

# TRANSLATION, TRANSFORMATION, TRANSCENDENCE

by Shana Sippy

## I. A translation has to be true to the translator no less than to the originals. ~ A.K. Ramanujan

Translation is one of the most significant and fundamental of our human practices, and Rance Ramaswamy is a master translator.

The great scholar of Indian poetry A.K. Ramanujan wrote that translation is always a choice and an interpretation and must “be true to the translator no less than to the originals.” Ramanujan did not presume that there was a single original from which a translator worked. Even before the translator’s encounter with the subject, it has multiple iterations—personal, oral, musical, dramatic, textual, theological, psychological, architectural, philosophical. The translator seeks to convey the many valences of these originals, all the while conscious that he or she is creating something else altogether new: a new original through translation. Rance’s

language is Bharatanatyam, and she mines the poetics and metaphors of Bharatanatyam’s lexicon for riches.

We might understand every utterance or gesture shared between two human beings to be a type of translation: an attempt to convey one’s deepest sentiments, the intricacies of a concept, or even the simplest of commands to another in a language that the other can understand. While I have known Rance for only a short time, I have seen her move with tremendous joy and ease as she communicates and translates. Not only does she translate through the body of her work as she engages and teaches the dancers in her company, but she also translates for communities and a range of publics.

Rance moves, in the course of a given day, from translating stories, emotions, and gestures to a 12-year-old student striving to embody her heritage through dance, to animated

collaborations with artists and scholars from across the country and world. In a single day, she might share her love of Indian art forms with young children—painting pictures with rice flour, moving her fingers back and forth with a deceptive ease as she creates complex *kolam* patterns to welcome auspiciousness—and then move on to thoughtful study of the philosophical texts and artistic traditions that will be incorporated into her next piece.

## II. Tamil Sangam poetry classifies five different landscapes: mountains, forests, fields, seashores, and deserts. Each place is associated with specific moods and seasons, crops and flora, relationships and devotion.

In classical Tamil philosophy, one’s location is significant and symbolic. The places where one works and sings, dances and

prays, are believed to both affect and mirror one's relationships and experiences. Raneé's life is testament to the idea that individuals are continually transformed by their environments.

Until the late 1960s, Bharatanatyam was virtually unheard of outside India, and it was not until the 1980s that Indian children living in places like London and California began to take classes as a means of cultural instruction and preservation. To this day, however, very few Bharatanatyam artists have opened up this dance form to non-Indian audiences and artists, and even fewer have taken it onto center stage in the contemporary arts world. Raneé has truly brought Bharatanatyam to new heights and venues.

Like those of other artists working outside of South Asia, Raneé's performances have come to be seen as de facto representatives of all that is Indian. To be an "ethnic" artist in America involves a tremendous responsibility—one that

is not always sought out, but is felt nonetheless. The task of representation can be daunting; it is both a burden and a gift. It can constrain and liberate. One is not simply allowed to be an artist, but becomes a cultural ambassador subject to the scrutiny of multiple (and often contradictory) worlds. Raneé assumes this role of representative with humility and care. It is always dangerous when people take the part for the whole, when they see the single Indian woman or dance company as representative of all Indian traditions, cultures, and politics. Raneé's vision as a dancer and choreographer makes these simplified receptions virtually impossible.

Americans who encounter south Indian dance often assume it to be a reproduction of a tradition that was carried across the ocean by immigrants. Of course, there is no such thing as a fixed tradition anywhere; traditions are always evolving, drawing new into old and

old into new. Nowhere is this relationship between present and past more evident than it is in Bharatanatyam. Modern Bharatanatyam has been fashioned through the lens of history. It is both classical and contemporary, shaped in conversations among the ancient, medieval, colonial, and modern.

The form that we find today emerged most directly out of a revival of south Indian dance traditions that occurred in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Raneé's contribution to the long, sometimes circuitous and ruptured conversation that is Bharatanatyam truly represents a significant turn only possible in our globalized present. Ironically, Raneé's awakening in Bharatanatyam happened here in Minnesota when she saw her now-guru Alarmel Valli perform. While she was familiar with Bharatanatyam from her upbringing in India, it was here—in a diasporic context—that Raneé began an ongoing transnational exchange with her teacher and

other artists. She has brought the richness of that dialogue to Minnesota in the ways she has shaped Ragamala.

Ranee's vision has both delicately preserved and radically transformed Bharatanatyam dance. Customarily, Bharatanatyam is a solo dance form; Ranee has re-visioned it as an ensemble. Traditionally, the study of Bharatanatyam was exclusive not just to Indians but to members of specific castes. Ranee has opened the form beyond the provincial, training devoted, serious, and accomplished dancers of all backgrounds to study and perform what she holds as a sacred art. While it may not seem notable in our modern multicultural milieu, the ethnic, racial, and religious diversity of Ragamala, in light of Bharatanatyam's history, is truly significant.

In addition to drawing others into the rich world of Bharatanatyam and the study of Indian artistic, mythological, and philosophical traditions more generally, Ranee has allowed herself to be drawn into the worlds of other artists: Minnesotan, Japanese, Indonesian, and

indigenous north Indian, to name only a few. She is continually expanding her field of vision and the boundaries of the stages upon which she creates. She makes connections and finds collaborators in the most unlikely places, allowing environments and relationships to transform her conceptions. And yet, as an artist tied to the landscape of southern India, she always returns to the soil, texts, poems, and gestures of her traditions to find her ground, ensure her footing, and shape her interpretations.

As a result of Ranee's ever-expanding vision, the landscape of Minnesota dance has been transformed, and so too have the contours of Bharatanatyam.

**III. Not all art is beautiful, nor need it be. Not all art seeks to inspire the feeling of awe that is best described in language most commonly associated with religious experience. Ranee, however, strives for beauty and seeks to**

**bring her audiences into a state of transcendence.** Transcendence itself does not require a denial of the mundane—but Ranee's work promises that productions can elevate the entire collective of performers and audience members alike. The beauty and lyricism of the movement, the music, the costumes, and the poetics invite transcendence and awaken the sublime.

Because Ragamala is a company performing south Indian dance primarily in the West, there is always the possibility that an effect of transcendence is evoked through an encounter with "otherness"—the exoticism of an Asian mystique. But Ranee's gift as a translator has meant that rather than capitalizing on the mystery of otherness, she creates bridges, striving to make accessible, human, and personal the stories, music, and experiences that might otherwise seem foreign. And for those from the Indian community, to whom Bharatanatyam is familiar, associated with home and tradition, Ranee's



work pushes the edges of expectation and expands the horizons of what south Indian dance conveys.

The beauty that Raneé crafts so carefully is not solely an expression of conventional aesthetics or the display of a simple conception of joy or love. Through sympathetic portraits and beautiful renderings of emotions, Raneé's work also probes the depths of pain and injustice. The range of her work is well described through the south Indian trope of *akam* (interior) and *puram* (exterior), which animates Tamil poetics. Akam—the interior, private emotions that map the domestic landscapes of lovers and the self—is both mirrored by and contrasted with puram, the

public declarations and disputations that are mapped onto political and military landscapes. In Hindu devotional poetry and theology, the relationship between lovers is often metaphorical, symbolizing the desire of the devotee for the divine. Even within love itself, poet-theologians discuss the spectrum of emotions, from honeyed sweetness to jealousy and rage, from ecstasy to devastation.

In many of Raneé's works, the personal, complex psychological narratives of individuals, told in ancient mythological and poetic traditions, provide entry points for the audience to see perspectives that are not always immediately in view. Through dancing the beauty in emotions and landscapes, Raneé allows her audience to transcend their own lives and perspectives. Yet, in this transcendence, her work is always deeply immanent, both in and of this world. Through movement, not only is the spectrum of people's emotional lives brought into relief, but nature, plants, trees, the earth itself, are also animated and made

palpable. **Raneé's dance is a prayer, asking us to see the beauty in every being and to preserve the sacredness of the earth.** While not didactic, her work opens minds and hearts to see the personal and the public, the self and the world, in new and profound ways.



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