

Understanding Chhau Dance and the Mask in it through Mimesis

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Abstract

This paper looks into the relationship between Chhau Dance and Mimesis. Chhau dance as a performing tradition strongly relates to the imitation of nature, the gods and goddesses and human behavior and expression. Chhau is similar as other dance-drama forms, narrative myths and popular epic tales. It works as a medium of oral transmission of cultural and moral thoughts of the communities. The choice of the subject that is mimesis in Chhau may sound odd because these ideas are quite different due to their different context between Indian Greek theories of aesthetics. Despite the variety of cultures, the human emotive experience has certain universal dimensions and I would like to explore the way mimesis works in Chhau performance. How the imitation is done in these forms of Chhau dance? To demonstrate this aspect I shall take some basic concepts of mimesis and Chhau dance.

Keywords: Chhau, Dance, Masks, Mimesis, Representation.

Chhau Dance

The traditions of Indian dance and dance-dramas are among the most remarkably multifaceted and diverse theatrical cultures of the world. The geographical immensity, different ecological circumstances, diversity of races, regions and their languages, the compound religious beliefs and ritual practices and elaborate social structure have all contributed in creating the most colorful panorama of dance and dance-drama traditions. Chhau dance as a folk dance-drama form is in widespread practice in the mountainous and forest areas of Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha. The origins of the Chhau dance are still ambiguous. The word 'Chhau' is interpreted in different ways by different scholars. Some say that the word 'Chhau' arises from the Sanskrit word 'Chhaya' which means shadow. While others disagree and argue that the word 'Chhau' comes from the word 'Chauni' which means camp for soldiers and armies. The reason behind the hypothesis of the word 'chhau' derived from the word 'Chauni' is that Chhau originated in the

mock fights of the Oriya *paikas* (warriors) who fought rhythmically to the accompaniment of indigenous music instrument in Odisha state. It can certainly be said that it is originally based on martial art dance form and is considered a genre of tribal martial dance form.

The Chhau dance in Seraikella in Jharkhand and the neighboring areas including Purulia in West Bengal and Mayurbhanj in Odisha, is mostly performed as part of the annual festival *Chaitra Parva*, which is celebrated every year starting from the *Chait* month of the Hindu calendar, the new cycle of agriculture which is around March-April. There are many Chhau dance groups present in the region. There are mostly the Kurmi community people from Purulia and Kanasri people from Seriakela in these Chhau dance groups who took up Chhau dance as their vacation (Biswas and Ghosh 192). The history of the Chhau dance is not clear but it is apparently believed that sometime over a century ago the Kurmi people and other indigenous tribes began this martial art form. Later, in the course of time people came in contact with Hindu religion and rulers. In order to establish the new religion and faith in depth, the ruler had modified the traditional war and hunting dances so that they came to illustrate the traditional mythology of the Hindus. Most of the dances performed in the Chhau festival are short dramatizations of episodes from Hindu mythology which deal in some way with fighting or hunting. The steps of the dances are the steps of war dances or the movements of huntsmen stalking their target or the movements of the animals they used to catch (Arden, 1971, p. 70)

After the dominant nationalist era, when classical Indian dance was defined and classified, the patrons of Chhau dance desired to be recognised as a classical Indian dance form; it was categorised as a semiclassical dance. There are three representative styles of Chhau, named according to the places where they developed, and are known as Seraikela Chhau, Mayurbhanj Chhau and Purulia Chhau. There are many similarities among the three styles, primarily in their martial strain, and consistently in their religious rituals and system of music. They differ stylistically from one another according to their theatrical nature and the sources of their stories. Each has its own charm and aesthetic appeal. The most distinctive aspect differentiating the three styles is the use of masks. Mayurbhanj Chhau does not use masks, whereas Seraikela and Purulia Chhau use masks. The way these two styles of Chhau masks also differs greatly in terms of their function and appearance. All Chhau have their own stories of myths and origins. The

origin of Saraikela Chhau is considered from *Parikanada*- *pari* means shield and *Kanda* means sword that is a kind of martial art form. At present it has embodied many other themes such as *Ardhnarishwara*, *Radha-Krishna*, *Hara-Parvati*, Durga killing Mahishasur etc. The earliest theme of Saraikela Chhau was simpler and closer to *Parikhanda* exercises such as number of *sober* (hunter), *Dhibor* (fisherman) *Nabik* (boatman), and *Astrawand*(sword play). There are mask dances which evolved around natural element like *Ratri*(night), *sagar*(ocean), *Hansa*(swan), *Mayur*(peacock) (Biswas and Ghosh 202).

Mimesis in Chhau Dance

The concept of mimesis has been defined, described and interpreted in various ways and a plethora of works have already been done in the realm of the concept of mimesis. Presenting some of definitions and studies on mimesis I will try to explain mimesis in context of Chhau dance-drama form. What does mimesis in Chhau mean? Does mimesis in Chhau mean only physical appearance or representation of imitation which is - expressive mimesis or does it mean the representation in symbolic way which is - suggestive mimesis. For instance, direct representation of some mythic character i.e. someone present himself in that character by dress, style and everything, by physical and cultural appearance, this type of imitation of art can be expressive mimesis. Other is the representation of something in symbolic way for instance in *Natyashastra*, many dances, its *mudras*, stances reflect the imitation in very symbolically such as the dances -Bharatnattyam, Kathakali etc. in which some hand and foot gestures try to depict something or some mythic character. All these types of dance represent symbolically and it can be called suggestive mimesis. Before delving into these questions let me briefly describe some studies and concepts of mimesis here.

The term mimesis is one of the oldest terms in literary and artistic history. Mimesis, a Greek word is simply translated around such meanings as “imitation”, “representation” and “emulation,” which illustrates the relationship between artistic image or any art and reality, as art is copy of real, the truth. From its very origin it was thought that mimesis is all about artistic representation of human social behavior and to the ways in which we know and interact with others and with our environment. Mimesis originally referred to the physical act of miming and mimicking something. In words of Matthew Potolsky, “mimesis can be said to imitate a dizzying

array of originals: nature, truth, beauty, mannerisms, actions situations, examples, ideas (Potolsky, 2006, p. 1).” It is also true that no one translation and interpretation can be considered adequate to cover the real complexities of mimesis. However, the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle are the most referred philosophers with regard to the conceptualization of mimesis. Plato in his *Republic* approaches mimesis in a more philosophical sense and does not limit mimesis to only the aesthetical sense. According to Potolsky, Plato begins the discussion of art in Book X by challenging the reality of mimesis:

This metaphor [Plato’s metaphor of mirror] mocks the idea that art requires special skills and methods. The craftsman does not in fact make anything, but only passively reflects what already exists, and does so ‘quickly’, almost automatically. Mimesis produces mere ‘phantoms’, not real things. It is at once dependent and deluded, just as a mirror is empty and inessential without something to reflect (Potolsky, 2006, p. 23).

In Simple words, Plato discards poets and their poetries, art works from their ideal state, the reality because he considers that the poetry, music, paintings, dance are mere a form of imitation. According to Plato, mimesis is not serious, it is mere play rather than true reality and knowledge. In the words of Leon Golden, “Plato warns us that imitation is not, and can never be reality; that it is far inferior to reality (Golden, 1975, p. 121).” According to Potolsky’s understanding of Plato’s mimesis, Plato’s theory of mimesis is very much a theory of political life where the imitator is not just a bad craftsman but a danger to the wellbeing of the republic (Potolsky, 2006, p. 29).

Like Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle’s *Poetics* is also a foundational text for the understanding of mimesis. Aristotle counters Plato’s understanding that mimesis is not real at all and opposed to reason. Aristotle asserts that mimesis is a real thing worthy of critical analysis (Potolsky, 2006, p. 32). Plato banishes all forms of art arguing it as mere imitation of the ideal but Aristotle appreciates art in its depiction of reality, in its function. Plato separates mimesis from the real and the essential and equates it with pleasure and emotion rather than the reason and the necessities of life. However, it certainly can be argued that a minor but significant shift occurs in Aristotle’s analysis of mimesis. Aristotle defines mimesis as a craft with its own internal laws

and aims. And Aristotle treats mimesis in his poetry, the poem, for Aristotle, is much like a natural object. We can study its parts and structure, classify it according to kind and aim, and determine in individual cases whether the objects achieve its inherent objectives, whether it is good. Aristotle's initial analysis of mimesis also embodies the argument that art has a specific nature of its own. For Plato, poetry and painting, epic and tragedy are essentially the same in their imitation of the real. Aristotle differentiates arts by the material of object. Painters use figures and colors, musician use melody and rhythm, poets use rhythm, language, melody. These are all mimetic, but they use different tools for imitation. Aristotle's concept of mimesis explains what is distinctive about our experience of art. He argues that poetry is mimetic which provides a space to imagine its subject matter as real while recognizing that it is illusory at the same time. Giving example of the play Oedipus, Aristotle states when we see an actor playing Oedipus, this actor is clearly a substitute through which we can imagine what a real Oedipus might be like. When we read Aristotle's ideas on art, we are in direct contact with the ideas, and there is nothing more real to imagine. While watching a play when a character kills another character in the play, we do not call the police. This is because we know that we are not seeing a real event but only two actors imitating real world possibilities; because we are conscious of the mimesis involved in art. The scene of murder on stage presents us a chance to reflect on nature and real human behavior in so that we can lead a more thoughtful life.

When we look at the Sanskrit theories of mimesis, it presents a different idea of mimesis. According the book "*Mirror of Gesture*" by Anand Coomarswami (1917), the whole Sanskrit theory also depicts the mimesis concept. There are descriptions as hands denotes nine planets, these depiction of hand gestures goes from page number 41 to 51 denoting the gods, rivers, world, oceans, trees, animals, water creatures, flying creatures, are constructed by the God Brahma. But symbols are not created out of imitation or mimicry of the things produced. Here the concept of mimesis is not same as Greek mimesis because the performance in Greek mimesis imitates the same, the real; if anyone wants to perform the role of god Zeus, he has to imitate the character of Zeus by appearance and style of acting. Aristotle's mimesis describes the same that art constructs direct contact with idea i.e. the real Zeus may be like the character. But there are many subjects and things that also depend on the social and cultural codes that are found in many representation or a sort of imitation, For example, the word tree for actual tree, these letters in

the word ‘tree’ does not represent actual ‘tree’ though represents ‘tree’ and it cannot be considered mimesis. In similar way the seminal text Natyashastra discusses about symbols which are not necessarily a product of mimesis. They can be suggestive and expressive. The dynamics of mimesis of Indian performance is different from Greek mimesis. Many times it uses symbols to perform although these symbols are constructed through social and cultural code. In this context, K. C. Pandey presents the word “Anukriti” for mimesis (Pandey, 1956, p.7) whereas Parul Dave Mukharji asserts translation of “anukriti” as “performative mimesis.” She presents range of mimetic terminologies and their literal translation such *anukṛti* (performative mimesis), *satya* (truthful), *sadrishya* (verisimilitude), *pratiti* (probable/convincing), *anulomyam* (along the natural direction of hair), *sajiva* (living), and brings the problem of translation into the forefront(Mukharji, 4).¹ Here it becomes a problem of translation because mimesis can’t be translated as anukriti. Both words have different contexts, meanings although there are some possibilities of similarity. In terms of representation and enactment of something, there are various ways such as the modes of presentation (*dharmis*), styles (*vritis*) and types of enacting (*abhinaya*). Indian art and aesthetics are all about *rasa* (modes of feeling and experience). The art of no other culture in the world has shown such courage and sincerity in expressing the entire gamut of nine *rasas* or moods and emotions (Mukharjee, 1965, p. 95). These nine *Rasas* are: 1.Silence (*Shanta*), 2.love (*sringara, prema*), 3.Joy, gaiety or humor (*hasya*), 4.Compassion or pathos (*karuna*), 5. Fury or violence (*Raudra*), 6.Courageous valor (*Vira*), 7.Awesomeness (*bhayanaka*), 8.Loathsomeness(*bibhatsa*), and 9.Wonder (*adhbhuta*). Additionally, Radhakamal Mukharjee asserts that any art can be kept under these nine *rasa* of Indian aesthetics that represents emotions and moods of people.

Since Chhau dance and the *rasas* of the dance comes from the same social, cultural, economical context, it is very clear to relate and connect Chhau dance to the art of mimesis – the *anukritis* through these *rasas*. There is the mask of demons in Chhau dance that display *Bhibhatsa* and *Bhayanaka* *rasa*, or the masks of Gods that depicts the *Vira* *rasa* or the Radha-Krishna story that depicts the *Shringara* or *Prem* *Rasa*. There are many universal similarities of mimesis or imitation in both contexts – in Indian and Greek. For instance, there are also some Greek performances in which masks are used and masks are also used in various performance in India.

¹<https://www.collegeart.org/pdf/programs/international/mukherji.pdf>

The uses of masks are to imitate the 'real character' in both the contexts. So, how is this imitation done in these three forms/repertoires of Chhau Dance? John Arden describes this similarity of aesthetics of Greek and Indian in context of Chhau dance of Puruliya West Bengal. He says that for the first time he understood what Greek tragedy must have been like in the days of Thespis (Arden, 1971, p. 68). The Chhau dance, in a rural setting, becomes a drama form to bring the gods down to earth for a few hours when the dance is performed. When Arden came to India in search of Chhau dance, he watched the performers use of masks of god - performing as the imitation of God in Chhau. Arden describes:

Ganesha is a god with an elephant head. As danced in the Chhau he is a small boy wearing a suit of black jacket and trousers, all spangled with glitter and embroidery, bare feet, bells around his ankles, and a huge mask entirely covering his head and shoulders. A cheekily tilted trunk about eighteen inches long. A crown of colored beadwork nodding above his white brow. He walked into the arena very slowly, pacing like a toy soldier. There was nothing human about him at all. He wasted an audience already prepared by deep belief and the music of the drums man incarnate deity who was gracing their village by his presence. It was as though there had been a fair chance that he might never turn up at all, it seemed of no importance that everyone had observed the boy who danced him walk into the street three hours earlier carrying the mask and then drink a glass of tea before getting into his costume. Ganesha strutted, he threw out his little brown feet, he tinkled and jingled and some of his movements made me laugh. They made the villagers laugh too Ganesha in the legends is a mischievous little fellow, the favorite child of his divine parents, easily frightened by malevolent deities but on occasion sturdy and surprisingly brave ((Arden, 1971, p. 69).

Like these imitations or appearances of gods, performers imitate almost all the characters of Hindu Mythology and beyond the mythology in Chhau dance. All performers in mask represent something whether it is god or demons or animal. Here we can find the Greek concept of mimesis as Aristotle says that art presents the reality at one level but also allows us to have certain detachment. The dance is basically a tribal martial dance form which comes from tribals' earlier life style when they were dependent on hunting and other natural sources for their

livelihood. The steps and movement of the dance depict the same as if they are trying to catch animals or hunt them. The mimesis is considered as the artistic representation of human social behavior and interaction with others and with our environment. Mimesis is also argued as the physical act of miming and mimicking something. The varieties of imitating various life acts in Chhau dance such as *sober* (hunter) style, *Dhibor*(Fisherman)style or *Nabik* (boatman) style, these styles of Chhau depict the socio-cultural realm of general life which somehow tried to display the better life. Saraikela Chhau dance performer Carolina Prada in her experience writes,

The body language, sometimes broad and sometimes contained revealed the mood of the character, the tala (rhythm) flowing with calm dhol (drum) beats and then suddenly with vigorous strokes, enlivened him and gave me a very strong feeling of that which is not shown, but can be seen; which is not said but can be heard. The dancer in a mask conveyed more than any other facial expression, because his message came from the inside.²

Her description shows the mimetic representation of Aristotle's idea where there should be figures and colors for a painter; there should be melody and rhythm for a musician. Masks appear as a tool and material in Chhau dance. No performer can imitate or perform any god or character without the mask. However, there is a great difference of mimesis or imitations within the stage Chhau performance and the community Chhau performance in rural settings. As the Chhau word of dance has come from "chhaya" i.e. "shadow" it means, this is a shadow of something. It may be the character of any mythic history or local oral story character, not like the Greek mimesis i.e. the whole imitation of an idea itself. In Chhau kind of performances the audience or spectator also knows that this is not real rather a shadow. As it is also argued that Chhau comes from the word "chauni" means military camp or army camp and later these army's practice movement, steps and gesture appeared as a form of Chhau dance. At present time Chhau has also come to arena of professionalism where Guru or specialist dancer trains artists. With the new stage setting of Chhau dance the question arises - whom these new stage artists imitate? The Chhau dance as ritual performance imitates its God or some oral tales that are based on the original gestures and movement constructed by social and cultural paradigm while the new stage Chhau artist from stage imitate their Guru or Trainer. The new Chhau stage dance and the Chhau

² <http://chhau dances angam.wordpress.com/>

ritual dance replicate the same complications of understanding mimesis as the idea of mimesis of Plato and Aristotle.

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