retd.) and former  
Head of the Doctoral Program, Alliance University,  
Bangalore.

\*\*\*

‘I found this one of the most interesting approaches to  
both Shakespeare and Kathakali.’

—Dr. M.J. Sridhar, Founder Director, Executive Resource  
Management Group Consultants, Bangalore.

# Vignettes Relating to Kathakali and Shakespeare:

*The Thirasheela  
versus the Curtain*

By

Mohan Gopinath,  
Vellinezhi Achuthan Kutty,  
Nagesh Bharadwaj  
and Asha Prabhakaran

Chief Editor – Dr. Sabina Zacharias  
Editorial Assistant - Vishnu Achutha Menon

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Scholars  
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*For Chinnam and my parents – till we meet again.*

—MG



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# MESSAGE FROM PROF. DR. V. GANESHAN

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*August 2021 / Atlanta, USA*

*I am extremely happy to know that Dr. Mohan Gopinath has authored a book titled 'Vignettes Relating to Kathakali and Shakespeare: the Thirasheela versus the Curtain'. It is both a privilege and pleasure to write these lines to express my appreciation for this venture.*

*William Shakespeare's literary works have been adapted by many artists and in many forms. In 1989, choreographer Annette Leday and playwright David McRuvie had created an intercultural Kathakali King Lear, which was staged for the first time in 1989 in Paris and later on also at The Globe in London. In the 1990s, Arjun Raina had fused Kathakali with Othello. Kathakali–King Lear was subsequently translated by Malayali poet Marumakan Raja and has since then been performed multiple times around the world.*

*Dr. Gopinath's book 'Vignettes Relating to Kathakali and Shakespeare: the Thirasheela versus the Curtain' starts with the origins of Kathakali, then analyses the training the actors, singers and other musicians have to undergo, then compares the performance of two great actors in Kathakali and Shakespearean drama, namely Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair and Sir Laurence Olivier.*

*Dr. Gopinath also draws the attention of the reader to the experiments being done to create a fusion of Kathakali and Shakespearean plays and how futile such attempts are. In fact, I do feel that every fusion created in the field of music is nothing but an avoidable confusion.*

*Dr. Gopinath's book throws new light on Kathakali and Shakespeare and reading this book is going to be a rich learning experience for the readers.*

*In Shakespeare's play, 'Twelfth Night' (Act 2, Scene 5) Malvolio says: "Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them." Dr. Gopinath was born great and I had greatness thrust upon me.*

*Therefore, let me congratulate Dr. Mohan Gopinath for bringing together Kathakali and Shakespeare in a creative manner and wish him all the best for his future endeavours.*



(Prof. Dr. Vridhagiri Ganeshan)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Dr. Mohan Gopinath**

Mohan holds a BA (Hons.) degree and a Master's degree in English Literature from St. Stephen's College – Delhi University, where he later joined as a member of the faculty. In between, he joined the Indian Police Service which he quit after one week. After the two-year stint in the college, he joined the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, and worked as a senior-level banker for almost 21 years in India, UK and Hong Kong, after initially completing a two-year training attachment in the London branch of the bank. Subsequently, he left the industry and worked for a doctoral degree which he obtained from Osmania University on the topic, Organizational Learning (in the banking industry). His career in HSBC also included an attachment to the all-India HR function.

After obtaining his doctoral degree, Mohan worked as a management consultant in India and the Middle East. He has also worked as a lead consultant for a World Bank-funded Institutional Development Study conducted for the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department.

He reverted to academia after working as a consultant for more than one decade and joined as the Dean of the St. Joseph's College of Business Administration, Bangalore. He later shifted to the Alliance University's School of Business, Bangalore, where he worked as a Professor in the Department of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource till September 2019. His areas of interest are leadership, management of change, conflict resolution, banking, and protection of the environment. He has written and published papers and case studies across a range of subjects (Banking, Organizational Behavior, Human Resource, Finance, the Environment, and the Performing Arts). He is also a keen tennis enthusiast and the author of ten books.

Mohan has conducted Management Development Programs for senior managers in his areas of specialization in the organizational development area in India and the Middle East. His first book was co-authored and titled 'Business Drama: How Shakespearean Insights Help Leaders Manage Volatile Contexts'. His interest in Kathakali (he has trained in Kathakali music and sung for many performances) led him to write 'The Actor Who Could Connect: the Genius of Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair'. This book was selected by the American Library of Congress for inclusion

in their database and also exhibited at the Paris World Book Fair in March 2019. He has also written a James Bond novel, which because of copyright restrictions, is for private circulation only.

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### **Vellinezhi Achuthan Kutty**

Achu completed his education from the NSS College, Ottapalam and Victoria College, Palakkad, and went on to work in the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Trombay and at the Directorate General of Civil Aviation and Meteorology, in the Sultanate of Oman. He has done research in the area of Atmospheric Science and is academically qualified in Physics, Computer Science, Psychology and Kerala Traditional Architecture. Achu is also proficient in Homoeopathy, Kathakali music and playing on the thimila, a percussion instrument. He is a recognized artist of the All India Radio.

He has won the following awards: Calicut University Rank in Physics (B Sc. -1974), Environment Day Award- National Environmental and Engineering Research Institute (1981), Indian Society of Earthquake Engineering Award (1984), Kerala Kalamandalam Award (2011), Kalamandalam Award (2015), Pathanamthitta District Kathakali Club Award (2014), Sreechakra Gowreesam Puraskaram (2016), Kalamandalam Sankaran Embranthiri Memorial Award (2016), Kilimanur Adyakala Awadakasamgham Award (2016), Karikkakam Navarathri Award (2016).

He has written books and research papers in his areas of interest apart from work done on Thaaliyola Transcriptions: Parvatheeyam, Devi Mahatmyam. Achu is presently the Director, TABAS (Thantra Academy of Behavioural and Allied Sciences), President, Vellinezhi Nanu Nair Smaraka Kalakendram, Chief Co-ordinator, Vellinezhi Kalagramam, and is the District Co-ordinator of SPIC MACAY.

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### **Nagesh Bharadwaj**

Nagesh holds a Bachelor of Engineering (B.E) degree from Mysore University and a Master's degree in Business Administration (MBA) from the University of Oklahoma, USA. He worked at Union Pacific Railroad Company and also Sony for more than 10 years in America. Living in New York City for his work, gave him a wonderful opportunity to explore and appreciate the world of Art. The many Art Museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art and other

places of art worship, allowed him to get an understanding of the impact of art on life. The various Broadway shows and Shakespeare in The Park allowed exploration into the performing arts. Nagesh has always wanted to be back to his roots in India and as such, has settled in India for the last 13 years. During these years, he travelled through most of South India extensively. During one of these travels, he recalls a beautiful night spent in Kumarakom, Kerala. It was a night in the back waters, the beautiful settings, the emotions portrayed by the artists, the sound of drums; they still reverberate in his memory. ‘The sights, sounds of this wonderful art form is a delight to behold’, and in this context, he says that it was a pleasure to be able to take this wonderful journey.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Asha Prabhakaran**

Asha holds an MBA degree from the University of Madras and is pursuing a doctoral degree from Anna University in the area of Organizational Behavior/ Human Resource Management, specifically related to Employee Engagement. She has been a teacher for 15 years at reputed B schools and is known for the efforts she makes to make complex topics understandable. She has a natural love for research and has authored/co-authored articles and case studies in international journals of repute. Asha is a keen environmentalist and is also devoted to music and dance; the latter interest was the reason she co-authored this book.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Sabina Zacharias**

Sabina Zacharias has a Ph.D. from The English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad in the area of Literature and Cultural Studies. In her thesis titled *Rereading the legends of Kerala: the politics of legend-making*, she has attempted a rereading of the legends of Kerala (from a caste and gender perspective) and also analysed its representations in film adaptations and fictional narratives. She has been teaching English Language and Literature, Cultural Studies and Business Communication for 20 years. She is also a freelance trainer and an academic content writer. Her other interests include volunteering for community service and working on education projects for social change.

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**Books Written by Mohan Gopinath**

- Jim Collins's Leadership Levels: a Compilation of Leadership Profiles  
with Sabina Zacharias and Suprabha Bakshi  
Managing Human Foibles and Human Dilemmas  
Team Roles: through the Eyes of Shakespeare and Dr. Meredith Belbin  
The Myers Briggs Type Indicator: a Shakespearean Validation  
Why People Fail: Through the Eyes of Shakespeare and Sumantra Ghoshal  
Leadership Nuances in Shakespeare's Plays  
Fiction - Double Oh Seven (*for private circulation only*)  
The Actor Who Could Connect: the Genius of Kalamandalam Krishnan  
Nair (*this book was selected by the American Library of Congress for  
inclusion in their database and exhibited at the Paris International Book  
Fair in March 2019*)  
Fiction (*novel*) – The Intruder – a Nocturnal Interlude  
Memoir – Does the Spearmint Lose its Flavor on the Bedpost Overnight?  
Business Drama: How Shakespearean insights help leaders manage  
volatile contexts, with Debashish Sengupta and Ray Titus

**Books Written by Vellinezhi Achuthan Kutty**

- Kathakali Padangal (*Kathakali Songs*)  
Kathakaliyute Kaipusthakam (*A Handbook on Kathakali*)  
Valluvanadan Kalakalum Vellinezhi Kalagramavum (*Art Forms of  
Valluvanadu and Vellinezhi Kalagramam*)  
Thaalayola Transcriptions: Parvatheeyam, Devi Mahatmyam  
Edited - Ente Smaranakal- (*My Memoirs*) - Kottiligal Narayanan Nair

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I have taught many thousands of students in my time and many of them have done well in their professional and personal lives and I am proud of them. I would like to particularly mention my appreciation of my student Chitra Vishnoi who is professionally doing well and in spite of her work commitments, regularly keeps in touch. And finally, to all our friends who are directly or indirectly connected with the world of Kathakali and whose influence came to our help in writing this book.

-----



“Go, little book, from this my solitude!  
I cast thee on the waters—go thy ways!  
And if, as I believe, thy vein be good,  
The world will find thee after many days.  
Be it with thee according to thy worth—  
Go, little book, in faith I send thee forth.”  
—Robert Southey

MG

*Say, what abridgement have you for this evening?  
What masque, what music? How shall we beguile  
The lazy time if not with some delight?*

A Midsummer Night's Dream – Act 5. Scene 1. William Shakespeare

~~~~~  
*Acta est fabula, plaudite.  
The drama has been acted out, applaud.  
Emperor Augustus Caesar*

~~~~~  
*As in a theatre, the eyes of men,  
After a well-grac'd actor leaves the stage,  
Are idly bent on him that enters next,  
Thinking his prattle to be tedious.*

Richard II - Act 5. Scene 2. William Shakespeare

~~~~~  
*Caelum videre iussit, et erectos ad sidera tollere vultus - He bid them look at the  
sky and lift their faces to the stars.  
Roman Poet - Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid) AD 17.*

# OF VIGNETTES AND OTHER MATTERS

MOHAN GOPINATH

In literature, a vignette (pronounced *vin-yet*) is a short scene that captures a single moment or a defining detail about a character, idea, or another element of the story. As the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it, 'Vignette' comes from Middle French 'vignete', the diminutive form of the noun 'vigne', meaning 'vine.' In English, the word was first used in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century for a design or illustration that ran along the blank border of a page, or one that marked the beginning or end of a chapter. Such designs got their name because they often looked like 'little vines.' It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that the usage of 'vignette' had shifted to cover a brief literary sketch or narrative, as we commonly see it used today.

Vignettes are mostly descriptive; I give below a Kathakali-related vignette which captures for me the essence of the word. It is based on Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair's portrayal of Roudra Bhiman, a role for which he was and is still widely acclaimed. The background to the scene is that at last Bhiman's anger which was suppressed all these years while the Pandavas were in exile, comes boiling to the top and he is ready to kill Dussasanan for all the insults he has made the Pandavas suffer. The role of Roudra Bhiman is enacted only by senior actors, in other words, those who have arrived. It is a niche role, somewhat akin to Shylock in 'The Merchant of Venice'.

When Krishnan Nair Asan is portraying Roudra Bhiman, what stands out is the way he conveys the human side of the character apart from the anger. It is not a one-dimensional portrayal with only anger and violence dominating the character of Bhiman. We say this because Krishnan Nair Asan brings this human side to the front when after Bhiman kills Dussasanan, Sri Krishnan comes on stage to confront Bhiman. On seeing Sri Krishnan, there is a visible draining away of the bestiality which so far had engulfed the character of Bhiman as he realizes the violent and incredibly brutal way, he had just killed his enemy, which was by disembowelling him and pulling out his entrails with his teeth and drinking his blood and then with his bloody hands tying the loose hair of

his wife Panchali which she had refused to tie all these years. This is indeed gruesome and we need not elaborate on the bestiality of Bhiman's behaviour. But when he sees Sri Krishnan a range of feelings overtake him and what is unique is that the whole gamut of emotions is shown entirely through facial expressions; the draining away of the anger, the disgust with himself, and the guilt he feels when he sees Sri Krishnan. We would also add to this the fact that Bhiman had realized that someone he loved and respected, had witnessed and become privy to what had occurred. The scene ends with Bhiman falling at the feet of Sri Krishnan and begging his forgiveness. In short, the appearance of Sri Krishnan brings Bhiman to his senses and drains the 'rouDRAM' out of him; Roudra Bhiman has given way to the normal Bhiman. In a way, Sri Krishnan's appearance brings the former back into the world he usually inhabits, a familiar world of no violent incidents in it. Bhiman in other words returns to his normal character which is one of strength tempered with goodness and love for his family.

The last few minutes of this scene are the essence of a vignette. In fact, I would say that there are two vignettes in this scene. The first is the standard one, where the scene ends with Bhiman getting rid of his anger and returning to his own natural self as the thirasheela comes up and Bhiman has fallen at the feet of Sri Krishnan. The vignette shows the two characters on stage in a frozen symbiotic stance; Bhiman at the feet of Krishnan and Krishnan looking down at him. But there is a deeper vignette hidden in this scene. In order that a new world may step in after the killing of Dussasanan, this dark and angry world where Bhiman existed for a time must disappear. He was insulated or rather cut off by the immeasurable gulf of anger he had suffered for so long, from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs and was locked up and sequestered in some deep recess. When he comes to kill Dussasanan, we must be made aware that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested and the normally good Bhiman is in a trance-like state where anger predominates. Time for him had stopped and relationships had no meaning and relations to things outside his narrow angry vision had been temporarily abolished. The Roudra Bhiman is not the 'real' Bhiman of who so much is written in the Maha Bharatham. Seltzer (2008) said that "still, in my own clinical experience, anger is almost never a primary emotion in that even when anger seems like an instantaneous, knee-jerk reaction to provocation, there's always some other feeling that gave rise to it." Hence it is that, when the killing is done with, when the work of darkness is completed to perfection, then the world of darkness should pass away like storm clouds disappearing and blue skies have to come in their place. Krishnan's

arrival serves this purpose and he shows to Bhiman that with his arrival the positive reaction has commenced: the good things in life have returned and the fiendish things have now started to go away. Life is returning to normal and Bhiman has become aware of this. The pulses of life are beginning to beat again, and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which Bhiman and Krishnan normally lived makes us profoundly sensible of the awful angry madness that had suspended them.

This is the second and deeper vignette. The first is theatrical in its origin, the second has the multicolored pastiche of life as its origin and is also not a visual vignette.

-----

*Roudra Bhiman* - I have always wondered at the reason why it was Bhiman who at the end of the exile and all the troubles the Pandavas went through, became the 'Roudra Bhiman' and killed Dussasanan. Yes, there was the curse of many years ago given by Panchali but to me, that is not a satisfactory answer; it feels like taking the easy way out to make the curse the answer; someone cursed someone and the curse perhaps by chance has come true. But is there something more here? Why did not Arjunan become a Roudra Arjunan or Dharmaputhran become a Roudra Dharmaputhran? They too had the same reasons as Bhiman to kill Dussasanan. The answer I feel lies in the very nature of Bhiman. Dowson (1979) says that, "apart from his mythological attributes, the character of Bhima is natural and distinct. A man of burly form, prodigious strength, and great animal courage, with coarse tastes, a gluttonous appetite, and an irascible temper; jovial and jocular when in good humour, but abusive, truculent, and brutal when his passions were roused. To put it in the language of ordinary people and looking at it from a psychological point of view, (Wignall 2019), said that "anger is an emotion while aggression is behaviour. Even though these two words seem almost synonymous, they differ completely on one key dimension - control. Technically speaking, you can't exert direct control over any emotion, including anger. You can't simply decide to turn up your feelings of joy any more than you can turn down your feelings of sadness or fear. And because you can't control your emotions directly, you can't be held responsible for them". To go back to Bhiman, he is not a complex person or an intellectual; he is a strong and good man driven by basic emotions. Left to himself, he would go through life helping others and feeling good about this and it is this very simplicity of Bhiman that causes him to lose control over himself at the end. Arjunan and Dharmaputran would have been too controlled to lose their rational perspectives. They would have been careful to see that

they did not lose control but would win the battles they fought through intelligence and rationality. An example of Bhiman's goodness and simplicity can be seen in his incredibly quick agreement to fetch a flower for his wife – a flower which she had just seen and liked. He did not hesitate for a moment to think about the difficulties he would have to go through the forests and travel a long distance to grant his wife's wish. The point here is that it is his immediate wish to please his wife which sets him out on a complex and tiring journey; he made no excuses to her that it would be difficult or that he would do it later. And when a simple and physically strong person loses his temper, he is prone to become violent and highly aggressive. A good man, a sensitive man, a man given to being ruled by emotions, a brave soldier who is a master of the game of warfare, a jealous man; these are potent combinations which can lead to him acting out of character provided the trigger is there. Bhiman had professional knowledge and professional competence – but from a soldier's point of view. And a soldier is a straight-thinking person who is more comfortable in the special world of military might and related matters where courage is high up on the list of qualities a soldier should possess. In battle, you may have to keep moving forward in the face of heavy enemy fire. The lives of other men may depend on this kind of courage. Battle plans are based on it. Then, in addition to courage in battle, you need the courage to admit your own failures. You may need still another kind of courage to ask your fellow soldiers to keep going when they have nearly reached the limit of their endurance. All these qualities are important parts of a good soldier's character, but the quality that all of our great soldiers have had – the quality that gave meaning to all of their other virtues – is the conviction of purpose. This means that these soldiers fought well and were able to endure the hardships of war because they were convinced that what they were doing was right.

Admittedly, this quality is not easy to have. Many combat veterans will tell you that they were never quite sure why they were fighting. Some say that they fought to save themselves. Others say that they fought for the men around them, or because they hated the enemy. There is never any single reason why men fight. But the fact remains that these very straight and clear qualities which are at the heart of a soldier's mental makeup were the ones that made Bhiman into a Roudra Bhiman.

These are the lethal combinations that were mentally ingrained and which Bhiman carried with him and made him a Roudra Bhiman for a short period of time. In fact, if we look at it from a psychological angle, the release towards anger was an active coping strategy which he resorted to when he finally came face to face with his sworn enemy. Active coping

strategies are either behavioral or psychological responses designed to change the nature of the stressor itself, which is exactly what happened in this case. Coping refers to the thoughts and actions we use to deal with a threatening situation which obviously was the case when he came face to face with his enemy. The fact that he returns to his normal self quickly only reinforces this argument; his was a simple and straightforward mind which saw things in black and white. It would not have been possible for him to carry the anger with him and wreak vengeance on the other Kauravas soon after killing Dussasanan even though he would have been physically capable of doing this. Dussasanan was his single-minded and sole target for the time being and the latter's destruction was all that he wanted at the time. And the driving force which triggered his anger was in line with what we discussed about his character. The fact that it was Dussasanan who tried to disrobe Panchali in public would have been the fuse that lay burning in his mind for so long and made him into the violent Bhiman who kills Dussasanan. I am also beholden to Kalamandalam Mohana Krishnan who corroborated my views on why a placid pachcha character could become so violent. To digress a little, the only other pachcha character who becomes incensed with uncontrollable anger is Dakshan in the story Daksha Yagam whose target for anger is his son-in-law, the god Sivan and also his daughter (the anger is directed more to the former and a little less to the latter; in fact, the feeling towards his daughter is not mere anger but a combination of hurt and anger. Chapter 6 has elaborated more on this point as Dakshan is one of the most fascinating characters in Hindu mythology and also in Kathakali. The scope for an actor doing this role is immense. To sum up, for the space of about an hour and a half on the stage, we see a Bhiman, who is acting completely out of character. The pent up feelings and sufferings the Pandavas suffered over the years, the despicable way his wife was treated in public, all these memories surfaced in one mighty surge and converted the normal Bhiman into the Roudra Bhiman who disembowels his enemy and drinks his blood and dances with the entrails of his enemy dangling from his mouth.

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This book has dealt with Shakespearean characters at various stages in the forthcoming chapters. So, I feel it will never be too early to plunge into this subject so that the reader will get a feel of what is to come later. Let me begin by asking 'who is the character in Shakespeare who comes closest to Bhiman in terms of suppressed anger?' The answer to me is Shylock from 'The Merchant of Venice', though opinions on my choice

may and will differ. The reason I stick to my choice is that there are similarities and dissimilarities between the two people in terms of the anger they bottled up within them for many years. Shylock had to live in an anti-Semitic world where to be a Jew was to be someone who had to be insulted. In Act 1, Scene 1 of the play, when Antonio and Shylock face each other, Shylock confesses openly that his hate towards Antonio is because of the incidents which happened in the past. He tells the listeners that Antonio has treated him much like a dog just because he was Jewish. Shylock declares that Antonio called him a “misbeliever, cut-throat, dog /And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine.” And also, that he was kicked on the street like a stray dog, “Foot me as you spurn a stranger cur/ Over your threshold!” The evidence of this being true is confirmed by Antonio himself when he does not deny this but adds insult to injury by saying he will do all these things again. But the triggers to the anger in Shylock and Bhiman are different even though the end result (the overflow of their anger) is the same; this overflow ends in the destruction of Dussasanan in the Kathakali story and the psychological destruction of Shylock at the end of the play of Shakespeare. But to go back to the triggers, Shylock has been baited since childhood and has lived amongst people – the Venetians – who despise him. Bhiman’s trigger to anger was the treatment meted out to him and his close family by the Kauravas; presumably, the fact that Panchali was publicly humiliated by Dussasanan in an open court as it were was also there and fuelling the anger. Both their fits of anger are from the psychological point of view a ‘reaction’. The triggers were present in both men and were waiting to be pulled and the bullet to be sent on its way to find the target. With Bhiman, the trigger was pulled when he killed Dussasanan. In Shylock, the trigger was pulled when he literally demanded his pound of flesh; the pound of flesh to be carved from Antonio’s body. One of them succeeded while the other did not. But then life treats vengeance in different ways and there is no clear-cut answer or solution one can seek when a person sets out on the journey with vengeance in mind as the goal. It was Confucius who said that, ‘Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves’. It means that if you are seeking revenge, you might destroy not only the other person or persons but also yourself. Because, in that journey of revenge, as you vibrate at the negative frequency associated with it, you doom yourself and your future prospects along with it. Shylock barely escaped this fate but it was a close thing. For Bhiman, it was a glorious victory and he stood revenged for all the wrongs done to him and his family when the ultimate and gory destruction of Dussasanan was completed.

I will make one last but significant point regarding the weapon used by Bhiman which was the mace (gada). I feel it is in keeping with his character as the weapon is heavy, blunt, and depends on its destructive power on the strength of the person who holds it. There is no sophistication about the mace and the mace was, I feel, the weapon of choice for the kind of person Bhiman was and whose character we have described earlier. We cannot imagine any of the other four Pandavas using the mace as their weapon of choice. This is, of course, a subjective statement but I feel most readers will agree with the point. The mace has nothing sophisticated about it and can be easily made with any heavy stone as its head. It is a crude weapon and it is a blunt weapon, a type of club that uses a heavy head on the end of a handle to deliver powerful strikes. A mace typically consists of a strong, heavy, wooden or metal shaft, often reinforced with metal, featuring a head made of stone, bone, copper, bronze, iron, or steel. The mace is different in one important way from the bow and arrow; for using the latter the physical strength of the wielder of the weapon does not have any importance. The destruction caused by the bow and arrow is more dependent on the aim of the person who shoots the arrow. The same applies to the gun in today's world. The person who fires a gun can be weak but the destruction caused by the gun is not in any way proportionate or dependent on the strength of the person who fires it. However, the use of the mace is not like the use of the gun or the bow and arrow. The marksmanship of the user is not of importance to the person who is wielding the mace; only brute strength is of importance here. In ancient times, the mace (gada) was used by the strongest commanders of the army and it was considered a very skilful act to kill an enemy with only one blow of mace. Bhiman and the mace fit together as naturally as the bow and arrow fit Arjuna.

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*Fig. 1 Sadanam Krishnan Kutty as Roudra Bhiman in 'Duryodhana Vadham'*  
Courtesy: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sadanam\\_Krishnankutty--Raudra\\_Bheema.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sadanam_Krishnankutty--Raudra_Bheema.jpg)

# AN ART FORM WHOSE TIME HAS COME

DR. IVORY LYONS

For several years I have visited India, and I must confess that on each trip I come to appreciate it more and more. More importantly, I am impressed with the many cultures that exist everywhere that I went to India. Each state has its own dance, manner of dress, tasty dishes and unique art among other things. And nowhere is this more evident than in Kerala, 'God's own country'. I have had the pleasure of visiting Kerala, one of the many treasures of India in landscape and art. The rich, green and lush areas and the immense vistas move one to appreciate beauty in its many natural forms. I have experienced a wonderful peace in this land that settles the mind and spirit and invokes one to take in the richness and beauty, where cultures meet wonderful forests, placid waters and stoic mountains. I have experienced, Namaste, a welcome from the gods.

I hope that the readers grow to appreciate the depth of the explanations of the stories. The imagination and the description by the authors and the value of comparing these classic works to those of Shakespeare will broaden one's appreciation for literature, music and dance. These authors have collaborated and written a book whose potential is great as it will help the reader to understand the nature and beauty of an under celebrated art form: Kathakali.

Move over Hamlet and make room for Kathakali performances. Here is a book which introduces the nuances and specialness of the Kathakali, an amazing art form that combines music, dance, and drama. Just as Shakespeare took stories and wrote plays around them so Kathakali does the same as it takes stories of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and retells them. Kathakali is a traditional way that people from Kerala tell stories and a wonderful way to expose this art form to others who have not been fortunate to watch a Kathakali performance. Many have seen or heard but know little about this unique and exciting art form from Kerala, India.

I have studied religion in South Asia for some time and I believe that this book is important for South Asian studies as it elaborates and exposes one of the many little known, treasures steeped in this area. Most are familiar with some dance forms but do not understand various aspects of

it. This book will do a long way to helping understand and appreciate this art form.

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## FOREWORD

### KALASHREE KALAMANDALAM UNNIKRISHNAN

I am indeed delighted to write the Foreword to this unique and interesting book. The authors have both in-depth and wide experience of the intricacies of the dance drama. Kathakali, I know, runs in the blood of two of them (Mohan and Achu) since they were four years old. Achu also has the distinction of introducing this dance form to the Sultanate of Oman when he was based there and was responsible for conducting many performances there. He gathered together many trained artistes who were working there to put together a remarkably accomplished troupe. Achu is a singer and has to his credit many appearances on stage. Mohan has also appeared on stage many times as a singer. I am happy that the four authors have added a useful and thoughtfully written volume to the history of the dance drama.

As the teacher and writer Lucas Iberico Lozada said, “Performance art is very often the least understood mode of artistic production. It requires a performer and an audience, but the artist has explicit control in determining how that interaction is mediated. There are no rules in performance--there is no need for dialogue, repetition, recordings, props, lights. The inclusion (or absence) of each is entirely up to the artist and is what makes the performance”.

Kathakali dancers are talented artists who have made Kathakali a popular art form all across the globe. Kathakali is probably one of the oldest theater forms in the world. It originated in the state of Kerala and the Kathakali dancers perform a group presentation, in which they act various roles which are traditionally based on themes from Hindu mythology, especially the two epics, the Ramayanam and the Maha Bharatham. The actor in Kathakali never speaks except with his hands. The text of the drama is sung for him and is the baseline for his interpretation. It is in histrionics or interpretive dancing that the Kathakali artist excels, the spectator's experience enhanced by the thrilling drum beats. The language of the songs used for Kathakali is Manipravalam which is a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam. Though most of the songs are set in ragas based on the microtone-heavy Carnatic music, there is a

distinct style of plain-note rendition, which is known as the Sopanam style. This typically Kerala style of rendition takes its roots from the temple songs which used to be sung (it continues even now at several temples) at the time when Kathakali was born.

To tell you the reader a little bit more about the dance drama, the field of performance embraces performance behaviour of all kinds and in all contexts, from everyday life to high ceremony. While linked to the temple dancing traditions such as Krishnanattam, Koodiyattam and others, Kathakali is different from these because, unlike, the older arts where the dancer-actor also had to be the vocal artist, Kathakali separated these roles allowing the dancer-actor to excel in and focus on choreography while the vocal artists focused on delivering their lines.

This book investigates a wide range of performance behaviour - dance, ritual, conflict situations, storytelling and displays of behaviour. It considers such issues as the relationship between training and the finished performance; whether performance behaviour is universal or culturally specific. The book will be of particular value to scholars, teachers and students of anthropology, theater, folklore, and performance studies. In brief, the book shows how a Kathakali repertoire is an operatic performance where an ancient story is skilfully dramatized. Traditionally, a Kathakali performance is long, starting at dusk and continuing through dawn, with interludes and breaks for the performers and audience. Some plays continue over several nights, starting at dusk every day but modern performances are shorter. The stage with seating is typically in open grounds outside a temple, but in some places, special theaters called Koottambalam built inside the temple compounds have been in use. Of course, all these are changing and the trend now is towards two-hour performances inside a usual theater.

As the website, [www.encyclopedia.com](http://www.encyclopedia.com) (2019) says, “in the cultures of the Indian subcontinent, drama and ritual have been integral parts of a single whole from earliest recorded history. The first evidence of ritual dance drama performances occur in the rock paintings of Mirzapur, Bhimbetka, and in other sites, which are variously dated 20,000–5000 BCE. The ancient remains of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa (2500–2000 BCE) are more definitive. Here, the archaeological remains clearly point to the prevalence of ritual performance involving the populace and patrons. The Mohenjo-daro seals, bronze figurines, and images of priests and broken torsos are all clear indications of dance as ritual.” The first three chapters are devoted to the evolution of the dance drama and it traces the various influences which went into this along with identifying the people who were responsible for its growth. It is a long and complex

history but what is to be celebrated is that it ended in giving us a unique dance drama.

What really struck me and what is unique about this book is the comparisons the authors have made between Shakespearean characters and Kathakali characters and how singular similarities were brought out. This is so far an unexplored territory and I trust that we will see more on this topic from the writers. This also applies to the comparison they have made between a Shakespearean actor and a Kathakali actor (Sir Laurence Olivier and Kalamandalam Krishnan Nair) in terms of how they interpreted characters and the subtleties they brought out when portraying characters on stage. The authors bring out the similarities between these two great actors and show the reader that common threads are running through great actors even if they are from different genres; they have shown that great actors approach the roles they are playing by following the same paths. They have in the book also looked at the development of Kathakali singing and the importance of rhythm in the dance drama. They have also touched on the practice of adapting Shakespearean and other dramas to the Kathakali mode and have given their views about this practice.

But the purpose of my writing this Foreword is not to tell you the reader, about the nuances of Kathakali and get into great detail about the intricacies and beauty of the dance drama. The authors will do that in the chapters you will be reading. Suffice to say at this moment that you will find this a fascinating book and those who are new to the dance form will use the book as a springboard to vault into the enchanting depths of Kathakali. Whether the performance is a short one or a long one, whether the stories enacted are unusual and off genre, does not matter. What matters to me is the pain and interest the team of four has taken to bring this book to light in the interest of propagating the dance drama. It is obvious to me that they have taken a lot of trouble to show that the dance drama is essentially meant to be enjoyed and not something which a person should keep at a distance in the mistaken notion that it will not be understood. ‘How can I ever follow the complex hand movements?’ or ‘When will the singing incorporate simple words I can understand?’ or ‘What is the significance of the different types of costumes?’ are questions I have heard many times. This book will dispel those unnecessary fears.

I will end with a quotation from Sir Laurence Olivier from an essay he wrote about acting which explains the magic of the stage for audiences. The words apply to Shakespeare and Kathakali, dance, dance dramas and wherever people come together to entertain audiences. The words prove that the stage has no boundaries and speaks a universal language in all countries in our world. “Once you have been to the tree and tasted the