

# CLASSICAL INDIAN DANCING IN THE FORMATION OF 'NATIONAL CULTURE': THE GUIDE AND JOURNEY TO ITHACA

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## Abstract

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) and Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) can be regarded as realist texts that reify and affirm the connection between Indian nationalist discourse and the Anglo-Indian realist novel in decolonizing India. The depiction of classical Indian dancing in these texts appears to be framed within the nationalist ideology and its quest for 'authentic' cultural practices that signify the 'spiritual' identity of the nation. Both texts seem to reify the nationalist imaginings of a homogenous 'national culture' that is predominantly encoded in the texts as the Hindu culture. Further, in the representation of cultural identities of the practitioners, both *The Guide* and *Journey to Ithaca* appear to construe an essentialist version of identity in conformity with the nationalist discourse. Whilst the character of Rosie, a devadasi, in *The Guide* is ambivalently constituted within the exigencies of narrating the nation, Laila in *Journey to Ithaca*, by becoming a vessel of 'spirituality' in India and, thus, embodying what is regarded as an 'authentic' Indian identity, reifies the monolithic and essentialist constructions of identities in nationalist discourse. Nevertheless, both texts also profess a degree of critical distance from the nationalist ideology by registering the tensions, instabilities and ambivalences that underlie the formation of a 'national culture'.

**Key words:** nationalist discourse, classical Indian dancing, identity, cultural revival

"Nations...are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a great role."

Brennan, 1990

This paper examines the representation of classical dancing in the Anglo-Indian novels - R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) and Anita Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) in conjunction with the formation of [an? the?] Indian nation. The above texts profess a complex relationship with the Indian nationalist discourse in their representation of classical Indian dancing and the cultural and sexual identities of the practitioners. However, these texts would be regarded not simply as a reflection of a putative reality, but, rather, as forming a dialectical engagement with the cultural modes and discourses of the emergent nation.

A significant linkage between nationalism and cultural forms has been established with the conception of nation as an 'imagined community' that comes into being primarily through an 'apparatus of cultural fictions'.<sup>1</sup> The realist novel, regarded

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson (1983a) defines a link between the texts (particularly, print commodity) that are circulated and read in a community and the imagining of that community.

as a transparent mirror of the 'real', has acquired a particular significance in the imagining of [a? the?] nation, together with other textual forms such as print media. The nation's symbolic structure is purported to function similar to the plot of a novel that follows classic realist conventions.<sup>2</sup> Further, while literary narratives offered a "useful paradigm for the process of nation formation" and proved pivotal to [the?] nationalist imaginings,<sup>3</sup> the fractured and discursive terrain of nation has afforded literary forms with a rich and varied array of thematic concerns. Nationalist discourse(s) has offered a (hegemonic) framework for the textual production and interpretation in the postcolonial nations and, hence, literature from these nations is seen as predominantly comprising 'national allegories.' The Anglo-Indian realist novel that was a part of the cultural production in the period of decolonization is regarded as a forceful medium, which, "having developed within the ideology of Indian nationalism, determined the images and style of the national imagination."<sup>4</sup>

Narayan's *The Guide* as a realist novel located in pre/post-Independent India can be read in conjunction with the formation of [the? an?] Indian nation. In its representation of traditional cultural practices such as classical dancing, *The Guide* professes a direct, yet complex, engagement with the hegemonic cultural discourses that had gained currency during the Indian nationalist movement. The mapping out of Rosie/Nalini's career as a classical Indian dancer is ambivalently constituted within the exigencies of narrating the nation. In addition to the depiction of classical dancing, the representations of gender/sexual politics in *The Guide* take shape within the ideology of Hindu nationalism and its invocations of ideal womanhood.

As a text that registers the popular fascination of the West with an "authentic" Indian culture as a locus of Spirituality and Truth, Desai's *Journey to Ithaca* appears far from circumscribed by the political enterprise of narrating the nation. However, as an Anglo-Indian novel that regards the articulation of cultural difference as pivotal to its subject-matter of portraying a colonial/neo-colonial encounter between the East and the West, it is inevitable that the political [Imaginary?] of decolonizing India (that is founded on an idea of a homogenous national culture and identity) is powerfully inscribed within the text. The articulation of cultural difference in the narrative is apparently framed within the ideology of Indian nationalism and its discursive construction of an "authentic" Indian identity. The trajectory of Egyptian born Laila's character from a classical Indian dancer to the spiritually enlightened "Mother" can be traced to the larger political/historical discourses that seem to have informed *The Guide*.

## Cultural Revival and Classical Indian Dancing

In the portrayal of classical Indian dancing, *The Guide* and *Journey to Ithaca* profess a direct, yet nuanced, engagement with the hegemonic cultural discourses that had gained currency during the Indian nationalist movement. Clearly, the enabling condition for Rosie's and Laila's narratives within *The Guide* and *Journey*

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<sup>4</sup> "The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down or up history" (Anderson, 1983a, p. 63).

to *Ithaca* is provided by the specific history of cultural revival in India under the auspices of the Indian nationalist movement. Since imperial domination annihilated, suppressed, and transformed the cultures of the colonized, the decolonization process was accompanied by the necessity of forging a national culture through revivification of traditional cultural practices.<sup>5</sup> “The response of both the Hindus and Muslims to the colonial cultural hegemonization was essentially inward looking, seeking to revitalize the indigenous cultural practices through a critical introspection of the cultural resources of the past” (Pannikar, 2003, p.7). The nationalist cultural revival in India relied upon the regeneration and reconstruction of specific cultural forms that were viewed as representing an ‘authentic’ Indian identity. “The ideas of purification reform and national regeneration prompted the English-educated elite to hark back to the “spiritual roots” of the nation’s past, which they argued resided in the traditions of arts, aesthetics and culture of the Vedic times” (Chakravorty, 2000/01, p.113). The traditional cultural practices such as *Bharata Natyam* acquired a particular significance in this process of cultural revival in India as representing the ‘authentic’ spiritual identity of the nation and was modified and appropriated by an elite nationalist movement to suit the national interests. Within a short duration in Indian history, this much-stigmatized cultural practice, which had been the exclusive domain of temple dancers in colonial and pre-colonial India, was converted into a ‘high’ art form that was pursued by the ‘respectable’ women of upper/middle classes and castes, a transformation, which was fostered within the Indian nationalist discourse (Allen, 1997, p.93).

As a text that was written during the height of national cultural regeneration, *The Guide* seems to affirm and address the imperative of forging a ‘national culture’ in decolonizing India, which is implicitly coded as Hindu culture. In the literary depiction of classical dancing in *The Guide*, Narayan locates this practice within the history of Indian nationalist movement and its emphasis on revitalizing the ‘national culture’. In *The Guide*, Rosie’s entrance into the world of classical Indian dance occurs within an environment of cultural regeneration prompted by the anti-colonial nationalist struggle that provides a cultural space that is highly conducive for her dance form to thrive. Raju’s ability to effortlessly exploit this cultural/political environment in order to initiate Rosie’s career as a classical dancer provides a telling indication of the significance that cultural revival has acquired within the decolonization process in India. An authoritative public discourse on national cultural regeneration was constructed and disseminated during the nationalist phase, an ideology that the general public subscribed to. Raju has no difficulty in cleverly appropriating this discourse in order to further his own interests. “I held forth on the revival of art in India so vehemently that they could not easily brush me aside... I delivered such a lecture on the importance of our culture and the place of the dance in it... I dressed myself soberly for the part in a sort of rough-spun silk shirt...and a hand spun and hand-woven dhoti....” (p.177) For Raju, enacting the role of a ‘cultural nationalist’ is an effortless performance that only requires borrowings from recognized cultural codes of rhetoric, dress and behaviour. As Spivak noted, Narayan makes clear that Raju’s intention here is the “vulgarization

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<sup>5</sup> Singh, 1996, p.161

of culture in the interests of class mobility” (Spivak, 1996, p.244) and, thus, the text appears to contain within it an implicit critique of the appropriation and exploitation of the ‘national’ cultural forms by capitalist forces. However, at the same time, Raju’s ideological distancing from the rhetoric of the national cultural discourse draws attention to its status as a discursive construct and, rather than normalizing or naturalizing its ideological content, lays it open for critical scrutiny. Thus, *The Guide* maintains a certain degree of critical distance from the discourse of cultural nationalism in post-independent India in its representation of classical dancing.

*Journey to Ithaca* takes its point of departure from the cultural discourses that informed *The Guide*, in its depiction of classical dancing predominantly within an ideological framework deployed by the Hindu nationalist discourse. Although *Journey to Ithaca* refrains from making any direct inferences [to? from?] the cultural nationalism in India, the constituents of the “authenticity” of classical Indian dancing as depicted in the text resonate with the nationalist discourse and its discursive construction and signification of “authenticity” of this cultural practice. Classical dancing is depicted in the text as an embodiment of the ‘authentic’ Hindu spirit of India that sets it apart from the other/Western cultural practices. (Krishna claims that “If Laila wishes to develop the spiritual side of dancing, she must learn Indian dance, not French ballet and opera and all that.” p.210) Furthermore, Egyptian born Laila is drawn to classical Indian dancing for she perceives in it an expression of spirituality and religious passion that she feels [is?] lacking in the intense materialism of the Western culture.<sup>6</sup> (“When Laila was taught how to undulate her arms and imitate the rippling motion of a snake,...Laila became stiff with self-consciousness, understanding that this dance had nothing to do with any religious belief or spiritual exercise, Indian or otherwise.” p.255) Laila’s understanding of classical Indian dancing (which is an extension of the nationalist ideology) seems to hold a privileged position in the text as an “authentic” construction of the cultural practice and the text confers a certain degree of validity and credibility to her view that classical dancing is in essence “spiritual”. Thus, the text seems to reify the nationalist imaginings of classical Indian dancing as an ‘authentic’ cultural practice that embodies the Hindu spirit of India and, thus, promulgates a dichotomous view of the spiritual East and the material West. Further, Krishna’s gradual acquisition of the status of a representative for national/ Indian culture in the cultural [imaginary?] of the West cannot be entirely divorced from the nationalist politics and the beginnings of the revival of classical dance in India. Thus, it is possible to read the representation of classical dance in *Journey to Ithaca* as symptomatic of a highly politicized cultural economy in decolonizing India that served to signify and demarcate the boundaries of the emergent nation.

Nevertheless, *Journey to Ithaca* contains within it an implicit critique of the commodification of classical dancing and registers its transformation into a highly sought after cultural commodity in the global as well as local markets following its newly acquired status as an ‘authentic’ Indian cultural practice. One of the novel’s primary concerns is with unveiling the ‘quasi-authenticity’ of the art practised by the traditional dancers like Krishna, who has succumbed to the forces of commodification

<sup>6</sup> Singh, 1996, p.162

and, thus, attempts to exploit, modernize and destroy the purity of his classical art form. In order to make classical dancing into a lucrative profession, Krishna forsakes the values and ideals that are integral to his art. In his New York performances, Krishna has to abandon dances like '*Krishna Lila*' that comprised the 'spiritual' core of their cultural practice, since these dances held very little significance or value for the American audience. "No longer did he [Krishna] speak of the artistic purity of dance, or the spiritual quality at its heart." The dances that Krishna choreographs for the New York audiences are devoid of any spiritual or artistic import and merely serve to render the audience a taste of the exotic and luscious Orient, which reproduces the Orient to them in a manner that is discursively familiar. The dances of the 'Oriental bazaar' and the 'Hindu wedding' that Krishna contrives for the American audiences are intended to offer a glimpse of the exotic that lends to popular consumption. As *Journey to Ithaca* manifests, in the process of commodification, classical dancing has become a transformed cultural practice that is devoid of its purity or spiritual essence. Thus, Desai's text maintains a degree of distance from the nationalist cultural discourse by expressing a belief in a pure and 'authentic' art form that can be located outside of politics, modernization and the commodity logic of the capitalist system.

Likewise, *The Guide* attempts to dissociate itself from the hegemonic national cultural discourse by bringing into view the degree of transformation that classical dancing has undergone in modern India, following its integration into the nationalist cause as a 'high' art form.<sup>7</sup> The nationalist revival not only grants this cultural form a new lease of life and endurance as a high art form that is representative of the national identity, but also modernizes classical Indian dancing and relocates it on the secular stage.<sup>8</sup> The classical art form that is taken to the modern stage by Rosie through Raju's intervention is an altered form that differs from what was originally practised by her ancestors. Although Rosie envisions her artistic career in terms of an exercise in a 'pure' and 'authentic' classical tradition (She plans to study "the ancient works of art, *Natya Shastra* of Bharat Muni, a thousand years old...because without a proper study of the ancient methods it would be impossible to keep the purity of classical forms." p.122), the modern cultural environment in India, while providing a milieu that is favourable for the flourishing of classical forms, also necessitates its re-ordering and re-integration within modern socio-cultural and economic structures. Far from practising an 'authentic' cultural form that she has inherited from birth, what Rosie takes on to the modern stage in independent India is a modified and reformed practice that is not only divested of its original purpose of gratifying the Hindu deities, but also adapted to suit the tastes of the modern day audiences. Her performances are choreographed in a manner that combines her own inventions as well as pieces from the classical art that are curtailed to fit the "programme". Although, a bronze image of Nataraja placed in the practice hall of Rosie conveys a religious aura and pays tribute to its 'spiritual' origins as a temple dance, time, money and pleasure (of the consumer)

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, 1993

<sup>8</sup> Laila's desire for classical dancing stems from not so much a passion for exotica (as displayed by Krishna's patron in Venice, Senora Durante) but, rather, as a result of an innate desire to liberate herself from the constraints of the Western subjectivity imposed upon her.

have become the primary organizing principles of modern day classical dancing performances, registering its integration into the commodity culture. In Raju's words, "Bharat Natyam is really the greatest art business today." (p.162) and his description of their celebrity routine captures the transformation of classical Indian dance into a modern day secular cultural industry divested of its 'spiritual' content<sup>9</sup>: "...receptions at the station, fussy organizers, encounters and warnings, the same middle sofa in the first row, speeches and remarks and smiles, polite conversation, garlands and flash photos, congratulations, and off to catch the train- pocketing the most important thing- the cheque." (p.193) *The Guide* mirrors the intense commodification of classical dancing in modern India, which has been incorporated into the 'prevailing forms of commodity production' within the capitalist system. Thus, Narayan's text offers a complex and nuanced view of nationalist cultural revival in decolonizing India.

### Classical Indian Dancing and Politics of Identity

The representations of classical dancing and the cultural identities of the practitioners in both *The Guide* and *Journey to Ithaca* appear to take [its? their?] point of departure from the identity politics that informed the Hindu nationalist discourse. One of the primary functions of classical Indian dancing in the nationalist discourse is the articulation of cultural difference or the expression of a particular cultural/national identity that appears to be essentialized and fossilized as an a priori substance, rather than a discursive construction. Since culture is a terrain in which the demarcations of a particular (cultural/national) identity are mapped out and the self is defined against the other, in the construction of national identities for the decolonizing nations, the notion of cultural difference (that is articulated through 'authentic' cultural practices such as classical dancing and music) became a constitutive element in defining and forging the boundaries of self/nation against the cultural/national others. The nationalist discourse strived to articulate an essential, a priori identity for the nation and, further, asserted the existence of an 'authentic' Indian identity (undefiled by the colonizer) that resides in the spiritual dimension (Chatterjee, 1993).

*Journey to Ithaca* registers the formation of an identity through a difference that is discursively construed and mediated by the representation of self in Hindu nationalist discourse. Clearly, the value and significance accorded to Krishna's art form in *Journey to Ithaca* presupposes a spiritual core that is an essential part of Indian identity that classical Indian dancing is said to embody. The text posits classical dancing against Western dance forms such as ballet that is depicted as devoid of any spiritual content. Further, performances of the mythic tales of *Radha Krishna* and *Shiva Parvati* in classical Indian dancing, which are embedded in the national culture as a part of the 'authentic' cultural heritage of the Hindus and form a

<sup>9</sup> "While the revival of South Indian dance certainly involved a re-vivification or bringing back to life, it was equally a re-population (one social community appropriating a practice of another), a re-construction (altering an replacing elements of repertoire and choreography), a re-naming (from *nautch* and other terms to *bharata natyam*), a re-situation (from temple, court, and salon to the public stage), and a re-restoration (a splicing together of selected "strips" of performative behavior in a manner that simultaneously creates a new practice and invents an historical one.)" (Allen, 1997, p.63)

significant expression of their identity, [render? invests?] classical Indian dancing with a cultural authority and legitimacy, which is in turn deployed to construct an 'imagined community'. The dances such as Krishna Lila performed by Krishna's troupe in front of the Western audiences serve to establish the cultural difference of the East/India as opposed to the West and, thereby, gives solidity to the idea of nation by the articulation of national boundaries through the signification of cultural difference. Thus, the text conflates the Indian identity with the Hindu identity and thereby, presents a hegemonic vision of a homogenous national culture that is coded as essentially Hindu.

However, the representation of classical Indian dance in *Journey to Ithaca* functions at another more obvious register, which postulates a Western discourse about an essential, static, exotic Orient. The interpretive framework through which Krishna's performances are made visible and intelligible to the Western audiences mirrors the Oriental discourse and its discursive construction of the 'otherness' of the Orient. The particular identity conferred upon Krishna's performances in America postulates this specific construction of the Orient in the political/ cultural [imaginary?] of the West. ("Sixth Avenue Darkies in Bells and Turbans bring India to Broadway!" Temple rituals by Hindu Dancers mystify!", "Snakes and Peacocks from East arrive." p. 260) The dancer Krishna, especially for Senora Durante, who acts as his patron in Venice, typifies an exotic oriental prince or an Eastern God and, thus, reveals "a body of assumptions, image, and fantasies held by Westerners about the Orient" (Desmond, 1991, p.39). Nevertheless, *Journey to Ithaca* strives to attain a critical distance from the Oriental discourse by unveiling the discursive nature of these essentialist assumptions regarding India. Krishna's American patron, Mrs. du Best, underlines the gap between [the?] 'real' India and its discursive construction as an object of knowledge in the West by claiming that "...I felt that I already had the India of my books and friends and art treasures. Perhaps, I didn't really care to have another India, the real India."(p.271) Thus, while foregrounding the essentialist construction of the identity of the East in the Oriental discourse and thereby, contesting and problematizing it, the text, nevertheless, appears to reinforce an equally essentialist construction and deployment of identity in Hindu nationalist discourse.

In *The Guide*, the identity politics of the Hindu nationalist discourse is made manifest through the representation of the character of Rosie/Nalini, who is a hereditary practitioner of classical Indian dancing. Rosie's cultural past is uniquely Indian in that she belongs to a family of *devadasis*,<sup>10</sup> who were regarded as the original practitioners of classical Indian dancing. She is a descendent from a matrilineal tradition that existed from pre-colonial times, in which women were dedicated to the temples as dancers in the service of Hindu deities, a tradition that accorded a considerable degree of power and privilege to such women. However, in *The Guide*, her origins are inferred to by Rosie as a shameful secret, which her present 'respectable' life as the wife of Marco, an upper-class archeologist, can do nothing to alter or vindicate. Rosie claims that "[w]e are viewed as public women...We are not considered respectable. We are not considered

<sup>10</sup> Spivak, 1996, p.254

civilized,” (p.252) registering the marginal position occupied by the *devadasis* in modern India.<sup>11</sup> Rosie thus exemplifies the ‘subaltern’ status of the *devadasi* within the modern social organization, as well as devolving economic and social structures, a position that underwent further deterioration in post-Independent India with the disappearance of their traditional support systems. However, the depiction of her subjectivity in the novel as a ‘public woman’ with an ‘impure’ history stems from the colonial and nationalist discourses surrounding this practice, rather than from a traditional Indian perspective. Narayan’s narrative uncritically endorses this view of *devadasis* in its representation of Rosie/Nalini, precluding the possibility of an alternative understanding of the *devadasi* tradition and, thereby, connoting its complicity with the hegemonic epistemological structures of thinking.

However, *The Guide* presents Rosie as a ‘reformed’ *devadasi* or a product of the colonialist and Indian elitist endeavours to reform *devadasis* in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Rosie’s displacement from the temple and her ritualistic function within the traditional Indian society and her subsequent relocation within the bourgeois nuclear family in the narrative present can be regarded as an outcome of the attempts at ‘reforming’ or ‘civilizing’ *devadasis*. For Rosie, a “different life” was envisioned by her mother with the changing cultural iconography in India that engendered a hostile atmosphere for the practice of *devadasi* tradition, which was perceived by the colonialists and elite nationalists alike to be ‘backward’ (in that it violated the Victorian moral and sexual codes). Although Rosie was born into a de-legitimized and disempowered position within the modern socio-cultural milieu of India that confers upon her the status of non-citizen, this modernity also becomes an enabling condition that allows her to extricate herself from the ‘fixed’ and relatively marginal position within the Indian (feudal) social structure that she was born into. Their access to money, with the emergence of the capitalist system in colonial India, allows *devadasis* to receive the benefits of an education. Rosie is provided with an institutionalized education as a better and more productive alternative to dancing like any modern Indian girl through the efforts of her mother and female relatives, who were *devadasis*. “There can be no doubt that education is perceived by them as a way out of the vicious impasse of female proletarianization (reduced to nothing but your body) outside of capital logic” (Spivak, 1996, p.251). This decision is arrived at from an informed position with the awareness that her education would enable Rosie to divorce herself from her stigmatized origins and achieve class mobility through marriage (Spivak, 1996, p.251). It would appear that through her marriage, Rosie forsakes her traditional art form for capitalist gain and class mobility: “[I]t was decided that if it was necessary to give up our traditional art, it was worth the sacrifice. He had a big house, a motor car, he was a man of high social standing...” (p.85). However, her decision also pre-empts a desire to escape from the instability and promiscuity of a temple dancer’s life and to enter into a normative (patriarchal) social structure, where she would receive the respect, recognition and economic support of a husband. However, Rosie’s role within

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<sup>11</sup> Terry Eagleton discusses how the modern day aesthetic forms are commodified and incorporated into the ‘prevailing forms of commodity production’. (“Capitalism, Modernism and Post Modernism”) The cultural industry is regarded by Adorno “as the degradation and commodification of the aesthetic and its final and absolute appropriation by capitalist forces”.



marriage is confined to passivity and inaction and her desire to pursue her traditional art form (which is expressed at the very moment she arrives in 'Malgudi' in her wish to see a King Cobra) and a liberal life cannot be reconciled within the heterosexual monogamous marriage. Rosie's love for her traditional art, which is rekindled forcefully in the post-Independent era, overrides her initial impulse to lead a stable life of middle class respectability and she leaves her husband to pursue her traditional art form with the aid of Raju. Thus, it is possible to locate Rosie's nostalgic wish for an "authentic cultural past" within the ideology of cultural nationalism in India that turned towards the cultural resources of the pre-colonial golden past in the attempt to forge a national identity.

Rosie's re-location within the newly forged national cultural space begins with her being renamed as 'Nalini' by Raju, who acts as her connoisseur. In becoming a national cultural icon in independent India, Rosie has to undertake a complex set of negotiations between her traditional and national identities. Her re-naming occurs in recognition of a national cultural imperative, for it allows her to fabricate a cultural/class identity that is considered as 'appropriate' for a classical dancer in independent India, for the classical dance, as a national 'high' art form, has become the exclusive domain of 'respectable' women from upper/middle classes, who embodied the 'spiritual' identity of the nation. In this process, *devadasis* were erased from the official history of *bharatha natyam* in India.<sup>12</sup> Further, the re-naming enables Rosie to divorce herself from her stigmatized origins and "enter a new phase of life ... [u]nder the new name, Rosie and all she had suffered in her earlier life were buried from public view." (p.176) Although it is Rosie's past as a *devadasi* that enables her to become a skilful dancer, this past is subsumed, suppressed or never given any authority in the novel, while her cultural practice is valorized as a national art form. Thus, while Rosie is able to salvage one part of her traditional identity as a classical dancer, her *devadasi* origins get effaced in the process of becoming a national cultural icon, bringing into view the tensions and ambivalences that underlie the formation of a 'national culture'.

Similarly, in *Journey to Ithaca*, the practice of renaming is central to the re-invention of identities in order to compromise [to?] the hegemonic cultural discourses on identity politics as well as to assume a subjectivity that one desires to embody. Laila's initiation as a classical Indian dancer begins with her being renamed as *Lila Devi* and this enables her to shed the markers of her non-Indian origins and to assume a cultural identity that is regarded as "authentically Indian". Significantly, for Laila, the name *Lila* is a configuration of an Imaginary Eastern identity, to which she initially projected her utopian fantasies and desires of a mystic, spiritual East and, in adopting the name *Lila*, she desires to transpose herself and become one with an "authentic" India. In addition, the ability to pass as a dancer of Indian origins becomes important for Laila in the West, for the "authenticity" that is avowed thus ensures the commercial viability of their cultural practice. The text thus brings into play the nuances that are inherent in processes of identity constitution.

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<sup>12</sup> *Devadasi* denotes female Hindu ritual practitioners, women who underwent training and initiation in religious artistic service, including dance and vocal music. After an initial period of training, *devadasi* was ritually married to the God of a Hindu temple.

Moreover, despite her lack of legitimacy in the profession of a classical dancer (unlike Rosie), Laila becomes an apt classical dancer within a very short duration. Her ability to become such a skilful dancer is explicitly connected in the text with Laila's communion and identification with the essentialized spiritual core of India and she is, thus, made to represent what is regarded as "authentically" Indian. ("[Laila's] certainty that she had once been one of them, possessed what they had, lost it but now saw she must grasp and recover it..."p.203). However, Laila's character, in all its complexity cannot be reduced to a signifier for the 'spiritual' identity of India, for, she, at the same time, thwarts such essentialist constructions of identities. Her ability to pass on as Indian by assuming its core beliefs and practices reveals the contingent and performative nature of cultural identities and, thus, problematizes the notion of a fixed, essential and a priori identity. "...[Laila] shimmered and sparkled before their eyes like some creature of the tropical forests and exotic lands, they could not be sure if what they marveled at was this human creature transforming herself to an inhuman apparition, or at her assuming a wholly Indian art and culture and making it uncannily her own ..."p.239). The text makes clear that insofar as Laila becomes a visual sign of the exotic 'otherness' of the Orient or an 'authentic' India, instead becoming a stable or a unitary sign, the perfection of her performance tends to invoke a critical distance, making the audience conscious of a gap between Laila and her performance. Thus, rather than completely effacing Laila's difference, the text insists on foregrounding such moments of rupture and instability in its representation of Laila and, thereby, posits a subversive view of identity that dismantles its essentialist premise.

## Cultural Nationalism and Politics of Gender/Sexuality

With cultural nationalism, the emphasis laid on classical Indian dancing has led to the empowerment of the female practitioners of this art form. However, this is an empowerment that is ambivalently constituted within *The Guide*, for, in the process of becoming a cultural icon, Rosie is reduced to a cultural fetish and an object of male gaze. Furthermore, Rosie's sexuality is ambivalently presented within the novel as a result of the dual identity she embodies as a *devadasi* and a national icon in independent India. As a woman of *devadasi* origins, her 'unconventional' relationship with Raju is tolerated and even regarded with a degree of acceptance, for it is regarded as 'normal' for *devadasis* to have sexual liaisons with many men.<sup>13</sup> However, when she attains fame as a classical Indian dancer, she is presented in the guise of a 'respectable' woman removed from her sullied past, for gender as well as sexuality are pivotal in the construction of militant Hindu identities. In Narayan's narrative, when Rosie becomes a classical Indian dancer, her sexual desire is gradually curbed and replaced by an intense love for her art, which, in its

<sup>13</sup> The transformation of the position occupied by *devadasis* from 'ever-auspicious women' in pre-colonial times to 'exotic' prostitutes in colonial times to 'common' prostitutes in modern India is intimately linked to the changes in the political and cultural landscape [in? of?] India. During the colonial period, the *devadasi* tradition was stigmatized as an uncivilized and primitive practice (akin to *sati*) that has to be eradicated from India and this resulted in the legislature prohibiting this practice and disinheriting *devadasis* of their traditional support systems. The upper-middle class Indians also supported the move to abolish this 'primitive' practice and, further, the revival of classical dancing by the elite nationalists disinherited the *devadasis* of their traditional cultural practice.

transformed status as a national art form embodies only the spiritual identity of the nation. Raju claims that “[s]he was a devoted artist; her passion for physical love was falling into place and had ceased to be a primary obsession with her.” (p.164) For, within the ideology of Indian nationalism, “[w]hen sexuality and spirituality merge, women are socialized into subsuming sexuality within a spiritual realm, leaving behind the realms of the physical, of desire, of pleasure” (Katrak, 1992, p.399). Thus, Rosie’s transformation into a national cultural icon curbs her earlier subversive tendencies (which are a legacy of her *devadasi* past) that she professed in transgressing the codes of sexual conduct for women laid down within the normative patriarchal structure. Thus, after becoming a national icon, Rosie is entrapped within the patriarchal, nationalist structures and loses her selfhood and this is a form of ensnarement that the traditional temple dancers were able to avoid in pre-colonial India as an exclusively female artisan community. Her strand of the story concludes with the intimation that she is engaged in a solitary pursuit of her art form, making her contribution in the propagation of national culture. In other words, *The Guide* reinstates the ideology of Indian nationalism by making Rosie a willing repository of the ‘spiritual’ identity of the nation. In the above light, Narayan’s *The Guide* can be viewed as weaving together a “seamless narrative” of the Indian nation-in-formation, thereby, presenting itself in the form of a ‘national allegory’ (Singh, 1996, p.161).

Similarly, in *Journey to Ithaca*, in the process of becoming an Indian dancer, Laila has to forsake her emotional and spiritual independence and to embrace a subjectivity characteristic of a traditional Hindu woman. The subversive and rebellious tendencies in her character get gradually curbed and she becomes the cultural self that she performs on stage. In dancing the myths of *Radha* and *Parvathi*, which contain invocations of ideal femininity and Hindu womanhood that is subjected to strict patriarchal control, Laila/ Lila becomes those women. This entails her sexual and economic as well as emotional subjugation to Krishna, for she conflates Krishna, the performer, with the mythic characters of the Hindu Gods that he performs, considering them one and the same. “[Krishna] was also the god ...the country and the religion and the art and that had become her obsession there.” (p.227). The Hindu legends such as *Radha/ Krishna*, *Shiva/ Parvathi* that are redeployed in the Hindu nationalist discourse to construct an ideal womanhood that is to become the domain of moral guardianship of culture “reinforced and ‘sacrilized’ [?]existing inequalities by ascribing to them an immortal status”. Laila subscribes to the ideology of Hindu nationalism by taking upon herself a discursively construed gender role that she regards as ‘authentically’ Indian and, strives to conform to the standards of an ideal “femininity”, which the text reveals to be oppressive to women. Her failure to extricate herself from this ideological position is made clear, for, even when she becomes the famous “Mother” or a spiritual guru in India, her philosophy is founded on serving a divine master, rather than on seeking her own spiritual liberation. *Journey to Ithaca* thus attempts to underline the oppressive and exploitative patriarchal structures that underpin the nationalist ideology and its discursive construction of an “ideal” womanhood.

In conclusion, *The Guide* seems to affirm Jameson's formulation, "[t]hird World texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic, necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.*"<sup>14</sup> (Jameson, 1986, p.69) Although, at a certain level, Narayan's text lends itself to this kind of reading by presenting the revival of classical Indian dancing and the character of Rosie/Nalini within the ideology of Indian nationalist discourse, there are instances that the text resists and subverts the impulse to locate its depiction of classical Indian dancing predominantly within this ideological framework. Further, Rosie/Nalini's character is ambiguously constituted within a complex historical framework of colonial history and Indian nationalist struggles. *The Guide* registers some of the tensions, instabilities and ambivalences that underlie the formation of 'national culture' in Independent India that can be attributed to the persistent influence of colonial as well as neo-colonial cultural discourses.

In the depiction of classical Indian dancing as an "authentic" cultural practice that is representative of an "essential" India, *Journey to Ithaca* takes its point of departure from the cultural discourses that informed *The Guide*, and, thus, seems to reify the nationalist envisioning of a homogenous national culture that is predominantly encoded in the text as the Hindu culture. However, the text problematizes and destabilizes the essentialist premise upon which such ideological constructions are instituted through Laila's character and, thus, provides an implicit critique of the nationalist discourse. Further, *Journey to Ithaca* proves resistant to the politics of gender in nationalist discourse and foregrounds its patriarchal character. Thus, far from professing a unitary and an unequivocal stance in relation to the nation, both *The Guide* and *Journey to Ithaca* underline the fissures, tensions and contradictions that are embedded within postcolonial nationalism, thereby, retaining a critical distance from the hegemonic nationalist discourse. Both texts bring into view the intense commodification of classical dancing in modern India with its integration into the capitalist culture, thus, registering the tensions and instabilities in the formation of a 'national culture'. As Bhabha (1990) noted, the ambivalent cultural representations of the nation in these texts serve to render instability to the nation-space.

Thus, as realist texts located in independent India, both *The Guide* and *Journey to Ithaca* signal the nation's coming into being as a 'system of cultural significations.' Further, in addressing an array of concerns pertaining to the nation building project, these texts affirm the link between the Hindu nationalist discourse and the Anglo-Indian realist novel in decolonizing India. While being largely shaped by the ideology of nationalism, the representations in these texts also attest to an ambivalent, provocative and dynamic relationship with the hegemonic political discourses in independent India.

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<sup>14</sup> "[I]n the process of establishing *bharata natyam* as national dance, the form, once the domain of a marginal group, came to be associated with respectable members of high culture elite and has, in turn, gained popularity among urban Indians of all regions and linguistic backgrounds as an emblem of Indian culture and traditional India" (Gaston, 1992, p. 49-50).

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