

Hybrid Bodies in Transit: The 'Third Language' of Contemporary *Kathak**

* I would like to express my gratitude to Silvana Carotenuto and Jane Wilkinson for their comments on a previous version of my article.

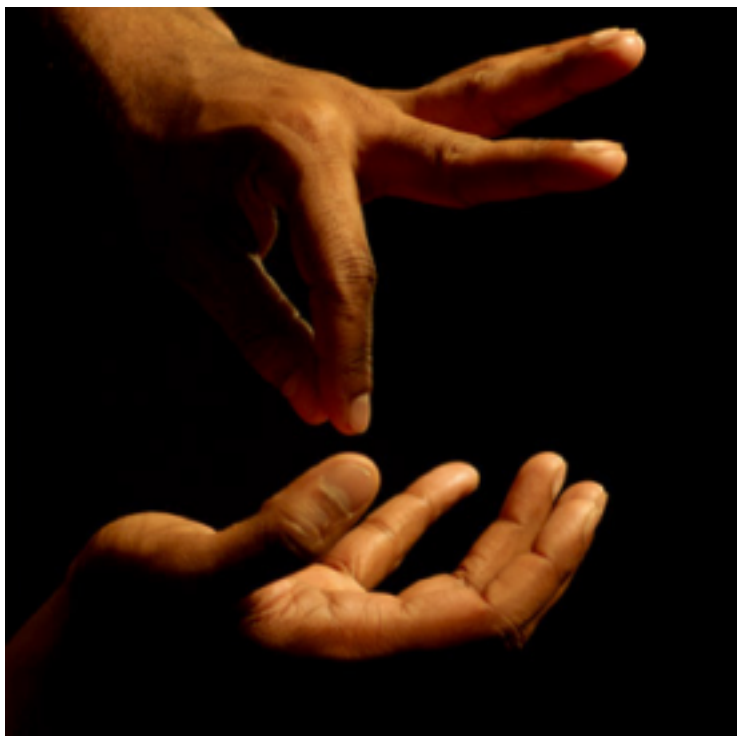


Fig. 1: Anders Røren, *Akram Khan*, April 2009, photo, London, <http://www.akramkhancompany.net/html/akram_akram.htm>, © Anders Røren, 30 April 2009, courtesy of Akram Khan Company.

It is the dichotomy of the opposites. One place, which is the classical world, offers you tradition, history. It offers you discipline,

something very sacred and spiritual, too.

And the other place, the contemporary, offers you a science laboratory. It offers you your voice to be heard. It offers you numerous discoveries and possibilities.

To be in a position where you can reach out to both, is the best place to be for me. I don't want to be in any one place for too long. I am always moving, like a tennis ball, from one side to the other and my favourite moment is when I am just in the middle, just above the net. That is the place where I feel most happy.

(Akram Khan)

¹ Throughout this article, 'confuse' and all its derivatives are to be intended in the sense Khan attributes to this word, one of the key concepts of his hybrid, in-between performance language.

In this article I observe the Dance Theatre of the Anglo-Indian performer Akram Khan, in his ability to feel and 'confuse' the two different worlds that constitute his body.¹ Khan is the son of the new Indian diaspora:

born from migrant Bangladeshi parents, and living in London, his state of being in a postcolonial time-space drives him to dance the transit from one culture to another, from one body language to another, from his British to his Indian identity. The flexible map of his body sustains him in his creative investigation of Contemporary *Kathak*, a hybrid language in transit from classical Indian *Kathak* to Western contemporary dance, an in-between space which Khan identifies as a chance to exhibit the performative language of his dislocated Anglo-Indian body/identity.

For Khan, Contemporary Kathak dance is a 'third language', where the Indianness of its classical form mixes with Western dance and where traditional and modern realities coexist in a "third space".² Bhabha's terminology is particularly appropriate for my description of Khan's transit, the 'in-between' of his kinesthetic body, at the crossroads of cultural policy and theory, in the encounter between Dance and the Postcolonial challenge. Khan's Dance Theatre offers an alternative aesthetics that re-shapes the colonial encounter and records the postcolonial openness of India today. His dance interrupts and interrogates both the Indian and the English languages and their always-already hybrid nature, as it pushes them to leave their original 'home' to move towards other bodies, other identities, and other dances.

From *Kathak* to Contemporary Dance

My parents are from Bangladesh Eventually, just before 1970, they moved to London for further education. I think my mother was going to do a Master there. And my father was doing a Business degree My mother was always fascinated by the Arts, so she continued bringing the community together through performances. Particularly with the Bangladesh Centre in London. They encouraged me to dance, and that's how I got into it.

(Akram Khan)

Khan took his first steps in the art of dance following the traditional Indian language of *Kathak*, a classical dance originally from Northern India and Pakistan. Its name derives from the Sanskrit *katha*, "story", and it shows a strong narrative involvement with the two famous epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Sunil Kothari actually describes the *Kathak* performer as a storyteller: "One who tells a story is called a *kathak*. An ideal *kathak* is one who can sing, dance, enact mime, knows music ... and has an admirable command over several aspects which go into making of a dance performance".³ Not surprisingly, the original space for this performance used to be the Hindu temple, where spirituality, tradition, history and drama were ritually combined. Over the centuries, however,

² Homi K. Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha", in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211.

³ Sunil Kothari, "Kathak: An Open-ended Classical Indian Dance Form", <<http://www.akramkhancompany.net/docs/Kathak%20essay%20by%20Sunil.doc>>, 30 November 2007.

Kathak has been changing location, target, and audience, growing and developing into schools with different stylistic approaches:

Its roots in the religion, as a performing art in the Hindu temples, its journey from the temples to the Mughal court, to the salons of the courtesans, the *tawaifs*, mistakenly termed as prostitutes, and after the British rule was over in India, its emergence as a classical art, worthy of practice by the educated and respected middle class gentry, is phenomenal. During the past century *Kathak* as a dance form was nurtured in ... two independent schools The Lucknow school has delicacy, beauty of bodily movements and a lyrical quality, whereas the Jaipur school lays stress on the vigorous aspects of dance and on the intricacies of time.⁴

⁴ Ibid.

On the whole, *Kathak* can be described as a dynamic dance, featuring complex variations and changing tempos; its dancers wear ankle bells whose music beats to the vigorous movements of their bodies, their fast pirouettes and (apparently) improvised gestures. This dynamism must have been the reason why Khan, who did not learn *Kathak* in India but in Britain, found it appropriate to his perception of dance: the fluidity of *Kathak* could easily abandon its traditional Indian space, eroding all national cultural borders, and travel onto a British-Asian body. In a globalizing view, *Kathak* seemed to allow and follow the diaspora of Indian migrant identities, bearing their postcolonial inscriptions. Its transplanted practice could be read as a cultural heritage of the colonised Indian self, performing its independence on the stage of the former colonial power.

Still, Khan's curiosity could not be limited to the horizon of an art form of this kind; his attention was caught by the contemporaneity of what was going on in his 'British' life, at the moment when his Indian 'half-world' met his Western 'half-world': "I didn't know what contemporary dance was. My community was quite self-sufficient in its art forms and didn't encourage me to go out to look at other forms of dance... But I saw a leaflet on contemporary dance and decided to try it".⁵

Contemporary dance originated in Europe and in the United States after the Second World War, following the revolutions enacted by modern and post-modern dances. These historical transformations were looking for a natural body expression, far from the lyrical idealization of ballet. Moreover, contemporary dance language does not converge into a single technique, with perfect, unified and controlled forms; its vocation is for the multiple styles that share in the deconstruction of classical traditions. The contemporary dancer is not trained to interpret unchangeable repertoires, but to develop his/her body as a 'hyper-body' – a 'hypertext' – with several different expressive inputs for both dancer and spectator. The dancer's body is not a fixed or immutable entity, but a living structure continually adapting and transforming itself.⁶

⁵ Khan, cit. in Preeti Vasudevan, "Clarity within Chaos", *Dance Theatre Journal* 18.1 (2002), 18.

⁶ See Elizabeth Dempster, "Women Writing the Body: Let's Watch a Little How She Dances", in Alexandra Carter, ed., *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 227.

The same inventiveness characterises the space of contemporary dance, exploited in all its geometrical dimensions: on the lower level, you have improvised falls; on the middle level, there are unstable movements; the upper level is where transient jumps can take place. Space is fluid: a dancer can be seen from the front and from the side, with equal interest.⁷ All codified rules of classical ballet can be broken and developed, thus enriching the possibility of representing the multiplicity of the Western bodies. In the versatile passage between *Kathak* and contemporary dance, Khan locates himself as a hybrid, transitional dancer and body, moving between the traditional (the past, the sacred and the spiritual) and the modern (the present, the human and the material), between an original physical language and the Western system:

[W]hen I am in one place, the contemporary dance world, then I feel I can't reach somewhere higher; there is no sense of spirituality; and when I am entirely in the classical world, I feel, I have no freedom to reach out there; so the most beautiful place for me to be is a place where I can reach both worlds at the same time.⁸

⁷ See Merce Cunningham with Jacqueline Lesschaeve, "Torso: There Are No Fixed Points in Space", in Carter, ed., *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, 30.

⁸ Khan, from the programme of *Sacred Monsters* (2006).

The 'Third language' of Contemporary *Kathak*

It was not a conscious or intellectual development, but simply that my body was making decisions for itself and yes, a unique language of movement was emerging from the confrontation of these two dance forms.
(Akram Khan)

Akram Khan's is a confused body: the acquisition of contemporary dance exposes his Indian 'mother-dance' to mutation. The code he was accustomed to dwell upon is torn by (an)other body language; but his former self does not disappear: "I can't take ten years of my training away. So in my class I would always move very differently from the other contemporary dancers, because my body is informed with something very different".⁹ The collision of the two forms of dance on his own muscles provides an object to search into, investigate and understand: "both my classical and contemporary dances were getting rather frustrated, so I decided in a way to investigate this frustration".¹⁰ Thus, Khan's body-laboratory produces Contemporary *Kathak*, a language based on his discovery of 'dis/ordered' elements governed by confusion. Confusion becomes indeed his creative tool; just as he avoids fossilizing within a single, specific genre, the dancer-choreographer also avoids applying a label to his work: "I don't like the word 'fusion' so much, because I think it's used in a wrong way, and it doesn't cut deep enough. I like to call my work 'confusion'".¹¹

⁹ Khan, cit. in Naeem Mohaiemen, "Akram Khan: Explosion in Contemporary Dance" (5 December 2003), <<http://www.thedailystar.net/magazine/2003/12/01/coverstory.htm>>, 15 January 2008.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

As well as being a rational form of research, Khan's confused art may be seen as work in progress, recording the transit of two contrasting dances on his intellectual flesh-and-bones body. The dis/order created by the encounter of traditional *Kathak* and the fleeting movements of contemporary dance, discloses the confusion between the "clarity" of the former and the "chaos" of the latter. As Khan points out: "Classical to me is clarity, where the boundaries are clear and visible. Contemporary is chaotic. It is an unfortunate misconception that has no boundaries. The difference is that you cannot see them. It is invisible that makes it chaotic. You know the boundaries are there but cannot see them."¹² In the progressive interplay between the clashing expressions of clarity and chaos, he is searching for an element of harmony within both dance forms. Through their material metaphors, he explores energy:

¹² Vasudevan, "Clarity within Chaos", 18.

My image of *Kathak* is based on a formless hunch, as suggested by Peter Brook. Imagine a person standing still within a cube or box. The body is filled with sand and the fingertips have holes, the sand is flowing out of there and the body is deflating. However, there is a small turbine on the top of the box and a vacuum pulls you creating a sandstorm. The clarity of the dancer is the feet on the ground while it is chaotic around. It is finding clarity within chaos. What I'm exploring is *Kathak*, the dynamics and energies of *Kathak*. It is *Kathak* that informs the contemporary.¹³

¹³ Ibid.

Khan's experimentation assumes concrete form in the development of the multicultural company Akram Khan Company he created in 2000. The purpose of this company is not only to examine the relationship between Western dance and traditional Kathak, but to emphasize the dis/order in the structural and mathematical elements comprising both dance styles. Maths is basic to Khan's double art. In Kathak, choreographies endorse the logical configuration of Indian music, since "everything in Indian music works mathematically and is very logical".¹⁴ A logical organization also shapes contemporary Western dance, which unhinges the composure of ballet while preserving the geometrical relation between the dancing body and space. Once again it is Khan himself who explains:

¹⁴ Patricia Boccadoro, "Akram Khan in Paris" (25 January 2004), <<http://www.culturekiosque.com>>, 30 May 2008.

I used connection through mathematics, because math is a universal language. I wanted to compare that because in North Indian and South Indian music and dance, maths plays an integral part ... that's why I started to play with numbers on stage. In Indian dance, the maths comes from the music. In contemporary dance, the geometric and geographic structures in relation to the body and space is where the maths comes in.¹⁵

¹⁵ Khan, cit. in Mohaiemen, "Akram Khan".

Khan's 'mathematical' dance involves several transits – between tradition and modernity, clarity and chaos, geometry and disorder, past and present, South Asian and British identities. The diasporic confusion of their languages mirrors the displacement of Khan's own, hybrid identity, the identity of a

stranger: “I am not British nor even Bangladeshi” – the choreographer repeats – “my condition is that of a stranger everywhere”.¹⁶ This condition urges him to search for another, “third”, road or voice: “Like many others of my generation that live in my condition, I am searching for a voice that is the combination of my motherland roots and the culture of the place where I was born. It is about a third road, a new path in between the East and the West.”¹⁷

In a performative application of Bhabha’s third space, Contemporary *Kathak* is the third language Khan uses to dance through a liminal space in which he may elaborate new “strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – initiating new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation”.¹⁸ The perspective offered by Bhabha’s in-between space enables “something new” to emerge, raising questions as to the sense of belonging to a specific culture:

[A]ll forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity. But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.¹⁹

The third space or language of Contemporary *Kathak* presents a cut and mix of languages, a possibility for playing and performing cultural hybridity.²⁰ Through it, Khan enacts his own in-betweenness, the negotiation of his postcolonial and Anglo-Indian identity. Thus the ‘writing’ body of his dance expresses and enhances the confused landscape of Khan’s soul: “I feel that the essence of dance is the expression of man – the landscape of his soul.”²¹

Into the Elsewhere of the Possible

At the moment I am in transition of searching. I have not quite found a solid foundation to ... define clearly what I mean by ‘Contemporary *Kathak*’.

(Akram Khan)

I ask you, what would you do
if you had two tongues in your mouth,
and lost the first one, the mother tongue,
and could not really know the other,
the foreign tongue.

(Sujata Bhatt)



Fig 2: Anders Røren, *Akram Khan*, April 2009, photo, London, <http://www.akramkhancompany.net/html/akram_akram.htm>, © Anders Røren, 30 April 2009, courtesy of Akram Khan Company.

¹⁶ Khan, my translation, <<http://www.romaeuropa.net/archivio/eventi/kaash/index.html>>, 30 May 2008.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

¹⁹ Bhabha, “The Third Space”, 211.

²⁰ Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities”, in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall, Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 446.

²¹ Marta Graham, “I am a Dancer”, in Carter, ed., *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, 67.

Akram Khan's movements recall the dis/ordered words of other hybrid bodies and identities. In its transit through other in-between spaces, Khan's diasporic male dancing body resonates with female poetics of voicing. His search for a language of movement mirrors the work of poets such as Sujata Bhatt, whose "Search For My Tongue" gives visual and bodily form to the issue of language.

In Bhatt's poem, her tongue "slips away", like a lizard's tail cut from its body. This is the moment when, placing herself in between human and animal, the poet compares her despair at being unable to save her mother-tongue with the lizard's inability to keep its tail alive. Language becomes a material practice that pulses as the poet switches from one language to another, diasporizing all in a cut and mix of English and Gujarati:

Days my tongue slips away.
I can't hold on to my tongue.
It's slippery like the lizard's tail
I try to grasp
But the lizard darts away.
Mari jeebh sarki jai chay
I can't speak. I speak nothing.
Nothing.
Kai nahi, hoo nathi boli shakti
I search for my tongue.²²

²² Sujata Bhatt, "Search for my tongue", in *Brunizem* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1988), 63-64.

²³ The work was first created in 1994 for a group of five young South Asian dancers living in UK – the YUVA (The South Asian Youth Dance Company) – under the title *Tongue Untied*; the piece was then re-elaborated by Daska Sheth for her company under the name *Search for My Tongue*, an experiment that met with great public response in India.

²⁴ Daksha Sheth in Liza George, *The Hindu* (20 March 2009), <<http://www.hindu.com/fr/2009/03/20/stories/2009032050780200.htm>>, 21 July 2009.

Bhatt's words belong to a travelling body, wandering and searching for a tongue – the metonym of her identity. Her hybrid body transits between the loss and appropriation of different words, giving them new meanings and possibilities. Not surprisingly, "Search For My Tongue" has itself inspired a dance production, opening up the poem to a further movement. The Daksha Sheth Dance Company – with its own hybrid bodies in transit – had in fact choreographed the poem back in the 90s, searching for an experimental body language and dancing the cultural dislocation and transformation of India today.²³

Daksha Sheth is a professional Indian dancer who received initial training in *Kathak* but who has always been something of a rebel in the Indian dance world. Her company hosts performing artists from different backgrounds and disciplines; in their productions they seek to bridge western contemporary dance and traditional Indian arts such as *Kathak*, *Mayurbhanj Chhau*, *Vedic chanting*, *Kalaripayattu* and *Mallakhamb*:

My dance combines dance, acrobatics, aerobatics, martial art and completely original music specifically created for dance. I have taken elements of traditional dance and combined it with modern music, clothes and movements the inspiration is essentially Indian. It is an evolution from my training in various dance forms.²⁴

The confusion of several body movements and traditions is visualized and articulated in a third language again, a unique dance vocabulary that gives voice to the hybridism of a postcolonial culture and the in-betweenness of South Asian dancing bodies.

The choreographed version of *Search for My Tongue* performs the poet's journey in life, her movement from home to Europe and America, from Gujarati to English. The bi-lingual poem is performed by multi-lingual dancers who use their bodies to ask the same questions as those raised by Bhatt's her investigating voice: Which is our identity? Can it be danced through a sole language? Bhatt's fear of losing her identity as a Gujarati-speaking Indian is overcome in the dimension of the dream, where her mother-tongue comes back.

I thought I spit it out
But overnight while I dream,
Munay hutoo kay aakhee jeebh aakhee bhasha
*May thoonky nakhi chay ...*²⁵

²⁵ Sujata Bhatt, "Search for My Tongue", 64.

For Sheth a similar fear is defeated on the stage, in the theatrical dimension, where diasporic bodies speak a third language, confusion is danced through the cut and mix of different techniques, arts and traditions and identities transit between two cultures. Broken words inspire untied body movements, while poetic rhythm becomes the music to which Sheth dances her own search for an independent identity and language: a third language made of loss and appropriation. In *Search for My Tongue* Bhatt's voice and Sheth's body break the Indianness of their languages, taking them where they have never been before.

The art of Bhatt and Sheth, like that of Khan, invites us to re-route the meanings of the Western language/dance and the Indian mother-tongue/dance as mobile sites of belonging and becoming, as "elsewhere[s] of the possible", to borrow Iain Chambers's expression. In his exploration of the wandering experience of languages with no fixed abode, Chambers speaks of the destabilizing and re-routing of colonial languages and bodies, bringing language "to the point where it is shaken apart, and the habitual meanings of words are exposed and sacrificed as customs and the prescribed is unsettled by an unsuspected shift into the elsewhere of the possible."²⁶

Dances of Interruption

In his dance, Khan usually interrupts his dancing language in order to converse with prestigious writers, sculptors, musicians and dancers. His art works with other arts; his language is combined with other languages from different cultures and different countries. In these interactions, the

²⁶ Iain Chambers, "Signs of Silence, Lines of Listening", in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 50.

²⁷ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 7.

limits of the knowledge of East and West blur, creating undefined borders. In addition, Khan's third language of Contemporary *Kathak* does not recall the past as an aesthetic precedent but, like Bhabha's artists of the 'beyond', it "renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living".²⁷ The traditional aspect of *Kathak* dance is re-integrated in contemporary art practice not as a synonym of the old-fashioned, but as an essential form. Khan's interruptive intercultural experiments are often made in collaboration with other artists, as in *Ma* (2004) with the Anglo-Pakistani writer Hanif Kureishi, *Zero degree* (2005) with the Flemish-Moroccan dancer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (engaged, like Khan, in a search for zero at the core of life, the middle point through polar opposites), *Banbok* (2008) in which the Akram Khan Company joined forces with the National Ballet of China, and *In-I* (2008-9) with Juliette Binoche. In this paper, I have chosen to concentrate on *Kaash* and *Sacred Monsters*, a choice dictated by the intense emotion I experienced, as a dancer, while watching these productions.

Kaash: The Mysteries of Forms

It is important that we remind ourselves of the value of that which we cannot touch.
Is it not true that the empty space inside the cup is what renders it useful?
Similarly, the stillness between steps, the spaces between musical phrases and the empty spaces in space itself contain all the mysteries of their eventual forms.
(*Kaash*: words projected on screen)

²⁸ *Kaash* - choreographer: Akram Khan; composer: Nitin Sawhney; set designer: Anish Kapoor, 2002.

"Empty space"; "stillness"; "mysteries" – these are the key to the dance language of *Kaash* (from the Hindi word for "If"), in which Khan uses images, stories, colours and movements belonging to his mother-India.²⁸ His 'interrogating' performance is built around the god Shiva, a pivotal character in traditional *Kathak* dances: "I am basing it on the concept of Shiva. Shiva in Hindu religion is the destroyer and restorer of order ... What if you put a dancer in a ice cube and then the energy is released when the cube melts? That's what Shiva is about".²⁹

²⁹ Vasudevan, "Clarity within Chaos", 21.

Energy is explored through the combination of different languages: set design, music, and dance. Energy is above all explored through the 'unsaid' dialogue between Khan and the artist Anish Kapoor. The minimalism of Kapoor's set supports the geometrical body effect reproduced by Khan and his dancers. The sculptor generates a dark rectangular backcloth framed by three overlapping squares, three geometric shapes whose colours change with the tempo. The set seems to create a never-ending condition of ambiguity

between empty and full spaces, matter and colour, place and non-place.

Kapoor aims to exploit unexpected depths by using colours with ritual Hindu meanings, playing with light and shadow, as 'if' he wanted to re-shape the unfinished within the finished. The 'infinite' sensation he evokes may be linked to the unfinished state of being inscribed on his hybrid body. Kapoor, too, is (un-)defined in his dual Anglo-Indian identity: born to a Hindu father and a Jewish-Iraqi mother, the sculptor has been part of the multicultural space of London since the beginning of the seventies. This is one of the ways in which *Kaash* mirrors the transitory dimension of his existence, combining

the spiritual traditions of India with Western art concepts. Music produces a similar effect: the musical track is provided by the British-Asian composer, Nitin Sawhney. In conversation with Khan, Sawhney works on some close parallels between Western techno-dance and the musical cycles of traditional Indian music. He is searching for affinities between sounds coming from different lands, so as to create nuances of difference between cultures and musical languages. In a similar way to Khan and Kapoor, Sawhney transits in 'travelling rhythms' that reproduce his displaced Anglo-Indian identity.

What happens to Khan's third language choreography on stage? Five dancers vitalize the performance space; group variations are alternated by solos and duets; but all the dancers stage the confusion of Contemporary *Kathak*. The combination of speed and stillness, chaos and clarity, geometry and disorder stuns the audience, imposing a new and different form of perception. The ensemble pieces tend to reproduce the choreographic strategy of the canon: in a contrapuntal manner, each dancer in turn performs a movement, with a different tempo, then they synchronize it in unison. This strategy creates visions of hybrid bodies, transiting from confused improvisation to logical order. In addition, Khan intentionally chooses dancers with no *Kathak* background. His desire is to make them approach the classical practice anew, pushing them to experience a natural confusion on their bodies. The upper parts of the dancing bodies are used with rigour and energy; arms deconstruct the space around the body, cutting it and perforating it with slashes, lines and waves in mid-air, creating a mixed effect of softness and rigidity. *Mudras* hand positions from Indian



Fig. 3: Artist Unknown, *Kaash*, 2002, photo, <http://www.akramkhancompany.net/html/akram_akram.htm>, 30 April 2009, courtesy of Akram Khan Company, London,

classical dance are also used, dynamically amalgamated with the breaking movements of contemporary dance.

From a theoretical perspective, *Kaash* raises stimulating issues relating to the performativity of diasporic identities. Ramsay Burt has suggested a parallel between national identity and gender performativity, recalling Judith Butler's theory of gender as a performative act. For Butler, gender is not a biological given but is constructed through discursive practices based on repetition and performativity. According to Burt's interpretation of Butler, national identities are built on similar practices: "the individual is called upon to perform gender and in responding to that call recognizes her or himself as subject to gender norms. Where national identities are concerned, individuals are similarly interpellated into nationalist discourses including those found within movement forms invested with cultural significance".³⁰

Before going on stage, the performance act needs repetitions and rehearsals which are both "a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" as Butler explains.³¹ Gender performativity also entails an act of repetition: "the act one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed."³² For Burt, the performative acts of gender and national identities share the repetition and re-enactment of the discourses upon which they are based. For British-Asian subjects, the act of repeating/performing traditional forms such as *Kathak* means perpetuating a sense of affiliation, of belonging to their motherland; this sense of affiliation, however, emerges from the interstices because it is performed by diasporic bodies/identities.

Khan's dancing language clarifies all this. He re-enacts his 'mother-dance' as he explores and hybridizes it, performing his own liminal Indianness and that of other South-Asian diasporic bodies. *Kaash* is clearly a repetition of the Indian national identity, if only thanks to the choreographer's cooperation with other postcolonial British-Asian artists. What one should underline here is the performativity of new Indian national identities as non-static and hybrid – just like the transitory art they display on stage. In this sense, *Kaash* develops precise diasporic cultural strategies similar to the practices of assimilation and resistance to the host (in this case British) cultural system described by James Clifford.³³ Contemporary *Kathak* is a language that accommodates the host culture by incorporating Western dance; similarly, it resists it by repeating the Indianness of *Kathak*.

The hybridism of *Kaash* represents a common terrain for both the migrant and the host community: it encodes the languages of British-Asian displaced bodies, as well as containing the presence of an element of *différance* that interrupts Western performing art. "If" both cultures are present in the third language of Contemporary *Kathak*, *Kaash* fulfils to some extent the

³⁰ Ramsay Burt, "Contemporary Dance and the Performance of Multicultural Identities" (19 April 2004), <http://www.akramkhancompany.net/html/text_articles.asp?id=7>, 30 May 2007.

³¹ Judith Butler, "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity", in Colin Counsell and Laurie Wolf, eds., *Performance Analysis*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 76.

³² Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", in Sue Ellen Case, ed., *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 277, cit. in Burt, "Contemporary Dance".

³³ James Clifford, "Diasporas", *Cultural Anthropology* 9.3 (1994).

promise of the words that open the performance, “contain[ing] all the mysteries of their eventual forms”.

Sacred Monsters: Shared Bodies, Shared Histories

In *Sacred Monsters*, Khan works with the most sublime contemporary *étoile*, the French ballerina Sylvie Guillem.³⁴ The performance is a journey in which both dancers challenge the classical dance techniques they have acquired, renewing their traditional languages: here, Western ballet and classical *Kathak* share a third language. The title recalls the term coined in the nineteenth century for theatre stars and their divine status for the audience and media. The encounter between Guillem and Khan is between two such sacred monsters, two perfect, classical/sacred bodies revealing their contemporary, monstrous dimensions. In their interrupting journey the two dancers admit imperfections and impulsiveness, theatrical elements denied both by the severity of ballet and by the coded forms of *Kathak*. This is the moment when the divine becomes monstrous and the weak, unstable, human condition of the performers is acted out, staged and danced. In this transit, the two artists discover the possibilities hidden in worlds – the classical and the modern – that are usually considered incompatible. Speaking of his project, Khan explains that “Working with Sylvie Guillem gives me the opportunity to explore another classical dance language ... creating a situation that will unearth the things that are most often lost between the classical and modern world”.³⁵ On her part, Guillem needs to free herself from the classical clichés of style, technique and tradition. What matters is that, on stage, monstrosity turns one into someone else: “I am a classical dancer. I have been trained as a classical dancer. But I cannot say that my ‘religion’ is a style, a technique, or a tradition. What I can say is, that the ‘place’ where I perform, whatever style I perform, feels strongly a ‘sacred place’. The stage ... a monster ... my sacred monster”.³⁶

The dancers interrupt their personal narrations, sharing different bodies, traditions and histories. The breaking point is visible in the transition from solos to duets. The performance opens with the solos representing the historical form of both dancers, their classical training. The duets show the artists’ evolution, their effort to be true, natural and hybrid; the solos perform the past, while the duets materialize the contemporary. Khan starts his solo of pure *Kathak*: the ankle bells support the power of his footwork, stamping with a resounding ‘tak-tak’ sound. The typical speed of his cutting arms seems to draw slipstreams in the air. It is followed by Guillem’s solo: although the solo does not offer a ballet variation, it shows the lyricism and linear strength that shape the dancer’s marvellous classical technique.

After mirroring Western and Eastern classical traditions, the dancers deconstruct the sacred status of their bodies. Guillem and Khan’s interior

³⁴ *Sacred Monsters* - choreographer: Akram Khan; dancers: Akram Khan and Sylvie Guillem; additional choreographers: Lin Hwai Min, Gauri Sharma Tripathi; composer: Philip Sheppard; set designer: Shizuka Hariu; dramaturge: Guy Cools; 2006.

³⁵ Khan, *Sacred Monsters*, <<http://www.sadlerswells.com/show/06-Sacred-Monsters>>, 30 May 2008.

³⁶ Sylvie Guillem, from the programme of *Sacred Monsters* (2006).

journey displays their monstrosity by interrupting their traditions and meeting each other in between contemporary dance. Both dancers exploit their previous training: *Kathak* and ballet are employed as the seeds that sprout into contemporary dance. Hence, they go constantly back and forth, their movements describing a third space where classical mode and contemporary experimentation meet and where a common third language can emerge, by being danced and spoken together. At one point, Khan and Guillem exchange childhood memories. Unexpectedly, the stage is used in order to speak, joke and smile about infant fears. The script, written by Guy Cools, is in English. Music plays its part in the performance of this third language. On stage multicultural musicians produce sounds coming from East and West, that support the dialogue between the two dancers. Now, as in Guillem's solo, the voice and delicate sound of the female singer guide the dancer's body. The female conversation marks a wonderful performative encounter. Dancing bodies,



Fig. 4: Mikki Kunttu, *Sacred Monsters*, 2006, photo, London, <http://www.akramkhancompany.net/html/akram_akram.htm>, © Mikki Kunttu, 30 April 2009, courtesy of Akram Khan Company.

musicians and singers move into an essential set design dominated by white: a bright white wall with a deep rip, an interruption letting the audience catch a glimpse of 'another' zone. This is the way in which *Sacred Monsters* transits between different languages and hybrid bodies, creating, in this very multiplicity, a common energy.

Moments of intense hybridism are experienced when Khan and Guillem dance together, magnetizing the audience with their encounter. Both are dressed identically, in loose trousers and t-shirts, but at the same time they form a contrast thanks to their black and white skins and their different physiques. Yet, whenever they meet, their bodies adjust in perfect harmony. They seem to be moving on a third stage, where cultural, ethnical and physical differences are overcome. Syncretism is disclosed in a precise sequence: Khan is in the middle of the stage, reached by the female dancer; Guillem's legs are on his waist, then on his back – the two bodies are totally intertwined.

They perform a sinuous mirror dance with their arms and torsos, in such a way that there are four arms, recalling the multi-limbed Hindu god Shiva. Crucially, two bodies collide into one – a 'third' – body. It becomes impossible to distinguish their different bodies and identities. The third language spoken by Khan and Guillem shapes their

metaphorical journey into a transition from the divine to the monstrous, from personal to shared experiences, from classical to contemporary styles, from South Asian to Western languages.

From a postcolonial point of view, the performance language transits between the ex-colonised and the ex-coloniser, since it is the third language of their shared histories. As Catherine Hall observes: “Both colonisers and colonised are linked through their histories, histories which are forgotten in the desire to throw off the embarrassing reminders of Europe, to focus instead on the European future.”³⁷ Indeed, it is Guillem’s European body that becomes unexpectedly shareable and hybrid, marking a further interruption: on her journey towards (an)Other history and (an)Other body, one of the leading representatives of ballet (the ‘monolithic’ European language) interrupts the solidity of Western dance. By meeting the confused Anglo-Indian identity of Khan, Guillem becomes a hybrid body, and, by dancing a third language, she localizes herself within a discontinued space.

Mirrors, Hybrids, Movements and Words

Following Khan’s creative transit, it is possible to say that the body on stage is a presence that dances, entertains and communicates emotions. If the staged body belongs to an Anglo-Indian artist it is above all the mirror of a cultural identity: a hybrid identity. The language of the body is the language of an identity: “The body is absorbing and the mind is absorbing the culture, the smell, the religion, even politically. And so – the body is an identity in itself, it has its own opinion.”³⁸ Starting from the essential bond between body, identity and language, Khan performs the cultural re-elaboration of his double self. His third language endorses cultural, political and identity discourses. Contemporary *Kathak* is moulded by hybrid ‘movements’ breaking with both the classical and the contemporary world. All this tunes in with the hybrid words and female voice of Bhatt and the “idiolect of movement” of her choreographer, Sheth, which have interrupted my own writing. In any case, the danced-spoken third languages I have recalled interrogate the shared and re-shaped histories of the national languages of both the former colonised and the former coloniser;



Fig 5: Nigel Norrington, *Sacred Monsters*, 2006, photo, London, <http://www.akramkhancompany.net/html/akram_akram.htm>, © Nigel Norrington, 30 April 2009, courtesy of Akram Khan Company.

³⁷ Catherine Hall, “Histories, Empires and the Post-Colonial Moment”, in Chambers and Curti, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question*, 66.

³⁸ Khan, cit. in Mary Kay Magistad, “Akram Khan”, *PRI’s The World from the BBC, PRI and WGBH, Global Perspectives for an American Audience* (8 February 2008), <<http://www.theworld.org/?q=node/15900>>, 30 January 2009.

interrogations that find their possible answer in the multiple possibilities acquired by languages when they transit into elsewhere.

In *Kaash* and *Sacred Monsters*, the confusion of languages reveals the artist's choice to feel and dance two worlds at the same time. The confusion enabling hybrid bodies to express the openness of the postcolonial reality is also the reality of India today seen through the gaze of an Anglo-Indian. Khan's Indian half is disclosed in images, feelings, colours and stories referring to his motherland – a danced, explored, imagined homeland. It comes in fact from a diasporic representation or translation, from which "something always gets lost", but at the same time a language where "something can also be gained".³⁹

³⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), 17.

In its hybridism, Khan's British-Asian body performs the polyphonic mosaic of cultures, languages and world-views of the contemporary Indian aesthetic. Moreover, his third language can be appreciated on multiple stages: evolving on the artistic stages of Europe and South Asia, it enriches the theoretical and political stages of cultural, performance and postcolonial studies.