Maya, Tradition and Modernity in Shaji Karun's *Vaanaprastham*

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ABSTRACT: The 1999 Indian/French film, *Vaanaprastham* (*The Last Dancer*), reflects the changing world of a South Indian community by depicting life episodes of a Kathakali dancer. Still engaged with traditional social mores and mythologies, the community struggles to absorb influences of modernity—altered expectations of the individual and of gender and caste relations. The story is mediated through the foundational philosophy of maya: that appearances are illusory.

The multi-award winning Indian/French film *Vaanaprastham*[1] is conspicuous for its use of themes based in Sanskritic philosophy and literary tradition, notable amongst which is the foundational concept of *maya* (the illusory quality of reality). As the role of *maya* has always been to give perspective on 'reality', *Vaanaprastham* places this essential question against the fracturing social changes of post independence India, where ideas of modernity and identity challenge traditional roles for culture and community. Established social and cultural modes—that of the Kathakali dancers enacting well-loved tales from the epic *Mahabharata*—are used to ponder the overlapping social and mythologised worlds. This conjunction is an important one, for it recognises the vexed place of myth and religion in the modern world, which defines itself, in part, by separating these 'worlds' into binaries of mythic versus real, religious versus secular.[2] *Vaanaprastham* has been called 'a deep meditation on fiction and reality',[3] for with its narrative built upon ideas of illusion and the conscious creation of realities, it enacts a quest to illuminate the complex that is identity. Malayalam 'superstar' Mohanlal portrays the dancer Kunhikuttam, who plays the role of mythical warrior-hero Arjuna to such perfection that a high class

[1]   *Vaanaprastham*, (English title *The Last Dance*), 1999, Director: Shaji Karun. Producer: Pierre Assouline. Cast: Mohanlal, Suhasini, Mattanoor S. Marar, Kukku Parameshwaram.

[2]   Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema: 1947-1987* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 82. Chakravarty recognises the pivotal role of realism in India's claim to modernity. She perceives that the rational, scientific attitude that was a characteristic element of the perception of British (and subsequently Western) superiority, both by the colonisers themselves and by the educated aspirational Indian middle class, favoured a 'realism' that had, historically, only a marginal place in Indian epistemology.

[3]   'Vaanaprastham: The Last Dance', *Au-cinema Reviews* <http://www.au-cinema.com/ Vanaprastham.com> [accessed 4 February 2004].

woman falls in love with his costumed character, while rejecting the real man behind the mask.

Vaanaprastham does more than illustrate the continuing (and common) theme of *maya* as confused reality, and as art, that can be traced in classical Indian drama and literary tradition.[4] In melding traditional thought with the emphasis on human equality and freedom that is a foundational component of the 'modern' age,[5] the film creates a confluence which demonstrates that which art historian Geeta Kapur has named 'a desire to invest faith in tradition as well as an inclination to dismantle cultural codes from a position of profound suspicion'.[6] Similarly, the film also addresses the tension at the heart of '... Indian sensibilities regarding realism: the manifest need to present at once an individualized consciousness *and* a prototype, an agent *and* a victim.'[7]

Vaanaprastham depicts, in the microcosm of individual lives, the changing directions in society, and therefore in the self, that echo the struggles of the new nation, comprised of a heterogeneous mix of peoples, in moving towards goals of national unity and social justice. In its reworking and repositioning of mythological stories, the film revivifies them, and re-emphasises the ongoing relevance of these mythologies. Acknowledging this contemporary role of Indian philosophy and tradition, director Shaji Karun has stated that the film reaches out to reveal this continuity to Western audiences, so that they may understand the unique dance form of Kerala depicted as 'a kind of self-expression'.[8] The reliving of age-old tales and familiar characters is clearly 'self-expression' for both the individual and the community.

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[4]   An excellent essay on the topic is that of D.F. Pocock, 'Art and Theology in the *Bhagavata Purana*', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, ed. by Veena Das, vol. 19. no. 1 (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1985), pp. 9-41.

[5]   A major criticism of India made by the British imperialists during their rule was that the country was bound by despotic 'feudal' governance practices and enslaved by superstitious religious belief; the caste system was held up as evidence of both. Yet it was a similar 'caste' system of racial hierarchy that was a tenet of British rule. See, for instance, David Smith, *Hinduism and Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), pp. 93-95; George D. Bearce, *British Attitudes Towards India 1784-1858* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1961). For an overview of the extensive European opinions on caste in the colonial era, see Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (London: Hurst & Company, 1990), pp. 49-84. The caste system therefore became a focus of social reform in the project of 'modernising' India. D.R. Nagaraj writes, in his introduction to Ashish Nandy's collected essays *Exiled at Home* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005), that Nandy's school of colonial theory stresses the mutual transformation of coloniser and colonised, a non-essentialist viewing of the process of modernisation that allows retention of tradition alongside evolving social practice.

[6]   Geeta Kapur, 'Revelation and Doubt in *Sant Tukaram* and *Devi*', in *When Was Modernism?* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), p. 233.

[7]   Sumita S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema 1947-198*7 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993), p. 96.

[8]   Sharmila Taliculam & Shoba Warrier, 'I wanted to change Western opinion of Indian films', *Rediff.com*, Movies: Shaji Karun and Vaanaprastham, August 22, 2000. <http://rediff.com/entertai/2000/aug/22shaj.htm> [accessed 4 February 2004].

Kathakali theatre in itself is an expose of *maya*: it is the dance-drama which, arguably, most directly depicts Gods and Epic heroes 'unveiled' to its viewers. Dancer Leela Sampson calls it 'the most explicit, passionate, and colourful dance form of India'.[9] Her description reflects the dance's affective quality, which is especially relevant to the film's female protagonist who, in her perception of reality, crosses a threshold between mythic and historical worlds. It is that threshold which is indicated to visitors at one of the oldest Kathakali theatres, the Devan Gurukulam[10] at Ernakulam in Kerala, where they are instructed that the curtain (*tirassila*) which is held across the stage before a performance is, indeed, *maya*. Once the curtain is lifted, the larger, more 'real' world of the Gods is revealed.[11]

The wide skirts, high circular crowns, and extraordinary painted faces of Kathakali dancers remove them from the 'normal' world. This dramatic makeup acts as a mask which 'reveals more than it conceals, exposes more than it hides, uncovers more than it covers … it is Maya … it is what it is not'.[12] Atmospheric surroundings create a magical realm, where the ancient stories of India are given new life. It is not merely costumes and masks that make Duryodhana, Krishna, or Hanuman appear upon the stage. Rigorous training in formally classified movements of hands, body, and facial expression is the dancer's discipline, but this physical perfection is still not enough to embody a God. The particular experience of *rasa* (emotional essence) which is the hallmark of each character can only be conveyed by an actor who really knows that emotion, who has internalised the love and serenity of Krishna, or the nobility of Arjuna.[13] The actors must 'read and re-read' the sources of the Kathakali plays—the Epics and Puranas—so that they know entirely the acts, deeds, motivations, ethics and character of their role model, whether hero, anti-hero or demon, God, queen, or monkey-king.[14]

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[9]   Leela Sampson, *Rhythm in Joy: Classical Indian Dance Traditions* (New Delhi: Lustre Press, 1987), p. 120.

[10]   This small theatre is run as a tourism and cultural promotion venture under the name 'See India Foundation'. Phillip Zarilli is critical of the over-dramatic emphasis placed on 'culture and tradition' by its director, while conceding that the director's brother is a famous Kathakali actor. However, in 2004, twenty years after Zarilli's publication, the Devan centre continues its small instructive Kathakali performances for visitors from within India and from abroad. Phillip Zarilli, *The Kathakali Complex* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1984), pp. 318-322.

[11]   Zarilli (op. cit., p. 166) explains the several dramatic uses of the curtain: for practical 'end of scene' purposes, or to give enticing glimpses of the character about to enter, creating excitement.

[12]   M. L. Varadpande, 'Masks', in *Indian Dance: the Ultimate Metaphor*, ed. by Shanta Serbjeet Singh (Chicago, IL: Art Media Resources, 2000), p. 183.

[13]   Zarilli, op. cit., p. 141.

[14]   Ibid., p. 142.

Kathakali recreates the cosmic worlds of the divine, but the everyday world of humans and nature is, notably, also included within this ambit. A complete landscape, the heavenly realms, times past and future, and a whole range of thoughts and emotions can be conveyed, wordlessly, on an almost bare stage. The resulting intimacy of detail and insight into the character's mind absorbs the viewer into the *maya* of the play, so that many hours—a whole night—may pass in this world. But in *Vaanaprastham* the realities of the Kathakali realm and the mundane world—the roles of Gods and humans—become confused.

The film's unfolding story is absorbing even to a cultural outsider, and even more nuanced on closer reflection. The protagonist, Kunhikuttam, is the illegitimate son of a servant woman, Bhagirati, and consequently, of very low social status. He makes a meagre living as a Kathakali dancer, is despised by his wife (perhaps for his poverty and lowly position) and adored by his young daughter, Sharada. The film opens in the year 1953, with the Kathakali troupe returning to their village homes after a night's performance in a dawn storm. The *chanda* (drum) player, Raman remarks, 'For a Kathakali artist like me, life has no shelter'. This comment hints at the difficulties of their lives as artists, who are reliant on the patronage of the wealthy landlords and the temples, but Raman's words also suggest the exposure the artists feel, living in two worlds— that of their daily lives and that of the Gods, which is always like a shadow by their sides.

Kunhikuttam's present role is to embody the demoness Poothana, she who (in the epic *Bhagavatham*) is sent by King Kamsa to kill the baby Krishna. In familiar Indian narrative style of 'story within a story', the Poothana legend itself is one of *maya*, which:

> constantly plays on the contrast between appearance and reality. The omnipotent, omniscient god, 'the infinite immortal', is concealed in the form of a helpless baby, an allusion to the *atman* or individual soul in whom the infinite or *brahman* resides.[15]

While Krishna's form is an infant, Poothana herself takes the form *(maya)* of a beautiful maiden *(lalita)*, and offers her poisonous breast to Krishna, knowing that if her death comes through him she will be delivered to salvation. Krishna draws out her life blood, but changes the poison to the nectar of eternal life; Poothana reverts to her true form and dies, in *moksha*. Poothana's goodness in her previous life is in this way karmically rewarded as it is revealed through the double unmasking—

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[15]   Marlene B. Pitkow, 'Putana's Salvation in Kathakali: Embodying the Sacred Journey', *Asian Theatre Journal*, 18. 2 (2001), p. 240.

that of the demoness Poothana, and of her *lalita* form.[16] The reference to Poothana's story serves as one level of the layered realities of *Vaanaprasthm*, for, by the film's conclusion a parallel can be drawn between the demoness and her saviour, and Kunhikuttam and his beloved daughter Sharada. This allegory is alluded to when at the mention of the demoness's name Sharada comes running to her father, laughing, and is told by him, 'you are my little Krishna'. Her jealous mother calls out from the kitchen, 'Poothana's breast is poisonous. Do you want that?'

Kunhikuttam becomes a 'Master' of the dance, playing the highly respected role of Nala.[17] Low caste Kunhikuttam, illegitimate son of the local landlord, is now graced with the aristocratic persona of a *pacca* character, the category of Kathakali appearance which signifies divine figures, epic heroes, and kings.[18] Historical lineage of Kathakali is of a joint tradition in which the dance was performed 'only by the Nayar warrior caste under the supervision of the Nambudiri Brahmin caste';[19] it is a high caste profession. It was not until the 1930s when Kathakali, which had faded almost to non-existence under Christian influence, was revived by the opening of a new teaching centre, the Kerala Kalamandalam, and opened its doors to all castes—though not yet to females.[20] So the idea of teaching the tradition to a low caste boy would, in Kunhikuttam's youth, still have been novel and viewed with distaste by some Nambudiris. The era was more egalitarian in idealised aspects, but attitudes do not change so fast.

Several years pass: it is 1955. Kunhikuttam is called to appear at the temple in Trivandrum, the capital, for a festival performance. In Trivandrum the Dewan, the Maharaja's minister, has a niece who wants Kunhikuttam to enact the play 'The Kidnapping of Subhadra'. Her name too is Subhadra, and she is writing her own version of the famous *Mahabharata* episode where the great warrior hero Arjuna 'kidnaps' her namesake, the willing sister of Lord Krishna. Kunhikuttam is honoured that someone as knowledgeable and refined as the Dewan's niece admires his work. But the *maya* of his princely role is sadly revealed when, still dressed in the grand costume and crown of Arjuna, he must beg the case of the poverty stricken artists after performing for the Maharaja. Money is only belatedly given to all the grateful troupe. The Maharaja's ignorance of the artists' circumstances illustrates the

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16   Ibid., p. 239.
17   One of the best-known story plays is *Nala Caritam*, and Zarilli's research found that 'the role of Nala is considered by most present Kathakali actors as the most complex and difficult of all Kathakali roles'. Zarilli, op. cit., p. 60.
18   Ibid., p. 173.
19   Manjusri Chaki-Sircar and Parbati K. Sircar, 'Indian Dance: Classical Unity and Regional Variation', in *India: Cultural Patterns and Processes*, ed. by Allen G. Noble and Ashok K. Dutt (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), p. 155.
20   Ibid., p. 158.

changing times: in an earlier era he would almost certainly have been the traditional patron, and regularly subsidised the performers.[21] Subhadra, meanwhile, had watched the performance from a window, and writes, 'I saw his luminous eyes, and his seductive body deifies the heavens'. An educated woman, married but lonely, and restricted by her high caste to a closed world, she romanticises through art—an art which is legitimised as a 'higher' version of reality by its suffusion with religious and moral ideals. Already she is avid to be seduced by Kunhikuttam's Arjuna, to be transported to an alternative realm of being, beyond mundanity.

In time, Kunhikuttam's landlord father dies, finally acknowledging his son by bequeathing a parcel of land. Kunhikuttam weeps in renewed sadness that his illegitimacy has forced his mother to live in shame and his wife to resent her marriage. In stark contrast to his daily life, his next play is to be *Gitopadesham*, in which he plays the warrior prince Arjuna, who requires his charioteer, the God Krishna, to resolve all doubts as they ride towards battle. Costumed in the finery of Arjuna, Kunhikuttam meets Subhadra after the performance. She is caught in the *maya* of the performance; or, alternately, the world's *maya* has been dispelled by her immersion in the play. Subhadra, then, is thrilled that 'Arjuna' stands before her, the only human who conversed with the God Krishna! Bemused, Kunhikuttam tries to awaken her to his own reality, saying, 'I act my role with all that I have learned. But in truth, Arjuna is a stranger to me'. He may mean that the character is still new to him; he may mean that he does not identify with Arjuna's iconic status. Kunhikuttam's life has been too grounded in the difficult realities of his world, marginalised by poverty and social illegitimacy, and by lack of love and respect where it should be found, in father and wife.

But Subhadra is lost in a world of love for Arjuna, the paradigm of manhood. In a thrall (*maya*) of *bhakti*-like elation, she wishes to be the Subhadra who has the 'unique destiny' of being loved by Arjuna. She sees that the moon now above is the same moon under which Krishna spoke. Myth and the mundane world are as one for Subhadra. The mighty events and characters of the *Mahabharata* are timeless for such devotees, just as the lessons and conduct they teach are endlessly real in their application. As, for some, sacred time is ever-present, there remains 'a persistent Indian conception of a transcendent reality as more important than the phenomenal world it underlies and sustains'.[22] Time is part of that 'phenomenal world,' which is *maya*. In such thought, time is not a line of progression, but a cycle in *samsara* (the passing wheel of life). The word for time, *kal,* signifies both past and future; it can mean

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21   Zarilli explains the traditional forms of patronage here, revealing that the companies were subsidised even in the rainy season, when performances were rare. Zarilli, op. cit., p. 265.

22   Hajime Nakamura, *The Notion of Time in India* <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/india/philosophy/phil2.html> [accessed 17 July 2005].

'tomorrow or yesterday, a moment or an age; it may refer to an event which just happened, or to a future likelihood'.[23] Kathakali re-presents epic time, and the audience, by its very presence, participates in that realm. Performances are rituals, 'domains of cultural practice knit into the fabric of local communities', the entering of another conceptual and discursive world.[24]

Subhadra, then, longs to join with her beloved, in a union in which the spiritual and physical are as one.[25] She yearns to overcome the *maya* of separation through the Kathakali (literally, 'story play'). She wants Kunhikuttam to *be* the Arjuna of her play, so that she will be transformed into the Subhadra of mythology, and 'know that ecstasy unhoped for in this life'. In the next performance, Subhadra becomes part of the play from the audience, adding her mimetic hand gestures (*mudras)* to those of the actors. She is the epitome of the 'ideal' spectator as outlined in the ancient treatise on the arts, the *Natyashastra*;[26] she is educated in all aspects of text, language and gesture, so that she is capable of '*meeting the performer as an "equal" in the process of exchange …*'[27] Subhadra is, moreover, interacting with the unfolding events on stage in a manner typifying the dialectic of *katha* (storytelling) tradition.[28] Consequently, the enraptured Subhadra does not just watch, as Arjuna enfolds the 'stage' Subhadra in his arms; in her own experience she *becomes* the maiden with her face on his breast.[29]

A suggestive image of two flames drawing together is shown, and at dawn the following day, Kunhikuttam leaves silently from the mansion, the crown of Arjuna in his hand. Subhadra, splashing her face with water, looks in the mirror with wonderment. Her joyful face is luminescent with the smudges of green makeup worn by *pacca* (noble) Kathakali—by Arjuna. Kunhikuttam, meanwhile, submerses himself in a pond,[30] while thunder rumbles overhead like a voice from the heavens.

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[23]   Sudhir Kakar, *The Inner World* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 46.
[24]   Phillip Zarilli, 'Kalarippayattu and Kathakali', in Shanta Serbjeet Singh (ed.), op. cit., p. 106.
[25]   'The notion that love is spiritual and not merely physical is crucial … for an understanding … of Indian culture itself. Mysticism is a central feature of both Islam and Hinduism. In their unconditioned love of God, the mystics seek total annihilation of their Self in the Divine. Since both Islam and Hinduism see the physical and spiritual as an integrated whole, it is natural for Indian culture to postulate that true love, love worthy of serious consideration, must move from physical to spiritual realms …', Ziauddin Sardar, op. cit., pp. 29-30.
[26]   Dr. N.P. Unni (trans.), *Natyashastra* Vol. 3 (Delhi: Nag Publishers, 1998), pp. 731-748.
[27]   Zarilli, *The Kathakali Complex*, op. cit., p. 267. For an explanation of the role and importance of *rasa* in Indian art, and its relation to the concept of *maya*, see the previous chapter.
[28]   Lutgendorf writes of viewer reaction to the televised *Ramayana* when the heroes lie wounded on the battlefield, and 'some devotees took ritual baths, as during an eclipse, for protection during the Lord's period of helplessness'. Philip Lutgendorf, op. cit. p. 344.
[29]   This sort of imaginary 'joining' has, historically, religious precedence in *bhakti* tradition.
[30]   Actually, he is washing in a temple tank, a place of purification.

He regards, on the bank, the discarded costume of Arjuna. The real man who stands before the thundering Gods feels no identification with that rumpled heap of clothes.

Dressed in full Arjuna regalia, he meets Subhadra again at their next engagement at the palace; she tells him she is pregnant, saying, 'It is Abhimanyu'.[31] Kunhikuttam watches his painted face in a hand mirror, as if to see to whom Subhadra had spoken. The mirror (*darpana*) is itself a form of *maya*—a reflection. Yet in Hindu symbolism, *darpana* is also wisdom for that very reason: it reflects 'the emptiness of all worldly matters'.[32] This theme of the mirror is one that is repeated at critical moments in *Vaanaprastham*, used by the characters to assess their own changing realities, as if to seek truth from their own appearance.

Several years pass. Subhadra refuses to see Kunhikuttam when he visits the palace 'without a crown or costume', as he remarks to his friend. Yet when robed as Arjuna, he has the baby placed in his arms, though the mother states, 'I consider him as the son engendered by Arjuna. He is not Kunhikuttam's son'. Embittered, Kunhikuttam swears to his friends that he will no longer play noble characters, and places down the crown, with care. He recognises the *maya*, the deluded vision, of Subhadra's self-absorbed world, but it does not lessen his reverence for the play or the role, as represented by Arjuna's crown. He assures his friends that 'the play won't be interrupted. None of us can interrupt any play'. This uninterruptible 'play' is *lila,* the eternal unfolding of the universe, which will roll on in great cycles of time unhindered by actors who are merely portraying the Gods. Behind that *maya* of their role lies the dismaying lack of power over events in their own lives.

Five years pass. Kunhikuttam roars, dancing his new role of black-faced villain on the stage. Subhadra still refuses to meet him, and he is sadly helpless as his friend, the singer Namboodiri, lies dying of throat cancer. The voice that sings the story is eaten away with disease: an allusion to the decay behind the façade that is their Kathakali lives, the silencing of their truth in the historical situation in which ordinary men must live. Perhaps a malaise underlies the tradition itself, and its changing role in twentieth century India, where its presentation and patronage is now frequently devoted to the uninformed curiosity of the tourist trade.[33] Kunhikuttam's best comfort for his dying friend is to tell him, in a direct reference to the *maya* of selfhood and masks 'You're

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31   Abhimanyu is, in the Mahabharata, the son of Arjuna and Subhadra, and is himself a perfect warrior in skill and bravery, who is killed in the great battle at Kurukshetra.

32   Eva Rudy Jansen, *The Book of Hindu Imagery: Gods, Manifestations and Their Meaning* (Havelte, Netherlands: Binkey Kok Publications BV, 1993), p. 47.

33   Phillip Zarilli has examined the changing nature of the Kathakali audience and the consequent changes in the content and duration of the plays. See Phillip Zarilli, op. cit., pp. 318-322.

lying here free of your costumes while I dance in mine, unable to free myself of them'.

Tired of all the roles in his life, Kunhikuttam craves the absolution of peace, and resolves to perform sacred rites for his father, and for himself on behalf of his son. His mother has begged him to desist, saying it is a sin for a low caste man to perform rites for a Namboodiri (*brahmin*). Bhagirati is a submissive woman who is tied to past attitudes, unlike the film's younger generations of females—her daughter-in-law, and Subhadra and Sharada—who are all self-assertive in ways that accord to their different personalities. The depiction of the women echoes the changing expectations of women that accord with India's passage through that era, as the traditional ties were loosening.[34] Resisting his mother, Kunhikuttam explains,

> Despite everything, I'm the son of a man. My father refused to acknowledge me. I now have a son whose mother refuses to avow my paternity. Father, mother, son, or daughter, this is just gesture language for a Kathakali artist. A caste-free language, where each word is sacred.

Living in two worlds, dancing in the realms of the Gods and playing his lowly caste ordained role in that of mortals, Kunhikuttam knows himself to be a man, who wants the human touch of father and son, a state which is beyond artificial divisions of caste—beyond the *maya*, or illusion, of difference and separation. Kunhikuttam stands for the rights of the individual, and now he longs to find the place where 'sorrow and joy are one'. This desire alludes to the film's title, for *vaanaprastha* is the third designated stage of Hindu life—the time of the forest dweller, where the delusions of the world (*maya*) are renounced.

Kunhikuttam performs rituals and takes blessings, then returns to incarnate Arjuna one last time. He will dance Subhadra's play, but this time with his daughter as his (Arjuna's) love, Subhadra. It is as if Kunhikuttam vows to transgress all barriers, since the normal relationships of father and son have been denied him: as *vaanaprastham*, he no longer follows social form. His wife is horrified, believing Sharada's life will be destroyed if she goes on the stage and, worse, dances with her own father as his lover. But Sharada, like the little Krishna she was called as a child, can overcome any poison in her devotion to her father, and by doing so can absolve his pain. She dances with him, and for the first time in many years, the 'real' Subhadra watches the play, unreadable emotions on her face. She seems to have awoken from her illusions and realized the mistake she has made in

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[34]   There is much that could be inferred from *Vaanaprastham* in regard to the changing role and depiction of women, but a close dissection of that issue is not directly relevant to the current discussion.

denying Kunhikuttam's manhood all this time, and later, dresses in her best silks, preparing to receive him. She looks in the mirror, marking her forehead and hair parting with the red *kumkum* signifying marriage—taking her 'true' role as Kunhikuttam's wife (or as Arjuna's?). It is too late. A voice in the corridor imparts the news that Kunhikuttam has died, collapsing after his 'last dance'. Subhadra, like a true widow, smears the red across her forehead and falls in distress to the floor.

Subhadra and Kunhikuttam have each, tragically (or, in Indian terms, through *karma*) been caught in identity *maya*. Selfhood is as truth, a shifting concept changing according to social or individual perspective. Yet there is danger in such nebulous perception, when the nature of *maya* is forgotten; that is Subhadra's downfall. For her too, Kathakali may be a 'caste-free language', but the daily world is not. Yet Kunhikuttam, at one level of perception, *is* Arjuna. He 'reincarnates' the form and qualities of Arjuna for the community. Subhadra remains abetted by the divisions inherent in India's social structure. The *atman/brahman* philosophy and, more overtly, that of the social role ordained to each person through his or her *dharma* and *karma* has conditioned ideas of the individual for Hindus, an influence which has affected all Indian social formations. Writer and literary critic Nirmal Verma explains, in an essay which critiques European colonization of Indians' 'sense of space and time' and 'concept of self' that:

> the self could never be completely colonized, for the identity of a Hindu, unlike that of a European, never resided in the self as an autonomous entity, but in a larger pattern of beliefs, ritualistic observances and caste obligations.[35]

Kunhikuttam and Subhadra are both enmeshed within this social pattern. *Vaanaprastham* reveals the individual struggling to emerge from the grasp of traditional structures, while acknowledging the prominent role that mythology, so at odds with prevailing western 'modern' conceptions of reality, still plays. India, a fledgling democratic nation in Kunhikuttam's time, discriminates (undemocratically) against a man for his circumstances of birth, yet can simultaneously elevate him, through the mask of *maya*, to the status of king and hero. *Vaanaprastham* reflects that contradiction: the Gods, meant to represent the higher truth beyond *maya*, become instead the illusion, veiling the realities of human life.[36] The film also reflects the conflicts of modernity, the perspective of a film director looking back from the end of a century at the difficulties and

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[35]   Nirmal Verma, 'India and Europe: Some Reflections on Self and Other', in *Between Tradition and Modernity*, ed. by Fred Dallmyr and G. N. Devy (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), p. 338. First published in the journal *Kavita Asia*, Bhopal, 1990, pp. 121-144.

[36]   Thanks to Dr. Joan Relke for that insight.

enigmas of change. Yet Karun's era, the 1990s, saw a renewed tolerance, even a new search, for traditional culture throughout a world becoming increasingly homogenised by 'globalisation'. As people migrated to further shores, their roots became precious; the tourist trade also valued 'traditional' aspects of culture as beautiful, strange, or revelatory. Karun's film reflects this feeling of value for Keralan culture, while acknowledging its social failings.

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