

Dancing through the Constraints

The Negotiations and Navigations of a Woman Classical Dancer
within Bangladeshi society

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Economics and Social Sciences in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Social Sciences in Anthropology

Economics and Social Sciences

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our original work while completing the degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material accepted or submitted for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
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Abstract

Dance, especially classical dance, is an integral part of cultural expression as it ties to a region's history and cultural heritage. Yet, it is the dancers who often face questions and criticisms along the lines of respectability. This study explores the negotiations and navigations by women classical dancers within Bangladeshi society to look into how they exist within a very distinct and contested space of respectability. This research seeks to understand the questions of morality, gender norms, and social expectations that these women navigate through and continue to pursue their passion. Drawing on theories and concepts of performance, class, capital and taste, intersectionality, and respectability, the study investigates the ways these dancers balance their roles on stage and in their personal lives.

Through ethnographic fieldwork the dancers' lived experiences highlight how they assert respectability in their pursuits, tackling issues of gender, class, religion and familial and social expectations. The study focuses on women dancers specifically as that is the majority demographic within the field in Bangladesh. By situating these experiences within broader socio-political narratives, the research reveals the paradoxical position of dance as a celebrated art form while simultaneously contesting notions of respectability that exists within their society.

This research is an exploratory work that contributes to the understanding of how women performers negotiate the intersection of personal agency and societal expectations. It sheds light on the nuanced experiences surrounding respectability for Women Classical Dancers in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Dance, Classical Dance, Women Dancers, Respectability, Art, Culture

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all those young girls who dreamed of dancing but had to set it aside, carrying their aspirations quietly in their hearts now.

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Table of Contents:

I.	Declaration-----	2
II.	Approval-----	3
III.	Abstract -----	4
IV.	Dedication and Acknowledgements-----	5
Chapter 1	Introduction-----	7
1.1	Background Context-----	8
1.2	Purpose of Study -----	12
1.3	Research Objectives-----	14
1.4	Methodology -----	14
Chapter 2		
2.1	Theoretical and Conceptual Framework -----	16
2.2	Literature review-----	20
Chapter 3: Looking at the Dancer’s Experience-----		26
3.1.	Dancer’s life at a glance -----	26
3.2.	Role of the Family: primary supports-----	28
3.3	Extended Social Network -----	29
Chapter 4: Aspects of the Intersectional Experiences		
4.1	Gender: The roles and responsibilities of a Woman dancer-----	31
4.2	The Religious point of view: Prohibition or Regulation?-----	34
4.3	Class as a Defining Factor: Who gets to Dance?-----	36
Chapter 5: The Negotiations and Navigations-----		39
5.1	Respectability of the Dancer -----	39
5.2	The Dancer’s Body-----	42
Chapter 6: Navigating the field of Dance in Bangladesh-----		45
6.1	Is the Audience Ready?-----	46
6.2	Institutes and Patronages -----	48
Chapter 7: Conclusion-----		51
7.1	Where are we headed-----	51
7.2	Future Direction-----	53
8.	References-----	54
9.	Appendix -----	57

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Dance is a prominent form of artistic-cultural identity expression in this region, present in most occasions and festivals. It is a marker of culture and one of the country's primary modes of expression and entertainment. With most of the dancers in Bangladesh being women, significant questions still come up when a girl is put on stage to dance. The image of the Woman Dancer is often tainted by history, patriarchy, cultural and social norms. The questions of respectability surrounding the profession of a dancer had to be tackled to be present in the public realm as a performer. For a woman, establishing respectability has always gone through layers of negotiation and navigation, and it is often challenging to create space. The different discourses surrounding women's roles in private and public life are complex. When a woman is up on stage as a dancer performing, it adds even more layers and questions that she faces to assert herself in society.

When delving into the bigger picture of Dance within Bangladesh, it has a long history of not just colonial legacy but also patriarchy, politics, identity, and much more. My experience as a dancer living and practising in Bangladesh and studying Anthropology gave me insight into work and witnessed the many levels of negotiations a woman has to do to survive respectably within society and these intersections of identity. This study will look at the experiences of Women Dancers, their performances on and off stage, and how they are faced with questions of respectability in their practice. I wish to explore in this study the nuances of the dancers' experience, the questions they encounter, and their views of what the cultural field of dance is shaping up in Bangladesh.

1.1 Background Context

Even though dance is a prestigious cultural practice in the country, many women still face challenges in continuing their pursuit in the long run. The intersectional experiences of Class, Gender, and Religion often dictate the scope of such artistic pursuits. For middle-class families in urban Bangladesh, children are enrolled in institutions that teach art forms like singing, dancing, and painting at a young age. However, after a certain point, many either stop learning or drop out of the institutions. Only a handful seek to continue down the path. This phenomenon began my inquiry into why students would fall out of dance classes even when they loved the art. Added came the dancers' experiences surrounding me, with remarks, discouragements, and overall questioning as to why they continued dancing. The burden of maintaining the image of a woman from a respectable family seemed to collide with the artistic practice for many, often expressed through remarks like “*Onek hoyechhe ar koto nachanachi korbe*”- It is enough how much longer will you dance or “*Chhoto belay thik chilo ekhon guna hocche*”- It was okay when you were younger, now you are in sin. There seems to be a more considerable consensus on the fact that many families discourage their daughters in the name of it being not respectable; the idea is that society pushes one to believe a dancer may be perceived with low morals and often referred to in titles like Nortoki or Nachnewali (Tarah, 2020).

In order to understand the premise of where this comes from I sought to look into the historical background of these performers. Written history has played a big role in tainting the image of the Woman Dancer time and again by aligning the origins of classical dance in the region, like the traditions of the Devdasis of the temples and then the Tawaifs of the royal courts, to “immorality”. These women exercised significant power and prestige and pioneered classical dances. However, their sexuality became a ground for discourse as they exercised certain

freedoms that were not available to the domestic women of the time (Ahmed, 2023). From the 17th to 19th century onwards, significant cultural shifts like the Anti-nautch movement targeted dancers, homogenising the Tawaifs and Devdasis (Chakraborty 2006, Banerjee, 2005). Their expression of sexuality and sexual freedom became the grounds through which the British tainted their art and the performers, aligning it with prostitution, which inevitably led to their subaltern statuses (Chakraborty, 2006). The criminalisation of these performers reinforced the distinction between respectable and non-respectable female sexuality in social and legal discourses (Shankar & Ganesan, 2021).

Despite the defamation and destruction at the hands of patriarchy and foreign rule, there was a wave of formalising classical dance forms in Bengal through visionaries like Rabindranath Tagore and Uday Shankar, who reconfigured Indian classical dance (Shahed 2019, Chakraborty 2006), giving a solid foundation in the practice of arts. Following this institutional standing, Guru Bipin Singh, Pandit Birju Maharaj, and many exponent artists provided training to Bengali dancers (Mariam, 2023).

However, Post-partition, there remained a deep hesitation among Muslims to accept classical dance or dance wholeheartedly as they were projected as a part of a 'Hindu' heritage, pushing them to reject it (Thobani 2017; Shahid, 2019). The power structures of Bengal significantly impacted the social values and norms and, as a result, the cultural practices (Mariam, 2023). The interconnectedness of South Asian traditions can explain classical dance forms flourishing in Bengal, as can be witnessed through the widespread practice. Yet, anxiety still exists as Hinduism's association with this region's dance is quite enmeshed. Classical forms like Bharatnatyam, Odissi, Kathak, and Manipuri have all emerged as forms of worship in temples. Dance became a way of artistic and Hindu religious expression, with dance pieces often

depicting stories from mythology. Ancient texts like *Natyashastra* serve as the essential background of dance history, and temples like the Konark, Brihadhiswarlaya, and Chidambaram house sculptures depict ancient dance as explored in *Natyashastra* (Shankar & Ganeshan, 2021). These associations of dance in the region with Hindu traditions have further pushed Islamic reformists to separate themselves from the tradition as much as possible, which was also reflected in nationalist aspirations.

These hesitations and anxieties were pushed into the identity politics of the region, primarily through adopting a Bengali cultural narrative post-liberation and later in Bangladesh's tumultuous political regimes (Huq, 2011). As a result, it had its effects on cultural practices like dance. Following Liberation and the birth of the new nation of Bangladesh, we see the dance resurfacing and reconfiguring its place again. From the struggle for independence, the Bengali identity had already prominently reshaped around the 1960s when the collective Muslim identity stopped being something that held the two wings of Pakistan together. The systematic discrimination that was being faced urged Bengali Muslims to draw from their Bengali-ness to assert their rights, drawing heavily from arts and culture to conceptualise it. Through the songs of Tagore and Nazrul, the wearing of *sarees*, and *tip*, a new sense of belonging and a new form of nationalism was being curated, rooted in Bengali identity. Within this, the dress and deportment of Bengali women took on increasing symbolic value in the struggle over cultural identity, which also applied to artistic practices of the arts (Kabeer, 1991; Huq, 2011; Sabur, 2020).

A large part of the new nationalist movement was held by cultural arts groups which even took an active role in politics and defined the Bengali identity as distinct from the Indian and Pakistani-Muslim tags it dealt with (Huq, 2011). For dance, artists like Bulbul Chowdhury

popularised local folk and classical dance forms among Bengali Muslims, with many choreographies related to this region's people. Later, his legacy would also go on to start the first dance school in Bangladesh, Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA). By merging classical dance forms with themes drawn from the Muslim past, he gradually popularised dancing in the conservative Muslim society of East Pakistan (Shahed, 2019; Basu, 2022).

In the urban culture of that period, we hear names of pioneering women performers like Afroza Bulbul, Rawshan Jamil, and Rahija Khanam Jhunu, who began the practice in the 1950s. However, these names fall short in front of the contribution of Muslim male dancers like Bulbul Chowdhury, Gawhar Jamil, and GA Mannan, who were able to legitimise and bring respect to the profession (Tarah, 2018). Thus, the women married to these dancers had the guardianship of their male gurus and husbands when performing, allowing them to pursue dance professionally (Tarah, 2020). The 1960s saw the emergence of more institutions like BAFA, noteworthy among which is Chhayanaut, which played an important role culturally and politically, with dancers also taking an active part in nationalist pursuits. In the 70s, the new Bangladesh saw women dancers emerging, with new institutions and platforms like Shilpakala Academy, Bangladesh Shishu Academy, and the television network BTV that would go on to promote the practice of dance. There was also an upsurge of dancers who gained scholarships abroad, mainly in India, in the classical forms of Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, and Kathak which led to this shift in respectability towards female dancers in Bangladesh as they had mastered the techniques and completed formal education. Notably, artists like Sharmila Banerjee, Belayat Hossain, and Shukla Sarkar were among those who were included and in the later decades many more followed. This was important not just for classical techniques but also for standards of morality and femininity,

generating an expanding neoliberal market for upper-class Indian gurus and an audience base for Indian classical dance in the country (Tarah, 2020). Institutions began to incorporate this in training, and dance flourished through government-backed foreign cultural delegations sent on tours, television shows, and competitions that encouraged dance practice, creating more performers and an audience base in Bangladesh. There are hundreds of institutions, avenues, and platforms to promote dance practice now with growing opportunities like formal education programs under Dhaka University and Shanto-Mariam University which have enriched the practice in the country.

Keeping this whole historical trajectory in mind, the journey for women dancers to establish respectability in society has been a long one. What questions they face, how the perception of dancers effect them and the conditions that shape these experiences are the important avenues that this paper will explore. The layers of negotiations and navigations within the field of dance are essentially what I wish to uncover through this study.

1.2 Significance of the study

The use of religious or socio-cultural narratives to evaluate the practice of arts as something against it always has deeper reasons (Huq, 2011). By exploring the implications of such views, I wish to understand the overall perception of women practising dance in Bangladesh and how the dancer navigates within these intersections of identity and negotiates respectability. It is key to note that the depoliticisation of religion and the play on respectability act as hindrances to women stepping out of the domestic sphere (Hussain, 2017) and even more so when women are learning and practising dance as a means of self-expression in the public sphere. Exploring this

area allows us to shed light on the cultural understanding of dance, get into the nuanced ways in which values may intersect with artistic expression, and how gender influences dance practice in who can and cannot get the support to sustain it in the long term.

It goes without saying that in Bangladesh, the number of women dancers is more than that of men, be it because of the feminine nature of dance or the culture, which I will emphasise later, so this research focuses primarily on women. It should also be noted that there have been many theories and research on how women were given the role of being culture bearers or upholding the moral order or respectability within the family or larger society within the context of the larger nationalistic project (Sinha, 2004; Sabur 2020), so this responsibility given to women also plays a deep underlying reason for the need for them to negotiate and navigate. The study also focuses on classical dance, which requires intense time, effort, and dedication to be adopted, drawing a distinction between dance for entertainment and dance as a cultivated cultural and artistic expression.

This study does not aim to define the status of dance in religious scriptures or debate whether dancing is morally right or wrong in Bangladeshi society but rather to explore the implications of these views on the lives of dancers. I wish to investigate the negotiations a woman dancer has to go through to continue dancing. The purpose of this study therefore is to expand Dance Research in Bangladesh from an anthropological point of view, shedding light on Dancers' experiences. Only a few scholars have worked with dance in Bengal and even a few in Bangladesh. So, by giving dance an intersectional lens and studying the lives of dancers on and off stage, the aim is to contribute to the broader literature of Dance Research in Bangladesh from an interdisciplinary point of view. In the process, I also wish to contribute to the literature on dance and how socio-

religio-cultural narratives intersect with notions of nationalism and identity and are formulated through the practice of arts like dance.

1.3 Research Objectives

For the purpose of this study the broad objective is to:

Explore the experiences of Women dancers within Bangladeshi society to understand how they negotiate respectability and navigate their place in the field.

And in order to fulfil this, I have broken the study into specific research questions

1. How did these Women start their pursuit of dance and are they still continuing?
2. What are the points of negotiation to establish respectability?
3. Where does that leave the practice of dance as a common expression of ethnic-cultural identity for women in particular?

The objectives of these questions and the whole study are as follows:

1. Understand the conception around dance and determine the cultural and historical factors that shape this conception.
2. Investigate the negotiation points a dancer must overcome to establish respectability and continue pursuing their art.
3. Explore the possibilities of Dance as a vocation in Bangladesh.

1.4 Methodology

The methodology used in this study is through primary and secondary sources, the first being in-depth interviews, listening to the experiences of 9 respondents and 3 key, all women dancers, aged 19 to 39. The respondents are selected through purposive sampling due to time constraints and range between multiple institutions and dance forms, the common factor being that they all

have been trained in Classical Dance forms and practice in Bangladesh. The three critical persons in the field are celebrated names in Bangladesh: choreographers, artists, and dance teachers. One-on-one interviews were conducted with the participants and key persons using a semi-structured questionnaire, and the answers were coded for analysis based on specific identified themes. These themes included how their dance journey started, specific factors that allowed (or disallowed) them in their pursuit, the negotiations surrounding respectability as a dancer and the profession of dance itself, and the future they see in the field, which will all be discussed in the following chapters. It should be noted that in terms of their experiences, the whole journey in dance from when these respondents were little girls to now that they are women are taken into consideration. The respondents' permission was taken to record their responses and use the data for this study. The research will also utilise participant observation as I am a part of the respondent demographic, who has been in the field of dance for more than 19 years learning and practising Classical Dance and will use my position to understand the cultural shifts and the inner workings of dance institutions within Bangladesh.

However, this study had certain limitations, such as time constraints and the length of the work, which may have affected the depth of the research. The focus is also specifically on women dancers as they are the majority. The dancers are from similar socio-economic backgrounds, living in urban Dhaka. There are many dancers living outside Dhaka, even in rural settings, who are trained in Classical Dance, but due to time constraints could not be included in the study. The respondents are also all connected within the same social network with me and among each other, coming from similar institutional backgrounds. There are certainly more genres of dancers and institutions within Bangladesh, but incorporating all of them would require a lengthier work that is impossible within the bounds of this paper.

CHAPTER 2

This chapter looks at the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that shape this study, situating the experiences of women dancers within a larger socio-cultural-political context. Drawing on theories on how the dancers play their roles to understand the experiences of these women in how they negotiate and navigate, it is placed within the larger concepts of Women and Art being used as markers of nationality and propagating culture yet dismissed when questions of respectability with their dancer profession arise. The theories and concepts thus lay the basis for understanding the larger forces that play within the nuanced experiences.

2.1 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To fully grasp the means of negotiating and navigating the space by Women Dancer, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by Erving Goffman serves as a theoretical framework for this paper by looking at the performance of the Woman dancers in how they display and negotiate respectability, mediating between their self-identity and social identity. Much like the dancers are up on stage performing, they also perform in their everyday lives, trying to carve out their roles as dancers and women- daughters, wives, mothers, and so on. Goffman's "body idiom" concepts - meanings given through social interactions and maintaining "face"- apply to carrying the image they curate. Moreover, the defensive and protective practices an individual employs can very well be the negotiations that a woman dancer has to go through to keep pursuing their passion for dance in society. The theory, however, lacks an understanding of the importance of broader social forces or structures that can shape the meanings, and this is where I wish to bring the other theories to complement it.

The theory of *Intersectionality* takes questions of class, gender, and religion of the women dancers to understand the tangible position that allows them to stay within the field of dance. The intersections of class, gender, and religion are essential in shaping not just the choices but the experiences of these dancers, creating the space for them to continue their pursuit and providing the economic, social, and cultural capital that allows them to dictate their negotiations of respectability. Kimberlie Crenshaw's (1991) theory of Intersectionality highlights that intersectional identities wholly constitute women's experiences, not just as negative experiences but also as avenues for negotiation or even a source of social empowerment and reconstruction. For the sake of this paper, this can be applied to the multiple dimensions of identity, the powers and privileges (or oppression) that come with it, and the negotiations that can take place within that.

Bourdieu's theories of *Class Distinction*, *Cultural capital*, *Taste and Habitus* are used to understand the significance of dance in how it formulates the notions of Respectability within this distinctive class of society that engages in the practice of "high art or culture". His theory of *Cultural capital* can be used to explain why these women choose to pursue the art form, continue in the long run, the level of support and even the negotiations and navigation they are likely to do to keep pursuing dance. *Habitus* specifically can help in distinguishing the need to pursue Classical Dance and how that ties to wider notions of nationalism or post colonial project that this region was engaged in and therefore shaped the view of the dance, the dancer and the nationalistic aspirations and the hesitations surrounding them. The study would also be incomplete without addressing *Taste* as the concept by Bourdieu as it defines the level of negotiation and navigation that the dancers deem necessary or choose to do to remain respectable, which again corresponds to class.

The triangulation of these theories will help me focus on how social identities and meanings are constructed through performances by the dance and the dancer. It can be used to analyse how Bengali women dancers perform and negotiate their identities on and off the stage, as well as the implications of these performances for their social roles along with how those expectations and aspirations are created within the distinctive class or social background. Since adopting the theories of performance studies would entail an ethnography that is far more than just participant observation to something closer to performative witnessing, it would also take into account my own experiences as a woman and a dancer, of how I perform those roles, both on and off the stage in looking at the negotiations that are not as much written but rather embodied, subverted and indirect.

For the Conceptual Frame, I use the concept of *Respectability* as explained and argued by Boucher (2003), along with Lune's (2024) understanding of respectability for dancers. Boucher (2003) defined the concept of Respectability to be heavily attached with women, a value system emphasized by their responsibilities and the reputation they wish to uphold. Lune's (2024) understanding of respectability or "respect" is a patriarchal concept synonymous with restraint, silence, and conformity. Her work centres on redefining respectability in dance, as through creative expression and new narratives of what respectability meant to dancers. Such an expression questions societal notions and gives agency back to the dancers to redefine the boxes they are pushed into. In this regard the respectability of the dancers would be subjective to their particular socio-cultural backgrounds as well as those defined by the society they live in, tied to its values around responsibilities and reputation of women within that culture.

The next concept this paper deals with is the use of *Women as bearers of nationalist cultural rhetorics*. I refer to Chatterjee's (1993) argument of the construction of “The New Women” in the postcolonial state, how new definitions of the respectable women of tradition were etched. I also use Sinha (2004) and Sabur (2020) to address how women are tied to the nationalist project, becoming sites of projecting culture. This understanding can be used to assert how dancers were taken on in this nationalistic project but then also forgone when it came to questions of their respectability. White's (2012) analysis of looking at family, modernity, and religion in Bangladesh uncovered the role of women as bearers of culture and respectability within the family, responsible for upholding “the moral order” which contradicts their wishes to be in public and even pursue arts like dance and is taken to understand how the image of “respectable women” is curated within the wider structures of society.

To look at how *Women's sexuality and the state* are intertwined, I take the works of Kabeer (1991) and Huq (2014). The invocation of norms for the sake of a more comprehensive project and how that is reflected in the realities of these women's lives, placing the female body at the centre of the discourse in terms of sexual expression provides the basis of understanding subjective ways to take in the dancer's experiences. Such a perception of tying women's modesty and respectability to their performance, if applied to the instances of women dancers in Bangladesh, reflects the contradictory position they are placed in their performing arts practice. It stems from a central uncertainty within the Bengali Muslim collectivity, where deep anxieties are reflected in juggling identity.

Last, I take Conquergood's (2002) understanding of Performance Studies to look beyond just the textual knowledge, at the embodied experiences and the knowledge that resides within the

performance itself, be it of dance or the dancer. Performance Theory would allow us to work simultaneously with written knowledge about the community's dance culture and the knowledge that resides within the non-verbal and behavioural aspects.

2.2 Literature Review:

Existing literature on Women Dancers and their experiences grappling with concepts of respectability can be divided into specific themes and an array of work by particular scholars, beginning with a wider global lens to more specific Bengal-based and then Bangladesh-centric studies.

To begin positioning the female dancer in the wider literature of dance or anthropology, Claire (2017), in her writing on Dance Studies, gender, and the question of history, notes how the female dancer's body is idealised in history. She explains how the view of the female dancer's body was used as a site to mark the histories of dance itself, how gender discourses seeped into to feminise dance altogether, and how choreographies became a place for the Women dancer to mark their presence as writers of history, embodied in the body of the dancer. Suggesting ways to study dance not just through the choreographies but also the gestures within a dancer, gendered, that is culturally embodied.

In Nationalist Discourses, the woman dancer is a contested figure as they are used and abused through tags of respectability and disrepute according to the notions of the time. If we begin historically, the discourse of the tainted Dancer was applied most heavily to the Courtesans of the 17th-18th century, explored in Chakroborty (2006) who looked into the recorded accounts of the Tawaifs of the royal courts of the Mughal empire, patronised and celebrated for their art to the prohibition by the British ban on these "nautch" girls, for their sexual freedoms and then

migrated all across bringing classical dance forms and the spreading Nortoki, Nachnewali or Baiji culture in Bengal. Ahmed (2023) traces these women performers' sheer influence and how they were reduced to being questioned morally, losing respectability and even their place in society by those in power at the time. He also delves into the Hindu reformist narrative and the Islam reformists (who wished to prohibit dance altogether) that homogenised their art with prostitution, pushing them to subaltern statuses and becoming entangled in sexual politics, alienating them.

The image of the public women can be studied by Banerjee (2005), who traced the historical marginalisation of women around 19th century Bengal and how Women performers assumed subaltern statuses under the scrutiny of being immoral, curtailed under a rhetoric of so-called “emancipation” by the Bhadrakalok class. The sharp distinctions between the Bhadrakalok women and those of the lower classes were also drawn by Kundu (2023), where women performers could engage in public performances, giving insight into how the tags of immorality and vulgarity were suppressed under the emerging Bengali educated mentality, propagated by nationalist discourses. Problematising women’s public performance by branding performers as prostitutes and driving them out of cities led to the demise of women’s popular culture. It shaped some of the preconceptions that we still see today within contemporary society.

Munsi (2011) and Chatterjea (2009) give this nationalist rhetoric projected on the woman dancer more context as they deal specifically with the negotiations of the public woman dancer and bearers of tradition and culture through dance. Munsi (2011) explains the intrinsic uneasiness of dealing with dance as a profession for women, a contested figure in the face of a civilised society, to the classical dancer who carried the tradition of Indian culture and heritage. The dancer was the bearer of not just the nationalist agenda but part of the images and agencies of representation

of history, tradition, identity, transition, dignity, modernity, and respectability, with which no other art form was burdened. The shift in how Classical Dance was viewed and the change in the audience for dance came from a responsibility of rescuing society from pollution to re-embark dance as a “high art”. The women dancer thus became a gendered and often marginalised entity in her social and cultural system. Munsi's (2011) exploration of the duality of the inner and outer worlds for women, the “wife/mother/daughter” of the private household and the public dancer upholding tradition while simultaneously battling the stereotyping of the “loose” dancer because society keeps shuffling between historical references and the present-day viability of dance as a vocation provides the lens to look into the dancers in this study.

Munsi (2012) emphasised the nationalistic view, highlighting the rise of hegemonic cultural narrative in how performers enter requirements of the ‘high art’ that removes them from the traditional and restructures the classical forms, dominated by feminine aesthetics which increased the visibility of female dancers post-independence. Compared to Munsi’s argument of “high art”, Chatterjee (2009) analyses “the classical”, as a very particular kind of exclusionary art through class, status, privilege, and resources. It is a political act that gives the art form a stature nationally and internationally and pits whose narratives are highlighted and whose are not even within an already contested landscape of morality and respectability, as it is not a homogenized group. The surrounding policy that is adopted to spread the culture are important markers when analyzing the situation for Bangladeshi dancers specifically since the situation may just be on two sides of the same coin, the only difference being the border.

In terms of how art intersects with the rhetoric of wider culture and respectability or morality, Huq's (2011) exploration of how women sought to reconfigure their self-identity, expression, and

religiosity on their terms by looking at the practice of music takes into consideration the women's decision-making and freedom of choosing piety over cultural practice. This perspective in looking at arts and understanding the agency women hold can help comprehend the religious angles that dance is looked upon. Huq explains that cultural activities, although becoming more 'sophisticated', also became more private, and cultural pursuits are viewed in a very class-specific outlook. She questions the tensions around notions of womanhood, femininity, women's bodies, chastity, and sexuality that had to be negotiated before women became public culture bearers of political protest.

Additionally, in understanding the layers of respectable femininity, Hussein's (2017) study on how women rise to the expectations in urban affluent middle-class households and navigate respectability through their practices, conduct, changing power relations, and boundaries of behaviour, become points of negotiation within the already patriarchal society. She notes that certain factors, mostly capital, economic, social, and cultural, help solidify the woman's position in the family and negate the complex power relations.

Finally, in contextualising the struggle for respectability for dancers in Bangladesh, I refer to Tarah's (2015) exploration of the juxtaposition of Dance between India and Bangladesh. These two countries draw from a shared cultural tradition. While she focused on the performance as providing insight into transactions and movements of cultural capital, it shed light on the perception behind classifying the dance of Bangladesh, and the prejudices and presumptions that came with it. This provided an insight into the standing of Bangladeshi dancers in the transnational pedagogy.

To understand the stance of Dance in Bangladesh post-liberation, Tarah (2018) provides a chronological account of prominent women dancers of East Pakistan and Bangladesh who have developed dance in urban centres. Emphasising women's role in public dance and the nationalist movement, she notes that dance practice and performance bring into focus social anxieties about religious, cultural, and class identity, modernity and tradition, and morality of Bangladeshi women. Here again, factors like religion, class status, and social environment allowed their pursuits and it was mostly the upper classes attending progressive schools who had the opportunity to learn dance. While the norm was not encouragement, they were provided a respectable platform as government employees or serving as cultural representatives of the nation, as a result of which women dancers became the primary performers in Bangladeshi media; however, there remained a question on these women performers, as Tarah (2020) discussed how married women to male dancers were held higher in morality than unmarried ones. The rise of middle-class respectability dictated their bounds within respectable bearers of cultural practices. The formalisation of techniques and education reconfigured the sense of respectability towards dancers and the ideological principles were shaped in such a way that marriage shielded the woman dancer from historical associations of immorality. Addressing this, much more in-depth and contemporary work needs to be done on the lives of women dancers today, in how they tackle these nuances.

Research on the lives of dancers like Alter (1997) and Ersöz (2021) looks into how women dancers themselves view their art and continue their pursuit. Referring to such studies has helped formulate the areas that need to be examined. Luthfa (2023) concluded similar research to what

this paper seeks to fulfil on the women performers in theatre, so I shall refer to it to look at how the experiences of dancers differ.

Therefore, the Research gap this paper seeks to address is the intersectional, distinctive experiences that define the lines of respectability and how that is tackled. The nuances the authors have discussed so far help create a picture of the world of dance for a woman dancer. From dealing with historical parallels of comparing the women dancer's profession to the tug between responsibility and respectability in family and state to the wider structures of nationalist discourses that define the space for dancers, this paper will seek to complete that picture, highlighting the negotiations and navigations of dancers who may not be as established but who have dedicated immense time, effort and dedication behind its pursuit. These are stories of women who continue dancing out of sheer passion, and whose experiences need a voice. The study would therefore seek to position the Dance and the Woman Dancer within the larger nationalistic project and the cultural sphere of the country and generate discourse.

CHAPTER 3

The Dancer's Experiences: Can she continue to dance?

Dancing as a career has been one of the most difficult choices for most women dancers. There are thousands of reasons why that would be the case. Some of the reasons have been revealed in the literature review in the previous chapter. There are questions about the profession's respectability, and social, economic, and religious factors determine one's access and ability to persist in the field. Gender, in this sense, allows women to pursue dance as it is seen as adhering to feminine aesthetics, yet the social expectations of a woman dictate how much they can exercise that (Munsi 2012, Kundu 2023, Luthfa 2023). The world of classical dancers has never consisted of a homogenous group. Therefore, their subjective experiences must be studied to understand the ensuing negotiations (Munsi 2012). Thus, this paper seeks to answer the question by looking at the individual experiences of the women dancers.

3.1 Dancer's Life at a Glance

All the respondents for this research are women dancers aged between 19 and 39 and have 12 or more years of dance training. They practise various forms of Indian classical dance, such as Manipuri, Kathak, Odissi, and Bharatnatyam, in institutions in urban Bangladesh. They belong to the middle to upper-middle class, which allows them to pursue performative arts as extracurricular activities besides formal education. Out of nine respondents, four have just graduated high school and are in the first years of their university education, and the rest five have graduated and work full-time, earning on their own in sectors other than dance, which is another point to be explored later.

It should be noted that none of these respondents are particularly famous or “stars” in their field but have substantive experience in dancing professionally as part of troupes and individually on stage, they are not yet choreographers or do not have degrees in dance but are dancers with significant experience. As for the key- persons interviewed, all three have degrees in Dance as formal education from India, studied classical dance, and are celebrated artists and choreographers in Bangladesh. Regarding diversity in styles and institutions, respondents are limited to five institutions and four to five dance forms, although there are many more dance institutions across Bangladesh.

The respondents are also limited to two religions, 5 following Islam and 3 following Hinduism, reflecting the majority of the population within the dance field. However, dancers from other religions and ethnicities do exist due to the limited number of respondents who could not be included in the research. The levels of religiosity or practice also vary within the demographic, with some practising and others irregular in their religious pursuits, but the understanding seems to be that their own religious aspirations do not coincide with their practice of dance but rather the religious connotations attached to the labels they are dealt with, and how this happens will be explored in the following chapter.

The table below summarises the demographic profiles of the respondents.

Name	Age	Education/ Occupation	Dance Institution	Family Composition	Religion	Dance form
Afiya Ibnat Halim	19	A Levels from Scholastica	BAFA, Nritya Chhondo, Nritya Nandan	Lives with parents	Muslim	Odissi
Kashvi Saha Golpo	20	HSC graduate	Chhayanaut and Nritya Nandan, Nritya Chhondo	Lives with Parents and sister	Hindu	Manipuri, Bharatnatyam , Odissi
Rimita Nandi Jaya	20	HSC graduate	BAFA, Kathak	Lives with	Hindu	Kathak

			Nritya Samproday, Freelance	Parents		
Sabiha Tarannum	21	BRACU CSE, HSC from Scholars	BAFA, Nritya Nandan, Kathak Nritya Samproday	Lives with Parents	Muslim	Kathak Manipuri
Meghomala Meghoshree	24	LLB graduate from Jahangirnagar University	Nritya Nandan and Chhayanaut	With a Mother and Sister, a Joint Family	Muslim	Manipuri Bharatnatyam Odissi
Kheya Tabassum	24	Graduate from BRACU Anthropology and working at KUMON.	Local School in Bogra, Tarit Sharkar, and various workshops.	Lives alone in Dhaka, family lives in Bogra	Muslim	Kathak and Bharatnatyam
Kangkhita Hassin	27	Graduate in CSE from UIU, working as a Data Analyst	Chhayanaut	Lives with their Parents and sister who also dances.	Muslim	Manipuri
Farah Haider Shemon	28	Teacher at an English Medium school	BAFA and Spondon	Married, Lives with Husband	Muslim	Bharatnatyam
Baby Ira Bala	39	Master graduate from DU, Teacher, and administration English medium school	Dance teacher at Chhayanaut and Nritya Nandan	Unmarried, Lives with brother, parents passed away.	Hindu	Manipuri, Bharatnatyam Odissi

Table 1: Demography of respondents

3.2 Role of the family: The primary supports

Family played a huge role in each of these dancers' lives. Understanding the family dynamics helps us explore how the respondents' journeys in dance began. All of the respondents started

very early in their childhood, out of their interest or their parents. It started as a co-curricular activity but grew to be more than that, as most of them are still dancing, unlike the many others who went to these dance schools but dropped out. The conceptions varied depending on the family's exposure to cultural activities, arts involvement, or backgrounds.

In terms of Family background, almost all of the respondents come from some kind of connection or network with arts, be it their family's involvement in the field or a sheer appreciation for the arts. It is the family's cultural capital and habitus that dictates their access to the Dance field, allowing them the opportunity to pursue. (Bourdieu 1986) The time, effort and resources engaged behind this pursuit is significant which indicates the families having the aspiration to support their pursuit as well as the economic and social capital to back it up, which will be explored in more detail. The support from the parents, financial and physical, from taking on the costs of learning to taking their daughters to dance school, waiting hours outside the institutions and bringing them back home, parents take on the brunt of such work. Afiya (20) recalls her father waiting till late nights to pick her up from dance programs and her mother spending all her time sitting outside her dance classes so that she could pursue her dreams. While most of the respondents continue to live with family, there is only one respondent, Kheya (24) who lives away from family and consequently also one who does not continue dancing anymore because of the lack of support, which we will further look into.

3.2 Extended Family and surroundings

Following the primary supports that are the immediate family, the extended family, neighbours, and surroundings were the first avenues of experiencing hindrances in their pursuit of dance for

the respondents. Age was seen as a significant factor in determining whether dancing was acceptable or not at home in some cases, particularly from the extended family's perspective. For example, Labiba (20) was discouraged by her grandfather from dancing after growing to a particular age, notably reaching puberty as it is now the woman with representational roles in the house dancing, not the girl. In other cases, the remarks would affect the immediate family from the surroundings, leading them to be discouraged from continuing dance.

Kheya (25) notes:

My father tried to explain that he was not looking at my passion for dance negatively, but he did not feel secure sending me out like this as the people were talking. He did not like how people saw and judged me, so he requested that I slowly reduce my dancing.

Such remarks and comments also came in the form of concern for the respondents, for example prioritising other more “respectable” pursuits as “Dance is taking too much of your time” or “Time for one to focus on more serious important things like job, education or marriage”.

However, almost all of the respondents mentioned that they try their best to manage other pursuits, be it education or their jobs alongside dance. Ira Bala (39) stated when a person truly dedicated, loves to dance beyond means, they can figure out the time, manage it and do all of it. It is often the concerns of others that reflect in such comments. These hindrances also come in layers, using notions of respectability, religion, gendered responsibilities and so on which would be explored further in the following chapter. Therefore, what I wished to portray in this chapter was how the dancer's journey is first and foremost affected by their home, the family, how their access to the field and also the first hindrances stem from the domestic space of the home.

CHAPTER 4

Aspects of the Intersectional Experiences

Applying the intersectionality lens by Crenshaw to understand how the Dancers could continue their journey, including their gender, class, religion, and other identity markers is important to find the distinct space within which they exist. This chapter will seek to break down the dancer's experiences into the specific parts of their intersectional identities of gender, religion and class to critically discuss the nuances within.

4.1 Gendered experience: The roles and responsibilities of a Woman dancer

To begin with, the access to dance learning or practice in Bangladesh is influenced by the fact that the respondents and most dancers in Bangladesh are women since Indian classical dance is seen as a more feminine art form in grace and thus more acceptable for women to pursue (Munsi 2012). In that sense, women are more privileged in pursuing dance as an art form in the country than men, which in itself is a direction that should be studied further in the future.

Coming back to the respondents, it should be noted that out of nine respondents, five began dancing because of their mothers who were either connected to the art scene or wished to pursue dance but couldn't because of societal expectations that resulted in enrolling their daughters in dance classes. They sought to fulfil their dreams through their daughters, bringing into question the generational aspects of women's hurdles in pursuing dance. This form of living vicariously through one's child can go back to understanding the moral bearings on a woman and how they intergenerationally negotiate and push the boundaries by claiming space in the public realm, this time through performing on stage.

It is more common than not that women have to juggle several roles and responsibilities (Hussein 2017), and this adds up even more when that woman is dancing in public, outside the domestic sphere. For generations, women have fought to create their place in the public sphere by working outside the home, but working as dancers still needs to be more widely accepted. Tarah (2020) noted how it is common for Bangladeshi women to not continue their dance careers after marriage, often due to objections from their in-laws. This was witnessed in the respondent's accounts when they noted being advised to leave the dance, or they will have trouble finding prospective suitors for marriage.

Kheya (25) noted:

There are talks among prospective suitors or their families that if a girl is a dancer, went on tours, and danced around, they are unsuitable for marriage. They question their morality and character.

Ira Bala (39) had a similar experience and said:

I once rejected a marriage proposal because the boy's family had strict impositions that I leave dance once married. This was surprising because the family was a liberal Hindu household; the boy pursued music, and the younger daughter was in Charukola learning art. However, their respectability still rested on "how the daughters-in-law of the house behaved."

However there are exceptions to this as seen in the case of Farah (28) who is the only married respondent and his husband is a big supporter in her pursuit. Sharmila Banerjee, a key- personnel and one of the senior gurus in Bangladesh, shared the expectations from a woman and their role in the house and outside. She started her journey as a dancer around the 1970s. At the beginning

of her career, she had to manage a home and dance simultaneously, juggling the role of a wife and mother alongside the role of a dancer, choreographer, and teacher.

It was hard to manage the time and responsibilities, but I tried my best. Wherever I went, I took my child with their food, studies, and everything and tried to maintain both simultaneously. The stress and hardship were there, but I also found enjoyment in that because I love all these roles. The hardships eventually became a lot easier.

Sudeshna Swayamprabha, another key person, recounts instances of dance troupe mates who have left the field owing to different hurdles in life. In terms of juggling responsibilities and obligations imposed on a woman, she shared

To me, it is a battle of will. Women always have to sacrifice something or the other to maintain semblance in their lives. They sacrifice their dreams of dance, for their jobs, and family life; there's no judgement in that. But in life, to bring balance and semblance, you have to sacrifice. It is when responsibility triumphs and dance becomes the opportunity cost, as wider aspects of society boil down to under appreciation, lack of financial support and patronization. It is an easy option to let go of unless you are very strong-willed and love it out of your heart.

This may very well be explained through the concept that women are expected to uphold the moral order in their family and, thus the larger society by passing on the accumulated cultural capital through the generations (Boudieu, White 2012). Yet the dancer as the bearer of broader tradition and culture of a region or ethnicity may again strike the contradictions women dancers face. The gendered image of the nation and the middle-class domestic ideologies are projected onto women, making them the bearers of culture (Sabur 2020) but afterward, they are expected to return to the subservient and passive roles in the family (Sinha 2004). This is exactly what we

see in the case of the women dancers who are only welcome when they are presenting the culture but must adhere back to their domestic roles and fulfil their responsibilities as well.

4.2 The Religious point of view: Prohibition or Regulation?

Moving on to another intersection of identity, it is often the religious standings that dictate the kind of support or backlash dancers receive. Most Muslim respondents expressed concern about their religion being used to deem dance as prohibited in Islam, from fatwas or more significant understandings (Faruqi 1978) but their interpretations of dance indicate how they navigate such allegations from wider society. As for the Hindu respondents, they compared the art form to prayer and placed more importance on it than just a hobby or practice, as the classical dance connects with their belief systems. (Shankar and Ganeshan 2021)

Kabeer (1991) mentioned how religion, specifically Islam and Bengali culture, the historical experience of it has prevented the two from being successfully moulded together within the Nationalistic project. This is precisely what we see in the responses of the participants who doubt the continuation of dancing traditions in Bangladesh. Most Muslim respondents were very aware of the fact that people viewed religion and Dancing as two very opposing things. This conception was instilled within them from society through their family members or extended people in their surroundings. The problem they noticed was women being in dance specifically as it brought in notions of purdah norms or modesty of the female body (Kundu 2023). However, the respondents did not feel they were doing anything wrong because they saw classical dance as modest since it was tied to their ethnic traditions. For example, dance costumes mainly consisted of traditional attires like sarees that were connected to the Bengali identity. The respondents pointed out that they personally never attached notions of morality because they performed a

classical dance which comparatively was more reputed and modest in clothing and appearance and therefore separate from obscene display of body that is prohibited.

Farah (28) says:

I don't think dance is haram, either the type or the vulgar ones that show skin. As far as I see, no dancer in Bangladesh shows skin or dances obscenely. They wear tights under their sarees and always-sleeved blouses. It is very traditional and modest, in fact, so there is no question of the prohibition.

Yet, discouragements came from surrounding people like neighbours or community members. Some also experienced backlash from their nearby mosque or religious communities who questioned the parents for letting their daughter dance, wear dancing costumes, and commute from in front of the mosque premises. There are instances of respondent's parents actively trying to hide from their relatives that their daughter is learning dance. It is often the elders of the family who push for the practice to stop, owing to preserving the family's respectability more than the religious viewpoints. Yet religion plays the role of asserting this regulation in the name of upholding the moral order (White 2012)

Kheya (24) noted :

If we look at it from the lens of a "Muslim Dancer", the two things, Muslims and dancers don't go together, we dancers might contradict this but generally, people see these as very separate things. If you ask a very religious person, they might even get angry that Muslims can never be dancers. But deep down, I believe, a person can practice their culture and religion simultaneously without affecting the other. I can love my culture as much as I love my religion.

Huq's (2011) argument is that the invocation of norms can be tied to providing a means for regulation, particularly on the female body. Thus, the use of religion as a tool can be highlighted from the rhetoric in not just controlling behaviour and self-expression but also the practices of the female body. It is used to convince or discourage or even push particular narratives of control among the population, in this case, that dancing is forbidden while it is actually about control. To compare this with the experiences of the Hindu respondents, they experienced no such conflict with religion but instead from social expectations. The respondents often compared their dance practice with prayer, which contrasts significantly with the Muslim respondents who have to negotiate within these understandings. (Shankar and Ganeshan 2021)

Jaya noted,

Since I am a Hindu, I have never faced any religious backlash, and I treat dance as a prayer because it connects with our beliefs, especially classical. Still, I see that for my friends who are Muslim, there is a backlash about it being prohibited.

4.3 Class as a defining factor: Who gets to continue Classical Dance?

The class question is a big concern regarding who has access to learning dance as it can be considered a privilege, especially classical dance. Chatterjee (2009) noted how there was an intrinsic distinction on who dances the folk and classical dances, bringing in examples of pioneers of dance in Bengal, looking at Protima Debi, the daughter-in-law of Rabindranath or Amala Shankar, wife of Uday Shankar, who all came from a particular social class and network. Even in examples by Tarah (2018) the first female dancers were from the affluent class who could afford to practise dance as an extra-curricular or hobby.

The respondents in the study came from middle—to upper-middle-class households, where their parents initially supported their pursuit. Their middle-class standing gave them access to institutions like BAFA, Chhayanaut, Nritya Nandan, Shilpokola, etc., which provided the privilege, opportunity, and resources to pursue the arts as a hobby or vocation. This created their social networks where dance was an appreciated practice and led to the generation of cultural capital for the respondents, defining their class position even further and placing them within the wider network of cultural and nationalist pursuits or what in Bengali is known as the “*Shangstritik Jogot - Cultural World*”. (Bourdieu 1984, 1987)

However, respondents noticed how practising dance can be very costly, from everyday commuting to dance classes, rehearsals, and programs to buying jewellery and costumes, which are pretty expensive, especially for Classical Dancers. There needs to be particular financial support or patronage that would allow this, be it from their family’s financial income or their own. Compared to this, the pay that comes from dance as a profession is relatively very low. This is the situation when the dancer moves out of their family’s financial dependency and carries forward Dance as a vocation. The opportunities are meagre if we look into the scope for earning from dance. The season for programs and events is not constant, and any form of disruption can immediately cause programs the scopes for dancers to earn to shut down completely. This factor is connected to the overall view of dance in society and how it is reflected economically in terms of patronisation.

In this regard, I noticed that among the older respondents who are working on their own and are financially independent opt out of having just dance as their profession. They choose to work in other occupations which would give them a stable income. Kashvi (20) who just graduated

higher-secondary schooling explained how she does not think Dance can be a stable occupation and so would choose not to have it as a vocation but rather a passion.

Looking into these three aspects of intersectionality, it is understandable that the factors discouraging dance pursuits begin to outweigh for Women Dancers in Bangladesh, from the expectations from a woman, to the regulations imposed along religious lines, to the class factor that shapes their access to the field. To tackle these the dancer engages in the negotiations and that is when the wider structures that influence these conceptions are uncovered.

CHAPTER 5

The Negotiations

Many of the dancers negotiate a path of moderation, not entirely becoming a dancer with a ‘public’ identity but someone private enough to be considered a ‘home-maker’ and a woman of good character while simultaneously pursuing dance classes and programs. In this chapter I wish to explore how respectability is defined by these participants and how they play out within the lives of women dancers, beginning from the negotiations they do in response to the questions to how they uphold their image, navigating through the remarks and comments. Munsi (2011) states dance is one of the tools that help women ‘perform’ their identity in the larger context of society and culture by using their body as the site for such performativity (Claire 2017), which is disconnected from reality but helps in assuming the roles of a woman rather than a dancer. This is very much linked to Goffman’s (1959) concepts of *Face*, how the roles of a dancer and a woman are performed simultaneously. However, larger structures still dictate the grounds for navigating these relations and the overall concept of respectability in the vocation.

5.1 Respectability of the Woman Dancer

The idea of respectability, in its subjective sense, depends on the distinct class experiences as different social classes would likely have different understandings of it depending on their Taste (Bourdieu 1987, Boucher 2003). When looking into how respectability applies to these women dancers, their taste and class experience are thus crucial in distinguishing their negotiations and that is exactly what I wish to explore here. In terms of the intertwining of women’s sexuality and the modernity of the state, Huq (2014) analysed how women articulate the relationship between religious/cultural norms and interiorities such as feelings, emotions, values, or inner states.

This conception ties together the dancer's image onstage and backstage and exhibits the curated identity formed around it (Goffman 1959). This is reflected in how women dancers carry themselves. From the negotiations we discussed earlier, the dancer maintains “face” when choosing their associations, the kinds of programs they will do, their behaviour, how friendly they are with people in the field, and so on. From costumes on stage to carrying them off stage, this image is curated following Goffman’s Presentation of Self (1959). Classical dancers often seek to leave a touch of their dancer identity in the clothes they wear off stage, choosing to drape more sarees, preferring to put on bindis, and almost navigating between the traditional woman’s image and their styles, which seeks to separate them to an extent from the “ordinary woman”. Despite such performative negotiations, there are instances where the dancer still faces criticism.

This is where we see the comparisons drawn from the image of the “New Woman” conceptualized by Chatterjee (1993) who projected that the respectable women of the post-colonial subcontinent has a threshold to reach, where they are heavily engaged in the inculturation of the next generation while maintaining themselves as a site for cultural and traditional expression. Something similar was also witnessed through Sinha (2004) and Sabur (2020) as the image that these dancers curate falls within this notion of the national identity of the women dancers of Bangladesh, carrying themselves in sarees, donning tips and taking an active “Bengali” approach.

Sharmila Banerjee recalls:

Living alone in the university hostel, there were scopes for people to point fingers at, but I tried to maintain decency through my clothing, image, behaviour, and actions that would

demand respect. If you can create that impression, it will always stay as you maintain it. But making the image is hard: keep yourself in check, move away from the crowds, maintain your appearance, choose where to associate with, and pick the shows that give you respect. So that one can tell that I am different from the 10 other girls. Your personality will then demand and deserve respect from society and you can tackle any negativity, hindrance, or obstacle.

In today's day and age, the added pressure of social media also affects dancers' experiences. Labiba (20) noted how the dancers who post on social media publicly are often faced with harsh comments that seek to question their morality or character, which can significantly affect them. Those targeted towards hurting the dancer's character are often witnessed in the sea of praises and encouraging comments. While many are lucky not to have faced such instances, some still do. Farah (28) notes how social media has created a different set and standard of audience, and dancers trained in classical for years often feel pressured to participate in the short clip based genre of dancing that has become popular now. This view again instils the view of dance as simply entertainment and constricts imagination beyond an art form or expression.

In terms of the negotiations, it is often the dancers choosing their associations that ultimately form their negotiations with respectability.

Benazir Salam Shumi, notes:

The standard of dance, the precedent, is set by a select few who became educated about what dance is. It's not just moving the body; dance engages the mind. I would only attend some of the programs or do all kinds of dance. I had that restraint, that taste to choose

what was respectful and what wasn't. It comes down to knowing one's place and selecting the respectable places to associate oneself with.

Eventually, it is the sense of class, cultural capital, and Taste that form the basis of these negotiations as the dancer then becomes connected to the wider network yet distinct in their choices, through the image they curate. They become part of the larger cultural, nationalistic movement that seeks to propagate and nurture the image of Bengali respectability. The Dancer, even though contested in questions of her morality and respectability still manages to negotiate a space within the public realm through performance, which in turn shapes the dance as a field in the country.

5.2 The Dancers Body

Moving from the image that the dancer creates, in performance, ultimately, the dancer's body is on display, which creates the scope for impositions, comments, and criticisms; the woman's body becomes a site for projections and speculations of broader society. Among the respondents, while some were shamed for being too fat, others were for being too thin in the name of concern about how they looked when dancing. The narrative comes to projecting their body and how the audience or society wishes to view it. This often leads to a tendency of heavy self-regulation. With the questions of morality, respectability, or even the display of their bodies looming large, many of the respondents sought to self-regulate within their already "traditional, modest" classical dance. Kheyra (25) noted having started using more safety pins, wearing more oversized blouses, and covering up when going to programs to reduce the remarks from people. There are cases of dancers working out and maintaining strict diets to get that ideal dancer's body, which may even affect their physical health and well-being in the long run. Kashvi Saha (20) and Ira

Bala (39) shared instances of being body-shamed when dancing even though they can perform on stage; it is often others who point it out as a problem.

In terms of the dancer's body, many respondents shared how they regulate their bodies by covering up their costumes and makeup as a reaction to the male gaze they face in public. They often go to the venue and get ready as moving about in costume and makeup results in stares from the public. Carrying a shawl or dupatta to cover oneself while leaving home for dance programs is a common practice and dancers also prefer covered vehicles to travel to these programs, avoiding public transportation altogether. Commuting is a big concern for women dancers because of this, on top of the general concern for a woman's safety in public. For dancers, this is intensified in the case of late programs and various venues they go to for performances.

Meghomala (24) explained:

When programs end late, there are safety concerns about how to commute as a woman and the type of transport we may get. We often feel unsafe in certain places. Because of this, before leaving the program, we have to wash off all our makeup, carry extra clothes, and change to avoid drawing attention.

There are however also exceptions, Ira Bala (39) explained that there is also a sense of empowerment when commuting with her dance troupe in costume, that shows that they are doing something different and this feeling that they are not alone. The dance group in this case acts as a big support system in front of curious stares from the general public.

We may assume that history no longer curtails the practices in the present; the notion becomes a remnant of today's reality. When asked whether they have faced allegations of their morality or respectability when dancing, respondents mostly agreed that the tags assigned to the profession or practice carry on. Kheya (25) shared instances when *Nortoki* was used to demean her character and question her morality as a dancer, even though it has very little relevance. While the word is connected to the historical tags of women dancers from pre-colonial or colonial era, the application in this meant a dancer with loose moral character. Meghomala also mentioned instances when her dancing was referred to as "*Noshtami*"- indecency without truly knowing about the art form by her college teachers. The tag or label thus marked the widespread view of women dancers that still exists today. (Tarah 2020) This is often done by larger society despite any actual idea of the history of the said dancers, projecting a homogenised, often exotified image of the women dancer who has "loose morals". This again goes back to how the "morally respectable woman"'s image is curated within the family and wider society, as someone who steers away from the "*Noshtami*" and upholds the moral order and bears the culture for the family's future generations. (White 2012)

CHAPTER 6

Navigating the field of Dance in Bangladesh

While the stance of the classical arts, its appreciation and its practice is mediated within a distinctive, class-based outlook or taste, there have been continual efforts to make it accessible through different platforms. Generally dance may have gotten that space in Bangladesh but the effort that goes behind dancing, from the training to the appearance to the physical effort of the dancers, often feels underappreciated or even compared, or demeaned to other art forms. This chapter will explore the nuances of these larger structures that shape the field of classical dance in Bangladesh and how the dancer navigates it.

When we look into how the wider image of Dance is shaped in Bangladesh, it is very apparently present in every occasion, from national holidays to festivals. And it is most often these trained classical dancers that are called into those platforms to perform. In this way the dance acts as the marker of the ethnic-cultural identity tradition, shaping the nationalist rhetoric around their practices. (Chatterjee 1989) However when placing this with the aforementioned instances of how the perception of these dancers really are, they serve only to fill the entertainment aspects of it and are easily let go when the question of respectability creeps in. This ties with what Munsif (2011) explores in seeing how the dancer is used and then let go to fill the nationalistic aspirations.

6.1 Is the Audience ready?

While exploring the value of dance, one of the recurring views among the respondents was that dance as an art form gets less respect and adoration than other art forms like singing, painting, or even theatre. Meghomala (24) and Ira Bala (39) pointed out how the audience would pay and

purchase tickets to see stage dramas and musical programs but would not buy tickets to watch dance shows. Regarding even behaviour or hospitality when doing programs, the respondents reflected upon small instances like the dressing room dancers are allocated backstage, the hospitality they are offered in terms of food or even the behaviour of the managing staff at events.

Jaya (20) explains that

Dancers are not treated with much respect. They may treat us with a lot of respect, but once the performance is done, they don't even care where we go or look back. Dancers are reduced to mere entertainers.

Among almost all the respondents and the critical persons interviewed, there was a consensus that the mass audience of the country needed more time to be ready to understand what classical dance is and, therefore, create the scope for its practice. There are two sides to this argument: first, there needs to be more knowledge on what classical dance is, and second, they view dance primarily as a means of entertainment and not artistic expression. Similar nationalistic aspirations that Munsri (2011) has for the audience to get acquainted with traditions through classical dance exist, but this is for a very selected group of society, defined by taste, class, and certain kinds of education. This where Bourdieu's concepts connect the understanding once again as Classical Dance is reflective marker to the particular class formation. This is based on the distinctive habitus of those within the "Cultural world or *Shangskritik jogot*", who appreciated and pushed forth the practices of "high art". Even when they reside within the upper-middle class, they are distinct in their taste and thus their class distinction, which to the masses feels disconnected, therefore cementing the "dancing girl" image that they are exposed through from popular media and urges people to move their daughters away to uphold respectability. The

need for Bengal to have its classical dance, the emergence of Gaudiya Nritya sheds light on the hierarchy that exists within this “high art” and in dance forms and aesthetics that have been curated through Bengali urban dances like RabindraNritya and *Srijanshil* or creative dance (Chatterjee 2009). Therefore, the question of whether the Bangladeshi audience is ready for classical dance or not comes to questions of class distinction and taste (Bourdieu 1984) which in turn circles back to the mass audience’s view of women dancers.

6.2 Institutions and Patronage

Many of the respondents pointed to the importance of having a nurturing environment in their dance classes from their gurus as motivating factors to make them pursue their goals in the long run. A large part of the foundation for classical Dancers is through their institutions and their Gurus. It is a major factor in not just fueling their passion but also providing the platform to become dancers. It is a very strong reason among the respondents to use their dance as an escape from everyday pressures of life. The nurture that dance students experience in their classes to help them grow as performers as well as the strong connections they generate with their troupe mates are big parts of these dancer’s lives. Ira Bala (39) mentions the classes, long rehearsals, preparations for programs and even organising costumes as vital experiences that shape the internal connections within the groups. The Guru in that case becomes the parental figure for these dancers.

Participants noted that when they started learning dance in their childhood, their classes would be filled with students, but as time progressed, the number of students began to decrease. While some noted that academic pressures or lack of concentration could be a reason for this decline, societal expectations from women, financial insecurity of the profession, and the general

perception of Dance contributed to this. Only a few students would complete the course and get academic certification. The reason for this was explained by one of the respondents as:

A girl, however much they may want, if their family and society keep pulling them back, they cannot continue on this path. Those who are strong are pushing through, but many are not able to stand their ground. Be it for extremism, the opinions of people, their remarks, or even the field itself are less intense than people's opinions are decreasing. It's discouraging to see the people you've danced with for so long slowly moving away; you feel hurt to lose your friends.

However, some were also sceptical of Bangladesh's dance scene's larger environment, which does not harbour collaboration but competition. Benazir Salam Shumi shed light on the internal politics within the dance scene of Bangladesh, which included a lack of education and proper knowledge about dance itself, within and outside the community. This has been going on for generations; while the field began with dancers who had strong footings and were the pioneers, there has become a tendency for branches to spread without gaining proper knowledge. The groupings amongst schools and artists and their internal competitions and clashes have left little environment for nourishing the art. She also points out the active choices of choreographers and dance teachers to pave a path for the next generations.

She explains that taking Dance as a Vocation in Bangladesh is impossible for three reasons. First, the environment of the dance field of Bangladesh, which is complicated, has politics in every aspect; there needs to be more respect among dancers, who, more than working together, are busy competing amongst themselves. Second, the financial future and pay in the field differ from

the effort given to learning, practising, and costume. When one thinks of survival, just dance is not possible. Last is the scope of growth in the field, as it still needs to be as reputed as a discipline in academia or as a vocation.

However, the most obvious lack of support as Sudeshna pointed out, is patronisation. Since it is a profession with less stability and consistency, it has to be backed up, promoted, and patronised by an institution like a government. She said that Dance in Bangladesh is stuck within a vicious cycle: there is less patronisation, hence less financial stability, and for that, people do not come, and it is not as respected as other forms. A few shows promote classical dance or platforms that give space to these dancers. Dancers are included often to create a spectacle rather than for the art form themselves, to entertain more than to present their art. Respondents explained that these spaces are highly commercialised, and to keep their art “respectable”, they steer away from those opportunities. These instances show how the respectability of Dance as an art form is mediated within Bangladesh which adds to the already present hindrances that a dancer faces to exist within the field.

In terms of navigation, the dancers then adhere to sustaining the art as a hobby while juggling stable income jobs or pursuing mainstream academics in order to secure their future. This may result in experiences like spending all day in the workplace and then allocating some time after work to dance practice as mentioned by Irabala (39) which is both physically and emotionally draining but the larger love, passion and dedication pushes them to fight through and continue their pursuit.

CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

While Dance in Bangladesh is a growing field and has come a long way, there are still nuances in which “Dance” is looked at with raised eyebrows. It is given respect but within bounds and dancers often have to tackle the multiple layers of negotiations with themselves, their families, and with larger society to create their own space. Given that classical dance is considered a feminine form and it is often women who mostly enter this space, the majority of these instances are faced by women dancers. This does not diminish the struggles of male dancers in any way; rather, by exploring the woman dancer’s space there is scope for a gendered study of the space male dancers occupy, their trials and tribulations, and is an excellent scope for future research.

7.1 Where are we headed?

The respondents were asked a final question about what they feel the future of dance can be in Bangladesh amidst tumultuous uncertainty and all kinds of ideologies cropping up. There was reassurance amongst the vital personnel about the firm standing of Dance because of its importance in culture and arts. They were hopeful of the new avenues dance has gotten over the years like the introduction of Dance departments in universities as a formal educational subject, the growth of learned scholars graduating and getting degrees in Dance studies, and also the scope for innovation and putting up new productions that are encouraging for many. Various efforts are being made to create new avenues for dance practice, notable among which can be initiatives like Kolpotoru’s adult-beginner classes which encourage women who were unable to dance to come back and learn at a more advanced age or Shurer Dhara’s Music for Development project that reaches singing and dancing to underprivileged children so that they can nurture their passions despite the social and financial obstacles.

Amongst the respondents, however, there was a mix of responses, with some being hopeful of its journey ahead and others also fearful. While some remarked that there needs to be more role models from this generation to popularise dance and spread it among the next generation, they were hopeful that dance would continue because of its strong traditional significance. They recognised that if someone has that immense will, love, and passion for dance, it is sure to continue and thrive, but it also requires awareness and support from society at large.

Sharmila Banerjee remarked about this saying:

On the one hand, there is a lot of growth in the sector, and the outlook has changed. But on the other hand, there is religious dogmatism or fanaticism, almost too extreme, which has led to taking two steps back. So there are both positive and negative impacts. But one must learn to balance these two spaces, learn, know, understand, and move forward, taking those in.

Although Dance receives a lot of attention, praise, and support, there needs to be more consciousness of how people deal with dancers, the respect they are given, and the appreciation they receive for their art. Taking into account the findings from this study, the aim was to begin the dialogue for dancers to be able to express their struggles. The multiple questions, layers of negotiations, from back-and-forth with family, patriarchy, religion, and broader society reflect how these women performers are existing within this space. Recognition of these questions and struggles that women dancers face can lead to more awareness and perhaps change. The role that these dancers play in their personal lives as well in the wider social network hint to the many ways they are engaged in the nationalistic project of upholding culture and heritage yet fall short with the assumed respectability that they are dealt with, attached to the profession or simply the

title of being a dancer. This study is thus conducted in hopes that more concrete studies of Dancers in Bangladesh be conducted in the future.

7.2 Future Direction

Dance Research in Bangladesh has been very limited, especially from an Anthropological lens. Through this study, I wished to at least touch on some of the crucial issues that Classical Dancers in Bangladesh face and there is definitely scope to build further research in the future. Some of the directions that can be taken would include:

1. A study focused Male classical Dancers and their struggles, their battles with questions of sexuality, gendered expectations of society and overall conception.
2. A more in depth study on the societal conception of Dance in Bangladesh, exploring the implications between arts and entertainment.
3. A study comparing and contrasting the experiences of rural and urban dancers in Bangladesh.
4. A exploratory study on the imposition of Islamic connotations on the practice of arts, specifically Dance within Muslim majority Bangladesh
5. A comparative study between the practice of Indian Classical Dance and local Folk Dance, exploring questions of legitimacy and cultural hierarchy.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your name, age, and religion?
2. What has been your educational background?
3. Occupation?
4. What is your marital status? What kind of family do you live in? (Nuclear/Joint)
5. How long have you been dancing and where?
6. What kind of dance do you do?

Research question 1: What are the cultural factors that shape the common conception of dance within the Bangladeshi Muslim Society?

7. When did you start and What made you pursue dance?
8. How does your family respond to practising or pursuing performative arts? Are they also in this field?
9. Have you ever faced any hindrances practising dance? (Expecting a story or sharing of an experience) [Intersectional experience- class gender and religion] If yes what were those challenges?
10. How did you overcome those challenges (Expecting information about class and social network, or other safety nets)
11. Do you think dance, as an art form, receives equal or as much appreciation as other art forms like singing or painting, within your community?

Research question 2: What are the points of negotiation to establish respectability?

12. How do you define Dance as a profession or artistic pursuit in terms of your understanding of respectability?
13. Have there been instances when dance provided you with certain kinds of freedoms or liberty (Trying to understand Agency through dance, economic incentive)
14. Have you ever faced any challenges in your pursuit of dance as a woman?

15. Have you ever faced any comments or instances when respectability was questioned for the profession of dancing, (to prohibit or discourage you from continuing)? And how have you handled them?
16. Why do you think you have been able to pursue dance all these years, what were your supports?

For those who have left the field,

17. What made you stop your pursuit of dance? Was there any particular instance or incident that caused it?

Research question 3: Where does that leave the practice of dance as a common expression of ethnic-cultural identity for women in particular?

18. Despite all the obstacles, why do you think people still pursue dance as an art form?
19. Do you think other forms of ethnic-cultural identity expression are taking the place of dance in Bengali Society?
20. In the institutions you attend or are a part of, have you witnessed any significant change in terms of the composition of students? Be it for class, religion, or gender?
21. Where do you think we are headed in terms of the practice of dance in Bangladesh with the rise of extremism and polarising ideologies cropping up every day?
22. (DANCE as a vocation, sustainability as a profession.)

Do you think it is possible to continue dance as a profession or vocation, what are the factors that allow it, or the barriers that do not?