

Book Review: Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema by Usha Iyer. Oxford University Press (2020)

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In their new book, *Dancing Women: Choreographing Corporeal Histories of Hindi Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2020) Usha Iyer, who is Assistant Professor of art and art history at Stanford University, delves into the dances performed by women in Hindi cinema through the lens of cultural history, as well as from the perspective of women performers' agency and mobility. Their in-depth analyses of how these actresses transformed the landscape of performance in post-independence Indian cinema, through virtuosity in dance and new movement vocabularies, as well as the introduction of choreographers, props and costumes, addresses the complex and critical historical underpinnings of cinematic choreography. The book underscores the importance of studying dance and choreography in Indian cinema in both postcolonial and cultural studies. It is also an important work in understanding female agency, politics and identity through the lens of performance.

While several authors have traced the connections between Indian cinema dance and performance traditions that precede it, Usha Iyer draws out the deep resonance between music and dance and the notion of a "multi-bodied choreomusicking body". They argue, "A choreomusicological approach to the Hindi film song- and- dance sequence advances the concept of a "choreomusicking body," composed of a conjoining of the playback singer's voice, the on-screen performers' gestural repertoire, the music director's composition, the choreography team, as well as the bodies of the often- nameless musicians who produce the instrumental soundtrack for the number, among many others" (55). This notion is critically important to the understanding of Indian cinema dance as well as the virtuosity of the artistes and choreographers. Iyer painstakingly re-reads iconic dance sequences, etching the labor of the background dancers, musicians and singers using archival, anecdotal, and visual sources. In doing this, they weave together the threads of the performer's repertoire with the choice of playback singer and the particular musical composition. Absolutely fascinating are the recounting of rehearsals, training, practice, delight, pride and identity of the performers.

The International Journal of Screendance 13 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.18061/ijsd.v13i1.8886>



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IJSD Volume 13: Choreographing the Archive

Through the work of several actresses notably Sadhana Bose, Azurie, Vyjayanthimala Bali and Helen Ann Richardson Khan known mononymously as Helen, Iyer documents the stunning onscreen improvisations that result from an amalgamation of classical Indian dance styles like Bharatanatyam and the range of international movement vocabularies that have informed the style of Indian film dance since the 1920s. They also highlight how the dance virtuosity of the lead actress enables the actress to forge the narrative of the film. Through detailed analyses, such as that of the song, "*Bakad bam bam baaje damru*", Iyer reimagines the inter-relationships between music and dance in the study of Indian cinema, centralizing the embodied experience of sound, and emphasizing how aural and visual gestures negotiate discursive meaning and narrative through inherent choreomusical aesthetics. Furthermore, Iyer organizes the choreography into dance styles with detailed descriptions of techniques of hand gestures, body isolations and clearly marks the performance numbers from the production numbers. By doing this level of technical analysis, Iyer clarifies the extraordinary efforts of each female film dancer; their virtuosity and the immense interconnected undercurrent of agency and creative support.

A key area that the book traverses is the "national impetus behind cultural reform" where Usha Iyer masterfully brings out the various conflicting points of view that led to the invention of new dance traditions across India. In the South, they highlight the roles played by Rukmini Devi Arundale and T. Balasarawathi in the history of Bharatanatyam: from temple, to court, to the proscenium stage and film. In the East, they also write about the eclectic blend of dance forms that Rabindranath Tagore invited into Santiniketan. They highlight his efforts to create a new dance style liberated from classical Indian dance narratives, and his critique of the nationalist sexual politics. This spanning of multiple movements across India, that foregrounded dance in redefining a national narrative of culture, and the reframing of the modern Indian feminine is key to understanding how public performance, social respectability and reform were assuaged in film dance.

Functioning as a synthesis of the historical forces leading to the evolution of film dance technique and aesthetics, as well as the changing landscapes of the purpose of dance in Indian cinema, Usha Iyer's book spans the movements and creative labor of the leading lady, the background dancers, the choreographer and the invisible labor. Placing social history alongside film, while correlating to other performance cultures, migrations, and technologies that influence on-screen dance making as well as audience responses, Usha Iyer emphasizes the undercurrents of inter-connected and related networks that produce new forms of mobility.

Biography

Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram is a dance educator, choreographer and poet. Trained in Bharatanatyam, Butoh and Flamenco, Sandhiya has led and performed in

several collaborative performances between dance styles, served on the Jury Panel for the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival and enjoys working at the intersection of neuroscience and dance. She is currently experimenting with screen dance to explore the interconnections between body and the natural world.

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<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190938734.001.0001>