

Dancing Toes: Expressing Self in Mrinalini Sarabhai's *The Voice of the Heart*

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Abstract

Autobiographies of public women relate that women are no less than men in intellect and skill. This paper will explore the construction of the various aspects of self in the autobiography of a public woman – Mrinalini Sarabhai, the development of her 'self' as a renowned public figure and how she fulfils her role as a daughter, as a wife, and as a mother. An exploration of the self of the author will bring out how she fulfilled her domestic roles, people who encouraged and motivated her to pursue her education and subsequently her career, her experiences in acquiring the status of a celebrity, and how the private self and the public self of a celebrity woman exist without clashing with each other.

Keywords:

Dancing Toes, Expressing Self, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Voice of the Heart

Earlier there were hardly any women's autobiographies that documented their achievements in public life. Women were expected to conform to the traditional roles of daughters, wives and mothers assigned to them by the social structure and were allowed to speak on one predominant theme: their love-affairs or their marriage or life after marriage and once a woman entered into the orbit of marriage, the only priority in her life was her man, his career and their children. If ever she achieved anything, she could not write about it in the pages of her autobiography, as Patricia Spacks (1980) writes:

Although each author has significant, sometimes dazzling accomplishments to her credit, the theme of accomplishment rarely dominates the narrative. . . . Indeed to a striking degree they fail directly to emphasize their own importance, though writing in a genre which implies self-assertion and self-display. (p. 113-114)

Women had to face many odds and adversities in gaining recognition as public figures along with maintaining homes and they took up the challenges and overcame all obstacles as Sarah Gilead (1988) explains that "the conflicted subject dramatises not only universal problems of identity, the desiring self forced by the exigencies of civilisation to relinquish or rechannel desires, but the particular problems of women who in patriarchal societies are cast into the contradictory roles of culture-preserver and culture-threat" (p. 43). Their erasure from the mainstream autobiographical discourse urged them to voice their achievements in their lives through their life-writing. Jane Marcus (1988) has pointed out that: "What seems significant is not the female struggle to enter male public discourse, which feminist scholars have documented, but the recognition of the

inability of that discourse to include their voices in its history. . . ." (p. 114).

Autobiographies of public women modify the laid down conceptions of the narrative structure of conventional autobiography. In men's autobiographies, generally, the authorial voice has remained by and large monophonic where only a single voice is heard. Autobiographies of public women subvert the established notion of the genre and represent experimental version of autobiography displaying polyphonic narrative structures where multiple voices of their family, friends, relatives and media-personalities are heard and they overlap with the authorial voice. Interviews, photographs, news reports in popular print and electronic media, journals, magazines and newspapers that often make them nostalgic are inserted in their autobiographies to commemorate and monumentalize their success in public domain and that they wish to share them with their readers. This act of insertion of photographs and interviews in their autobiographies depicts two aspects of public women's life-writing: first, the pictorial renderings bring into focus their relational selves, and second these images show how they value their ordinariness. In what appears to be candid expressions of their lives, these women successful in public sphere have endeavoured to maintain a delicate balance between their public as well as their private lives by giving priorities to both. Jane Marcus (1988) has aptly remarked:

As public figures of great intellectual or artistic achievement, the women . . . used their autobiographies to show that they were also women, creatures for whom relationship and community were very important. Their achievements were brilliant, but they show themselves in the mediocrity of their lives as women who are connected to community by the ordinariness

and materiality of their womanhood. (p. 127)

This paper will analyse the construction of self in *The Voice of the Heart* (2004), the renowned autobiography of Mrinalini Sarabhai, the veteran dancer, choreographer, poet, writer, environmentalist, humanist and dance instructor. An analysis of her autobiography will also include social and cultural conditions of the time in which she reared herself up to become public woman. An exploration of her 'self' in her autobiography demonstrates how Mrinalini has established herself as a dancer, how she has worked to spread *Bharatanatyam* beyond the border of India, how she has used the art of dance and its appeal to audience to eradicate evils of our society and to bring change. Mrinalini (2004) writes in her autobiography, "Continuously through the years people ask me, 'What is dance to you?' My reply usually is, 'It is my breath, my passion, my self'" (p. 13). She also portrays her life as a girl, her relationship with her parents and with her in-laws, and then how she became a good wife, mother and grandmother and also how she continuously struggled to pursue her career as dancer. Apart from being a loving wife of the renowned personality, Vikram Sarabhai, she has been a responsible mother of two very famous personalities – Mallika Sarabhai and Kartikeya Sarabhai.

Her autobiography reveals that throughout her life, Mrinalini has identified her inner self with the art of dance. Her passion for dance and her inner self are inseparable; both aspire to rise to the same domain – divinity. When she dances, she seems to enact it as divine art. Mrinalini (2004) writes, "When I dance there is a spiritual energy that emanates from the inner depths of my being. Time and again critics have written and people have spoken about this quality" (p. 219). Describing what dance is, Mrinalini explains that the outer expression of face and body involved in dance is the index of the inner sense of the dancer

and a well-trained dancer succeeds when she communicates with her surroundings using the art of dance as a language. Mrinalini (2004) says, "As a poet forms a mental picture with words, the body speaks, creating meaningful emotions that are not of the intellect" (p. 117). In an interview with Arnab Banerjee (2008), Mrinalini defines dance as "My life. My passion. It's everything that I can recall or share and comprehend. Whatever I perceive it's through the eyes of dance — be it nature, the environment — I see it as a continuum of life through the prisms of yesterday, today and tomorrow". Mrinalini (2004) elaborates her passion for dance in the introduction to her autobiography:

Dance or any other expression, is a reflection of one's inner spark, which in outer life is given a form. . . .

Dance is a fundamental and spontaneous expression of humankind . . . and all creative work is a mystical experience. In literature, in dance, in drama, indeed in all the arts, inspiration is the springboard for the final work. But inspiration is itself the result of many years of study, of deep knowledge and of hard work. (p. 9-10)

Through many decades, Mrinalini has shown how all classical arts are cultivated and refined as forms of aesthetics and therefore, how different postures of our body can be employed to create exquisite patterns in time and space. This becomes possible when a dancer imbibes the art of dance so well that it does not remain merely a craft rather rises above the mundane existence as Mrinalini (2004) writes:

Once on stage, I forget everything. When I dance, there is no feeling of 'my' or 'self'! It is as though a whole dimension of spiritual energy takes over my being. I am no

longer aware of the living world. In those moments I feel as if some strange power within me is released: creating a oneness with the 'Supreme', a wholeness and unity with the cosmos, like an enlightenment of my self! (p. 129)

As soon as she enters the stage, she suddenly finds herself in a place where she has full of liberty to enact bodily postures, expressions and movements, but that too 'within the framework of technique'. She perceives that her inner self fully absorbed in her dance performance communicates with her audience to make them focus on her art. It seems at that time that she dominates the entire stage to pour out her passion through her dance and presents her inner consciousness through it:

What is so meaningful in Indian classical dance is the complete austerity of the stage setting. There are no props, no decor, nothing infringes upon the stark beauty of the dancer who creates a universe through her movement: the expression of life, of death, of love and hate, of the struggle between good and evil, developing the excitement of a theme with her limbs, her face, her fingers and the profundity of her eyes. The dancer draws the audience into new insights, into a spiritual, thought-provoking dimension. . . . Conscious awareness and then unconscious understanding envelops me when I dance. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 129-30)

Mrinalini Sarabhai first acquired her fame as a celebrated dancer when she caught attention of the media after her brilliant performance in front of thousands of international audiences in the theatre called the *Palais de Chaillot* in Paris popularly called 'the Mecca of the Arts'. Mrinalini

(2004) writes that in Paris, people are more critical, "knowledgeable and powerful, the best in the world" (p. 128) and are more particular about details. The French critics were perceptive and had a taste for the best: "they had watched so many artists and had the power to make or break a career in the west" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 128). Performing in front of such audience and critics and winning their hearts and earning their respect and reverence were tough for her but she could succeed. After her performance there, the news in the newspaper read, "Mrinalini Sarabhai has conquered Paris – a great dancer, a great art!" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 130). Mrinalini (2004) glorifies this moment in her autobiography as things took a turn with this acceptance by Paris critics: "From that moment on, our reviews were ecstatic, contracts poured in, and I became a celebrity in the western world, a 'professional' in the toughest profession – show business! (p. 130). It also restored her faith in herself and gave her a better understanding of arts and aesthetics as she writes:

When I came to Paris, I was rather worried about how classical South Indian dancing would be received by the audiences. Yet inside me was the great desire to show to the west what to me was a most perfect technique. The manner in which it was appreciated everywhere reaffirmed my belief that art is always able to transcend all barriers of national differences, whether in music, painting or dance, and communicates without words or familiar backgrounds. My belief became a reality on this tour and gave me the courage to work towards a greater artistic understanding between the western and eastern worlds. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 131)

Mrinalini claims that it was the result of years of hard training. The seed of a bright dancing career was laid in her from the very beginning of her childhood. It was her father who encouraged her to cultivate her art freely. She delves deep into her past and recollects, “MY FATHER SUBBARAMA SWAMINADHAN WAS THE PIVOT OF MY EXISTENCE. . . . He is as real to me today as then – his smile, his kind, twinkling eyes, and the proud way he steadfastly claimed – ‘This child will be somebody when she grows up. . . .’” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 15) (capitalization in the original text). Her father was a genius and his prediction came to be true. His encouragement and support made her excel as a genuine traditional dancer of *Bharatanatyam*. As a child, Mrinalini was deeply attached to her father, who she says, “always called me ‘child’ and that to me is now one of the most evocative terms of endearment in the English language. The only time he was displeased with me was when I would not practice the piano. Somehow I did not like the instrument. Since I loved movement, sitting still was torture” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 28-29). She was deeply in love with motion and dynamism. She describes her very first performance on stage as a child at the Museum Theatre in Chennai. She recited the nursery rhyme, ‘To ride a cock horse’ and simultaneously moved around the stage on a wooden horse. Suddenly the head of the horse broke off and it fell on the stage but she hardly cared for it and she went on racing with it round and round as she had never learnt to stop. Mrinalini (2004) writes about this incident: “Perhaps the seeds of professionalism were sown on that day!” (p. 41). Later, at the age of eight, she performed as a serious professional actor in the role of a boy in a play called ‘The Parrot’ at the Museum Theatre in Chennai at the request of her ‘Carb Uncle’, Harindranath. Overwhelmed by her passion for dance, she writes, “For me, too, the stage was magic! . . . and I knew more than ever that I was a

dancer, and dance was my life” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 73).

She was close to her father whose sudden death left her in a state of shock and she bewailed the loss of inspiration. It created a void in her heart. Mrinalini (2004) fondly remembers him saying, “My father was my entire life” (p. 30). Talking about her loss, she writes:

Only someone who has been through such an experience, who has lost a parent in their childhood, can understand the trauma it produces.

I had no one to turn to except my Ayah who understood my sorrow to some extent . . . I learnt that life does not bring happiness alone; that sorrow is a part and parcel of living and that loneliness is something that has to be accepted. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 31)

She honestly affirms that her mother who had by then, also established herself as a renowned parliamentarian, had no time for her children. Mrinalini grew as a lonely child deprived of parental affection. She became timid and shy and feared loving anyone, because of “the fear, that if I loved someone, he would disappear and leave me all alone, was deep-rooted in me. I had to learn to rely on myself. Years later I found myself dealing with the same scars when Vikram died and I felt my world come apart” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 31). It was hard for her to accept her father’s absence in her life and missed him desperately, she heard his words, “‘work, work, child’” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 31). Mrinalini (2004) writes: “. . . I felt miserable not knowing what to do with myself. A tremendous restlessness seized me. At night, under the mosquito net, I tossed and turned feeling alien and uprooted. The word ‘college’ came up. Mummy wanted me to go to Oxford. But for me, all education had only one title and that was dance” (p. 49).

She belonged to a family where all held high positions, but except her, nobody else had any inclination towards dance. Her father, Dr. Swaminadhan was a distinguished barrister at the Madras High Court and principal of the Madras Law College, her mother Ammu Swaminadhan was a great freedom fighter and parliamentarian, her elder sister Dr. Lakshmi Sehgal was the commander-in-chief of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army, her elder brother, Govind Swaminadhan, served as the Attorney General for the State of Madras (Tamil Nadu) with notable eminence and was also a famous barrister of Madras. Mrinalini (2004) writes:

. . . I had wanted to dance ever since I was a child. There was absolutely no tradition of dance or music in our family. . . I had no one to guide me in my career. But I knew that I was a dancer. . . . My mother could not understand my fierce determination and like the rest of the family, took it as a passing phase! (p. 49)

Mrinalini's self-determination and will-power made her pursue her passion for dance and she says, "Nothing could stop me from dancing" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 46). In her childhood, she was sent to Switzerland and there she picked up her first lessons in *Dalcroz*, a Western method of dance. She even enrolled in the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in the United States for a short time.

It was at Shantiniketan, Mrinalini bloomed as a dancer and there she realized her dream. She writes that "Shantiniketan was the heart and soul of India's tradition and progress. For me, at that time, it was the place where I found my own real self and true friends" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 61). Talking of Rabindranath Tagore, Mrinalini (2004) writes, "He was my guru in every sense of the word and his dance dramas have been the inspiration for much of my work" (p. 75).

Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore once gave her a lead role in his drama *Chandalika* and asked her to choreograph her part on her own; Mrinalini introduced Bharatanatyam in Tagore's dance dramas for the first time gaining much applause and appreciation from him. She was overjoyed with this appreciation of her art: "It was as though something deep within me was liberated and given the authority to be my real self! It was a moment of such intense joy that the radiance, not of his words, but of his acceptance of my individuality, still remains within my heart" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 55).

She took training in Bharatanatyam in the Pandanallur tradition under Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai and in Kathakali under the legendary teacher, Kunju Kurup. She learnt Mohiniattam from Kalyanikutty Amma, the living legend of this ancient tradition. She learnt under such gurus like Muthukumaran Thatha, Chokalingam Pillai and C. R. Acharyalu who left a deep influence on her life. She recalls her rigorous training at Kalakshetra in 1937 under Muthukumara Pillai who initiated her into Bharatanatyam. Mrinalini explains how her teacher was strict with his lessons and how she followed him with full dedication and determination. Pillai realised her hard work and perseverance. He could foresee her talent as Mrinalini (2004) says: "We developed a deep attachment for each other, the guru and the student. He told me that he felt that I had a rare gift within me and that he would teach me everything he knew. This was beginning of my real training. Only I knew, and kept it secret" (p. 50). As an obedient student, Mrinalini always followed her guru's instructions and trained herself in Indian classical dance through hours of practice. She used to practise her lessons for nearly ten hours a day. She has given a detailed description of how she used to cultivate her art of dancing and has described her disciplined grooming under her gurus:

Lessons always began with exacting work. There were no preliminaries. It was training

of the severest kind. It did not matter whether my limbs were delicate, or that I had been a sickly child. I had to go through the dance pieces for three to four hours, the practice time increasing every day. . . . Sometimes, if I did something wrong, or was in any way heedless, he would say, 'I'll stop the lesson'. This was the biggest threat of all, for dancing meant everything to me and it was the only discipline I loved. And he knew well how to use that threat! (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 81)

But she would lovingly accept his words and followed him by heart and soul, no matter whether she could hardly walk after her dance classes. Though she got married and delivered a child, she persisted in her practice. Her consistency, integrity and commitment towards her art were appreciated by her guru:

Thatha would just drop everything and everyone else and be with me to teach me. He always accepted me as one of his own. He said to me that if anyone could preserve Bharatanatyam, I could, and I promised to do my very best always. He often said to the 'vidwans' who came to see me practice, 'Here is somebody with intelligence and understanding along with dedication, who can really take my kind of dancing everywhere'. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 85)

In Bangalore, Mrinalini gave performances with the renowned dancer Ramgopal. But after a certain period of time she realised that Ramgopal never understood the depth of her 'innermost vision' in her dance. To him, continuous appreciation of audience, honours

and awards mattered more than the perfection as an artist. Mrinalini left him to carve her own path and grew as a classical as well as creative artist. Mrinalini (2004) writes:

. . . I began to wonder, when did I grow up? Was it after my father's death? Is there a defining moment of maturity? Yes, there is. The young tearful child, unconsciously realized the new role that had to be played in life, to be a witness of oneself and yet to be immersed deeply in the process of living fully. (p. 31)

In common perception, learning music and dance is like following a hobby. A full career on dance was unacceptable in those days when Mrinalini groomed herself up as a dancer. Her family also thought that she would give up dance after marriage. Mrinalini (2004) writes, "On the one hand, because I came from what was called a 'respectable and well-known family', the Swaminadhans, people would not take my work seriously. They thought that the minute I got married, like other society girls, I would forget all about dance" (p. 82). She cites many critics of art like G. Venkatachalam who discouraged her. She continued her unconventional career even after her marriage. It became a boon in disguise for her, as Mrinalini (2004) writes, "Many years later . . . I realized that I owed people like him a debt of gratitude for they perhaps pushed me to being more and more determined to reach the heights of excellence" (p. 83). The more they criticised her, the more she persisted: "I was delighted by what the critics said about my acting. . . . How I loved being on stage! I think that it was my stage personality that gave me the courage to face my normal life" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 42-43). Her skill in dance helped her stand out an accomplished woman and in some ways, made up for her lack of beauty:

I was dark complexioned and skinny – both terrible social handicaps in my time. In India

you have to be round, fair and plump to be called beautiful. My mother always emphasized the fact that I was not worth much. I don't think I have ever got over that. Only my art gave me the courage to live, and through the years, my marvelous friends and my audiences have helped me build up my self-esteem. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 35)

Mrinalini achieved public acclamation only after her marriage to Vikram Sarabhai. Vikram supported her whole heartedly. He himself was a renowned scientist and founder of Indian Space Programme and nuclear research. He realised the potential of his wife and helped her pursue her passion. She remembers that when she just began to get fame, many marriage proposals poured in. Mrinalini fell in love with Vikram Sarabhai and was caught in a dilemma about her marriage to him. She knew that marriage might create hurdles. She was apprehensive about her future: “. . . marriage and going away to a strange place frightened me. I was nervous and hesitant because of my dancing” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 89).

Vikram was different from other men. It was a union of souls where in one enhanced the other's talent. She loved him because he understood her commitment to dance as Mrinalini (2004) reflects: “It was some deep yearning within me that found a perfect answer in him” (p. 79). Vikram belonged to a reputed family. He had studied abroad but was deeply rooted in his culture. It was due to his support, she continued her career as a dancer. But the family reputation came in her way. People could not understand that dance was not merely a career but her very being was shaped by dance: “. . . when I used to say that ‘Being is what my dancing is’, they hardly understood” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 83). When someone commented after her show: “Well, she can dance, after all she is a Sarabhai!” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 123), he was

undermining her talent. One does not become a great artist by being born in a great family. One had to earn one's fame through perseverance and hard way of living.

Mrinalini writes in her autobiography that she could get success because of Vikram's support. He accompanied her for most of her performances, whether in India or abroad; many a time, he would stay and manage the household and look after their children when Mrinalini went abroad with her troupe. It was mutual as she also helped him attain eminence as a scientist. Their love and respect for each other counters the notion that the world of science and the world of arts always stand apart. Mrinalini (2004) writes, “A scientist speaks about the spaces beyond our planet and its mysteries. A dancer searches spaces within for meaning. Vikram as a scientist, and I as a dancer, shared a togetherness that was hard to define” (p. 80).

Marriage alone, however, did not bring fulfillment as she had to face several restrictions because of belonging to a reputed family. Her autobiography depicts the journey of a girl born and brought up in a Kerala *tharavad* to become a daughter-in-law of a reputed Gujarati family. To adjust in an inter-caste and inter-culture marriage is always difficult. She felt very lonely and alienated as the whole family talked in their mother tongue, Gujarati that she could not comprehend. Nobody had any time for her. Lack of love and affection accompanied by negligence of her mother-in-law upset her. She felt as if she was an outsider:

People do not realize the trauma a girl goes through when she marries into an alien background. Perhaps that is why marriages in India are still arranged by the families, whenever possible. . . . Here I felt starved but was too shy to ask for things that I liked. The family were all so preoccupied with their own work that they could not be bothered with a

new person. It was as though I did not exist except when we met at lunch or dinner time. It was all so overwhelming. Small happenings, but they left deep scars! (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 98)

In her autobiography, Mrinalini describes the turmoil, the country was undergoing during freedom struggle when she grew up. Though she herself did not actively take part in the movements but her own family members as well as her in-laws actively participated in it. However, she faced the worst trauma of her life during one such turmoil. A shell shot from the gun of a policeman exploded in her face, her eyelid was ripped open and her entire face was badly damaged. Doctor insisted on removing one of her eyes as it was badly infected but her father-in-law objected to the decision saying that it would ruin her career as a dancer. Mrinalini (2004) writes:

Then began my long ordeal to recovery. For many days I lay dazed, not knowing if I would ever see or dance again. I was not allowed to cry any more. I felt terrified in the complete darkness. I would have given up but for my belief in God, prayer and Vikram. 'I have been born to dance,' I consoled myself. 'This is a passing phase, a deep suffering in order to test me' . . .

The nights were difficult, the feeling of isolation more profound even though I tried to pray. There was no way that the mind with its fears could be silenced. Every minute became more precious, every loved one more dear. Life becomes valuable only after such harrowing experiences. It is a process of growing up inwardly. (p. 99-100)

Apart from physical pain, she suffered from acute mental agony as she thought that she would no longer be able to dance and her inner strength and confidence wore off. Mrinalini (2004) writes, "I was sure I would never dance again, having been told that part of my sight would never come back. Facing the truth was a dreadful experience . . . and I became depressed and overcome by a sense of isolation from the world" (p. 102). Mrinalini lost faith in herself. This was the most traumatic period of her life as her very existence had no meaning without dance. She cried night after night sitting on the floor of her bathroom hiding from everybody, hiding from Vikram. This mental agony made Mrinalini grow as an artist as art and artist mature with pain. Even when she recovered she lost confidence that she could face the audience. With time, she regained her confidence. She expressed her suffering through her art. Mrinalini (2004) recalls:

Even when I started to dance again I would be overwhelmed with dread and would almost have to be pushed on to the stage. Once I was under the arc lights I would forget my fears, but for hours afterwards my mind and body would tremble. . . . It took years of hard discipline and treatment and Vikram's wonderful understanding and assurances before I could face an audience with confidence. (p. 102)

Mrinalini later decided to teach Indian classical dance to the people of Gujarat. She worked day and night to make her dream come true. In 1948, she founded a dance academy, called *Darpana*, in Ahmedabad for training in dance, drama, music and puppetry. She introduced Bharatanatyam and Kathakali to invigorate the culture of Gujarat which was more famous for folk tradition. Initially, people would not appreciate lyrics in Carnatic music and south Indian classical dance. In a conservative society, people were reluctant to

send their daughters and they were prejudiced against her too:

PEOPLE IN AHMEDABAD TOOK A LONG TIME TO UNDERSTAND THE tremendous physical work required to be a dancer. Many remarked that being married to a 'Sarabhai' I should not dance. Someone wrote to Papa commiserating with him that his son had married a dancing girl! . . . The long hours of hard work that I put in, the efforts to keep up with my career and to run a home, were of course completely ignored. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 123) (capitalization in the original text)

With passage of time, *Darpana* became popular in Gujarat as well as got recognition at national level. Mrinalini successfully countered prejudice and bias. Students from various parts of Gujarat and other parts of the country enrolled in *Darpana* and Mrinalini (2004) fondly remembers her students in her autobiography: "The children who came to me were like unopened buds. My desire was to make them blossom gently into flowers that mirrored their artistic and ancient heritage. 'Darpana' means 'Mirror' and the universe I feel is reflected within each one of us" (p. 157). Mrinalini's dream became true and she formed a group that later performed across the world showing rich cultural traditions of India. *Darpana* also revived the traditional Gujarati theatre and puppetry and saved it from extinction. Apart from imparting training and guidance to thousands of students, Mrinalini worked continuously for five decades to improvise her art and won number of awards and honours.

Mrinalini adoringly calls her students at *Darpana* as her dancer-daughters and they call her 'Amma'. This mother-daughter relationship between teacher and students is

seldom found as she proudly speaks of her disciples, "My women friends had in the past often tried to persuade me to buy expensive jewellery but I would boast, 'My diamonds and emeralds are my dancers in Darpana'" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 266-67). Mrinalini is still active even at the age of 93. She loves to teach her disciples that "Each mudra has to be understood in its deeper context" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 12). She has toured all over the world with her troupe of dancers and has bagged acclaim for her creativity. Her autobiography is full of detailed description of her international tours to Indonesia, Egypt, France, Africa, China, Switzerland, U.S.A. and to other countries. At that time, the celebrated classical dancers like Ram Gopal, Uday Shanker and his wife Amala Shankar had won international acclaim. It was difficult for Mrinalini to succeed beyond the Indian shores. Her dedication, devotion and perseverance made her get recognition as one of the distinguished dancer of her time. She became an internationally renowned artist but she never thought of settling in abroad. Her love for her dance is matched with her love for her country: "But I wanted to live in India and to dance. I could never be away from my roots. . ." (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 74).

After achieving national and international fame, Mrinalini turned towards reformation of society through dance. She believed that social evils can be eradicated using the art of dance. She felt a responsibility towards society especially to work for the upliftment of the women who are the marginalized in our society. Mrinalini has grown up in matriarchal society in Kerala. It was only in Ahmedabad she observed very closely how women are subjugated under patriarchal system of our society. She felt the need to bring about a public awareness about gender discrimination and domestic violence that women of every class daily endure. Both Mrinalini and her daughter, Mallika, through their creative dance sought justice and freedom from subjugation and violence for women. For decades, both of them singly or

jointly performed to spread this social message through their dance:

But I felt the need to express my own thoughts in dance dramas, not only for a freedom of form but also to make the performances more varied and creative. I felt that dance had a social role to play and could speak powerfully through traditional techniques. . . . Dance is an inward journey, a deep personal equation which unfolds before the audience. It is the self, speaking. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 113)

Increasing number of dowry deaths of the unfortunate, poor and hapless brides about whom she read every day in the local newspapers left her in state of shock. Newly married girl were forced to commit suicide or were burnt. She pondered how can a man destroy another man's life just only for dowry? Can the man-made custom of giving and accepting dowry be completely erased from the Indian scenario? These questions disturbed her repeatedly and she composed *Memory*, a dance drama based on this social malady. Mrinalini (2004) writes in her autobiography, "It was the first time that Bharatanatyam spoke of a social problem. . . . Editorials were written by leading newspapers on how for the first time dance spoke of contemporary problems. My creative urge had at last begun to find fulfillment and direction (p. 227-28).

With only three women characters and incorporating South Indian classical songs as its background music, *Memory* reflected the four parts of a woman's life, beginning with the vibrant life of a young innocent girl full of gaiety, attaining age she falls in love with a young lover, then her marriage that ultimately crushes her inner self enduring tortures of greedy in-laws asking for dowry and then ending her life by committing suicide. With it, Mrinalini achieved fame and "had touched chords in the hearts of women everywhere"

(Mrinalini, 2004, p. 229). Gradually, social problems that obsessed her took form in her dance. Students in Darpana still use dance as a powerful medium for the rehabilitation of victims suffering due to various forms of violence in our society.

Another of her creation, *Manushya* (1949), is a story of man narrated by using only the technique of Kathakali but not its inept costumes. This bold experiment made her reach the heights of her innovative endeavours and led her to compose many dance dramas concerned with social issues and she begins "each performance with a small talk on the reason why I felt compelled to take up that particular issue" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 230). Mrinalini (2004) explains the process of her creation in her autobiography:

Creativity is very difficult to describe, because though it springs from inspiration it cannot be achieved without the hard training that leads to technical articulation. It is an inner knowledge of which movement is exactly right in a certain situation. . . . In classical dance it was an individual's effort and imagination that made new designs and new patterns in the classical repertoire. (p. 232)

In her every creative dance performance, the basic technique remained same, but her 'interpretation' underwent change every time. As a celebrated classical dancer, she has always adhered to form of classical art – the basic foundation and grammar of any form of dance. Mrinalini (2004) writes, "In the matter of technique, I am a purist, and I believe that a firm grounding in form is absolutely essential and that is why, as a performer and teacher, I am extremely strict. The classical technique cannot be changed at will or to suit one's convenience" (p. 113). While performing, she pours out her inner emotions and views through her own compositions and

choreography without deviating herself from the mainstream classical dance and she is “always accused of being a perfectionist, as though it is a crime against society!” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 102). In an interview with Jasmine Shah Varma (2004), Mrinalini said, “New dance forms evolve . . . But I would prefer that while you evolve a new form, there be some classical tradition behind it. A tree may grow in many directions, but it must grow with roots. This is what I think I have done”.

She introduces the rituals of Kerala and Tamil Nadu in her dance that is deeply embedded in her early memories. While composing such pieces, these rituals often psychologically return to her mind like the repressed desires and ultimately they take shape of dance. Once while performing the *Meghadoota* of Kalidasa, she bejeweled her creation with the ‘ambience of Kerala’. Using classical dance forms – Kathakali, Mohini-Attam and even the traditional folk dance, she also brought with it the basic features of the women of Kerala – how they braid their hair and decorate it with flowers, how they pray to God and how they reconstruct their selves through their childhood memories. It was highly appreciated. Mrinalini (2004) writes that “Only an artist understands the joy when movements suddenly become alive and dramatic, when symbolic designs are meaningful. The exploration is an obsession, the climax the fulfillment, the final ecstasy. All the rest is anxiety and physical exhaustion” (p. 235). Describing her creativity, Mrinalini (2004) says that:

Behind each movement was an inner energy, the result of years of training. It took hundreds of performances and relentless work to establish a reputation of classicism, only then did I present my own perspectives. Sometimes in a composition there is no need for words for they have different meanings. But often

words and shapes are born together within my mind. . . .

In dance, the body speaks with the power of the mind behind it. In our country, words and music are important in the great oral tradition, but often silence seems more meaningful to me than the totality of universal sound. (p. 11)

Mrinalini’s creativity attained its fulfillment after *Darpana* achieved international fame. She not only achieved success as a famous dancer but also succeeded in training her own daughter, Mallika and her dancer-daughters at *Darpana*. In an interview with Anjana Rajan (n.d.), Mallika Sarabhai replied that *Darpana* is described today as a “crucible for the arts across the world”. Rajan (n.d.) writes, “Thus Mallika decided that for *Darpana* – which means mirror, in the sense that art is a mirror of society – to remain true to its name, it would have to change so that it reflected the present reality”. *Darpana* remained committed to its basic art forms – the Indian classical dances, but it has undergone a huge metamorphosis and changed in keeping with the need of the time, using art in the service of the society as Mrinalini (2004) writes:

In spite of many hard knocks over the years, I still have faith in the innate goodness of human beings. There have been many instances of loving relationships with my students and teachers, who left for personal reasons of their own. . . .

I feel that the dream Vikram and I shared of having a real Academy for Gujarat has come true. After all, to make a ‘state’ dance was not a small task! (p. 303)

Motherhood brought maturity to Mrinalini’s private self. She continued her

career as a dancer on one hand and on the other she sincerely discharged her duties and responsibilities of a mother. When she was the mother of a single child, she used to carry her baby wherever she went on tour for her performances. Later, when Mallika was born, she left both her children to the care of her husband. In one of her early international performance in Europe, her son, Kartikeya, got more media coverage than what she did! Mrinalini (2004) quotes one of the reporters of the *Daily Mail* in this context, “the thought struck me that few European ballerinas would find it convenient to bear a child and take him on tour’. I was considered out of the ordinary for not only having a child, but also being proud to show the world I was a mother” (p. 131). Vikram, in most cases, tried to accompany her for her performances abroad. Once he took their son to meet Mrinalini who was busy keeping her overseas concerts and had not seen her baby for long. Immediately after seeing his mother, “our little boy” she writes, “. . . hugged and hugged me. All my tiredness vanished. Is there any greater joy than a child’s arms around his mother’s neck?” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 143). Mrinalini (2004) cherishes joys of being a mother:

When Mallika was born, she brought great joy into our lives. Children are to me the greatest fulfillment of married life. . . . Vikram and I both loved our children and treated them with respect. Love does not mean spoiling – it means cherishing. We just made our children feel that we were always there for them and that they were very important to us. There is a difference between freedom and licence. (p. 157)

With mutual understanding, Mrinalini and Vikram took care of both – career and parental duties. They always stood by each other whenever required. Even the children were never made to feel lonely and isolated.

The feeling of separation, estrangement, lack of love and affection and solitariness that Mrinalini herself suffered in her life after her father’s death and as a daughter-in-law after her marriage in the Sarabhai family made her take special care of her children so that they may never feel lonely without her. She has maintained and balanced her family life and professional life well. Mrinalini (2004) accepts that, “It was always very difficult to leave the children when I went on tour” (p. 146). However, Vikram remained with the children at home till her return because Mrinalini (2004) writes, “for both Vikram and me, in spite of our busy careers, the children were first priority” (p. 159). In this context, she quotes an article in her autobiography that Mallika wrote many years later about her own feelings when Mrinalini went to tours in abroad:

. . . I used to howl every time Amma went away. Papa was not very busy touring till he became the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. Amma often had to go on tours, but between them they had an understanding, a commitment to parenting – at least one of them would be with us at home in Ahmedabad at any given time, till we were twelve years old. This meant that Papa was with us alone frequently, and for lengthy periods of time, adjusting his work schedules to suit Amma’s dance ones. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 157-58)

Sacrificing at some level of her career is a part of life of every public woman and Mrinalini states that sometimes she too has sacrificed her career for her family. Vikram, already overworked with the Indian Space Programme, became more engrossed with the department of Atomic Energy after Homi Bhabha’s death. At that time, she cancelled many of her dance tours and she never regrets

it. She always tried to be with her husband Vikram or with her children whenever they needed her. She has successfully carried out her duties as a wife and mother balancing them with her career as a dancer. Mrinalini (2004) feels proud when she writes of her act of balance, “Working so hard, dancing, teaching and entertaining, looking after the children – it was more than a full life” (p. 221).

Mrinalini takes pride in her daughter, Mallika who has become a beautiful classical dancer, theatre personality, choreographer, stage and film actress, scriptwriter and social activist. Defining an all-round personality, Mrinalini (2004) writes, “Strangely enough, though Mallika looks more like Vikram in real life, on stage, she is strikingly like me” (p. 265). Bringing pride to her celebrity mother, Mallika Sarabhai started off as a Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi dancer. She has whole-heartedly learnt under her mother’s guidance but has established her own name changing according to the requirements of the time and demands and tastes of the modern audiences. Mrinalini (2004) writes, “Mallika, who has found her own vision, has given me tremendous joy, for even as a student she understood my language” (p. 232). Mallika has always been unconventional, outspoken, honest, and bold. Whenever she has performed, she has received tremendous acclamation. Her habit of looking at things from a different point of view and her outlandish attitude has often created controversy as Mrinalini (2004) writes, “This non-conventional, honest attitude all through her career has caused her a great deal of pain but she has always insisted on being truthful to her inner self” (p. 263-64). Talking to Sonoo Singh (1998) in an exclusive interview, Mallika said, “My role model has been my mother, *Amma*, throughout. She has stood by my side like a rock, telling me that her love for me is not dependent on what I do but for what I am”.

Whenever Mallika appeared on stage, people tried to find out similarity between her

and her mother, and once, Mrinalini’s American dancer friend, Jean Erdman, wrote to her, “You’d have been truly proud of Mallika. She was spectacular, and one could see you through her” (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 265). When asked by Sonoo Singh (1998) in an interview about how she feels being a daughter of the celebrity Mrinalini Sarabhai, Mallika replied “*Amma* has been a classical dancer since 1949. . . . People do come up to me and compare. “Your mother is a better dancer than you”, is what some say. . . . Today *Amma* is equally proud of me”. Mrinalini (2004) writes about her daughter:

. . . Mallika became a professional in her own right, and I realized that I had unconsciously begun a parampara of dance. Her personality is in a way so different from mine and yet, as a friend pointed out, ‘You both seem to have the same soul’. Mallika gave me the impetus to create dance dramas in which both of us danced together. (p. 265)

At the end of Mrinalini’s 45 years long career, Mallika as a dutiful daughter paid her a grand tribute. Knowing well her mother’s chronic claustrophobia, and willing to fulfill her wish, Mallika constructed an open air theatre in Ahmedabad, called ‘Natarani’, meaning ‘Goddess of Dance’. In an interview with Jasmine Shah Varma (2004), Mrinalini said, “Mallika designed Natarani to reflect my personality with its vast open spaces, peepul tree and the rivers beyond”. In the same interview, Mallika said to Jasmine (2004), “My mother unknowingly started a legacy. . . . There is a little of the guru-*shishya* aspect in our relationship, but we are partners and co-creators too. We respect each other’s creativity though we may not agree on the form”.

The exploration of her ‘self’ in Mrinalini’s autobiography is a testimony to the fact that she has shown the modern Indian

women how to rise and reach their goal in life, how to fulfill their long cherished dream, how to carve a name in the public world, and simultaneously run a home, rear and gear up the career of the children. Her autobiography is a valuable source of inspiration for those women who cherish a dream of setting up their career in the field of dance. Mrinalini has survived her art through her daughter, Mallika and even her granddaughter, Anahita and grandson, Revanta. She will also live through thousands of her students whom she has trained herself for half a century. In these long years of her devotion to dance, Mrinalini has proved her versatility by engaging in such activities like authoring books and novels, writing poems, cultivating children's literature. She was the chairperson of the Gujarat State Handicrafts and Handloom Development Corporation Ltd. She was one of the trustees of the Sarvodaya International Trust, and was also the chairperson of the Nehru Foundation for Development. The last few lines of her autobiography are the most self-revelatory, she writes when people ask her why she goes on straining herself though she has achieved her fame and is called the

Goddess of dance, Mrinalini (2004) answers them in the concluding part of her autobiography:

How can I tell them that I am only I when I dance. I am only that 'I AM' when I dance. I am only Eternity when I dance. Silence is my response, movement my answer.

What am I but an abstract form in time, born into a land of deepest symbolism, containing within my work the past, the present and the future of a conscious force beyond time, beyond space, the echoes of which may be heard and seen in later vision. . . .

Can anyone ever understand these words? There is no separateness in dance and my entire being.

It is the radiance of my spirit that makes for the movements of my limbs. (p. 304-05) (capitalization in the original text)

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