From Literary Text to Embodied Performance: Rasaparinamam in the Mohiniyattam Adaptation of Swathi Thirunal's Sāturā Kāminī

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the aesthetic transformation—conceptualised here as *rasaparinamam*, or the "transformation of rasa"—that occurs when a literary composition is adapted for Mohiniyattam performance. Taking Swathi Thirunal's Sanskrit varnam *Sāturā Kāminī* in raga Kalyani as its primary case, the study asks how a verbal, musical and devotional-erotic text becomes a choreographed stage work without losing either its literary integrity or the distinctive *lāsya* character of Mohiniyattam. The paper argues that adaptation is not a mechanical transfer of words into gesture but a creative re-translation in which the dancer-choreographer selects, elaborates and reorders textual meaning through *padārthābhinaya*, *dhvanyārtha*, *bhāvārtha*, *sanchari*, *adavu*, *tāḷa* and musical design. Drawing on close analysis of a staged version of the varnam, the study traces how the heroine's longing, the *sakhī*'s mediation, the iconography of Padmanabha, and narrative episodes such as Govardhanodharana and Panchali's disrobing are converted into movement. It further shows that the Kalamandalam lineage has reshaped the varnam from an early, comparatively restrained form into a structurally expanded dance item resembling the Bharatanatyam varnam in its use of trikāla patterns and rhythmic elaboration. The findings suggest that innovation in Mohiniyattam is most convincing when it arises from the internal logic of the text, the raga, and the body's expressive vocabulary rather than from external novelty alone. The paper contributes to scholarship on intermedial adaptation, South Indian dance historiography and rasa theory by demonstrating how tradition and experimentation can coexist in a classical performance form.

Keywords: Mohiniyattam; rasaparinamam; Swathi Thirunal; varnam; adaptation; abhinaya

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Mohiniyattam occupies a distinctive position among Indian classical dance forms because its aesthetic identity is inseparable from Kerala's musical, literary and devotional cultures. Often described as a *lāsya* form, it privileges lyrical movement, fluidity, feminine grace and expressive interpretation over the more sharply percussive emphasis found in some neighbouring traditions. Yet Mohiniyattam is not a static inheritance. Its present repertoire has been shaped by royal patronage, institutional revival, pedagogic transmission and continuous choreographic experimentation. The Kerala Kalamandalam, established by Vallathol Narayana Menon in 1930, became especially important in this process; exponents associated with the institution helped reconstruct and systematise a repertoire at a time when the form had undergone serious decline. The institution itself notes that Mohiniyattam existed before Swathi Thirunal, but that during his nineteenth-century rule the art was deliberately brought to the centre of cultural attention.

The central problem addressed in this paper is therefore not simply how a poem becomes dance, but what changes when a literary work enters the embodied, musical and temporal system of Mohiniyattam. A literary text carries semantic density: metaphor, allusion, emotional implication, narrative memory and devotional address. When it is adapted for performance, these elements must be distributed across voice, music, rhythm, gesture, facial expression, spatial movement and costume. The dancer does not merely illustrate the words. Rather, she interprets them, sometimes foregrounding meanings latent in the text, sometimes adding narrative episodes, and sometimes reshaping the emotional emphasis through *manodharma*. This process may be called *rasaparinamam*: the transformation of the rasa potential of a literary composition into a performed aesthetic experience.

Classical Indian aesthetics provides a useful framework for understanding this transformation. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, rasa arises from the interaction of determinants (*vibhāva*), transitory states (*vyabhicāribhāva*) and permanent emotional dispositions (*sthāyibhāva*). Abhinavagupta's later theorisation emphasises that rasa is not simply an emotion represented on stage but a heightened aesthetic experience realised in the sensitive spectator. In dance, however, rasa is not produced by text alone. It emerges through the performer's ability to make the spectator see, hear and feel the emotional world suggested by the composition. Thus, when a varnam is danced, its literary rasa is mediated by musical phrasing, rhythmic structure and the dancer's physical interpretation.

The varnam is particularly significant in this respect. In Carnatic music and South Indian dance, the varnam combines lyrical invocation, rhythmic virtuosity and expressive elaboration. In Mohiniyattam, the varnam traditionally offers scope for *padārthābhinaya*, the word-by-word rendering of meaning, as well as for *sanchari*, the narrative expansion of a word or phrase. The source text examined here explains that the first varnam taught at Kalamandalam in the Mohiniyattam concert format was the Telugu varnam "Sāmi ninne nammithira" in raga Yadukulakambhoji. In its early form, it had no elaborate dance-oriented *adavus* and no expressive *sanchari*; only *padārthābhinaya* was performed, while suggested meaning (*dhvanyārtha*) and emotional meaning (*bhāvārtha*) were not developed. This historical detail is crucial because it shows that the Mohiniyattam varnam has not always possessed its present dramatic and choreographic density.

Later developments altered this situation. The source records that subsequent varnams came to resemble the Bharatanatyam varnam more closely, particularly through the use of three-speed *adavu* patterns in the *pallavi*. This raises an important historiographical question: whether such borrowing represents a loss of Mohiniyattam's distinctiveness or a legitimate expansion of its expressive capacity. Scholarship on Mohiniyattam's revival suggests that the Kalamandalam tradition was actively constructed rather than merely preserved. Kalamandalam Sathyabhama, a leading student of Chinnammu Amma, joined the institution as junior faculty in 1956 and contributed substantially to the development of its basic training and repertoire. Her account of the form's history, theory and practice remains a foundational source for understanding these changes.

Swathi Thirunal's compositions occupy a special place in this history. His court patronage and prolific musical output helped consolidate a repertoire of padams, varnams, svarajatis and tillanas that later became central to Mohiniyattam. Scholars have also noted that Swathi Thirunal's padavarnams, padams and tillanas were prescribed as central literary texts for Mohiniyattam, reinforcing the form's orientation toward *lāsya* and expressive femininity. The choice of *Sāturā Kāminī* for analysis is therefore doubly significant: it belongs to a composer closely associated with the modern Mohiniyattam repertoire, and it offers a rich example of how *śṛṅgāra*, devotion and narrative expansion interact.

The varnam addresses Padmanabha, the presiding deity of Travancore, through the voice of a *sakhī* who describes the heroine's lovesick condition. The heroine is weary with desire, isolated in separation and unable to endure the passage of spring. The text invokes the classical *viraha* situation: the beloved woman's suffering becomes an occasion for describing the god's beauty, power and compassion. This structure permits multiple levels of interpretation. At the literal level, the dancer renders words such as "elephant," "musk," "lotus eyes" and "conch and disc" through gesture. At the suggested level, the *sakhī*'s complaint becomes a dramatic dialogue between human longing and divine indifference. At the symbolic level, the heroine's yearning may be read as the devotee's longing for divine grace.

Existing scholarship on Indian dance adaptation often treats choreography as interpretation rather than illustration. Avanthi Meduri's work on Bharatanatyam, for example, demonstrates that performance traditions are shaped by nationalism, gender, institution and historical memory, not by timeless authenticity alone. Similarly, studies of Mohiniyattam have emphasised that its revival involved choices about repertoire, technique, costume, pedagogy and stage presentation. Betty True Jones's research on Mohiniyattam's heritage, especially in the nineteenth century, has been influential in drawing attention to the form's complex historical formation. The present paper builds on such approaches by focusing on the micro-level of adaptation: how one textual phrase becomes one movement phrase, and how a narrative episode becomes a *sanchari*.

The paper also engages with intermediality, the movement of meaning across different media. A literary text is

read silently or heard as poetry; a danced varnam is seen, heard and felt in shared time. The adaptation must therefore translate verbal syntax into bodily syntax. A word such as "Govardhana" cannot be conveyed merely by a hand gesture; it may require the dancer to become rain, flood, frightened people, animals, Krishna and the lifted mountain in succession. Such transformation is not a departure from the text but a mode of making its narrative energy visible. The source material describes precisely such a sequence in the *sanchari* on Govardhanodharana, where the dancer shifts through multiple roles before returning to the central idea of Padmanabha as protector of all worlds.

Finally, the study is concerned with innovation. Choreographers working within classical forms often face a paradox: audiences expect recognisable tradition, yet artistic vitality requires new interpretation. The source text rightly argues that even a theme drawn from the Puranas or epics becomes original only when it speaks to contemporary experience. Innovation, however, should not mean arbitrary insertion of new movements. It should arise from a deep reading of the text, sensitivity to raga and tala, and an understanding of Mohiniyattam's own movement grammar. This paper therefore treats *Sāturā Kāminī* not as a fixed museum object but as a living score whose meanings are renewed each time it is choreographed and performed.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive and performance-centred methodology. Its primary object is the staged Mohiniyattam adaptation of Swathi Thirunal's Sanskrit varnam *Sāturā Kāminī* in raga Kalyani. The analysis is based on the textual and choreographic description supplied in the primary source document, which records the varnam's *pallavi*, *anupallavi*, *svara-sāhitya* sections, *charanas*, translation, and the sequence of movements used in performance. Because the research concerns the transformation of literature into performance, the method combines textual analysis, rasa-theoretical reading and choreographic analysis.

First, the varnam was read as a literary composition. This involved identifying its central emotional situation, major images, devotional address and narrative possibilities. The heroine's condition of longing, the *sakhī*'s role as mediator, the repeated appeal to Padmanabha, and the references to Vamana, Govardhanodharana and Panchali were treated as key interpretive units. Attention was also paid to the rasa structure of the text: *śṛṅgāra* appears not merely as romantic attraction but as the pain of separation, while *karuṇa*, *bhakti* and *ādbhuta* emerge through the descriptions of divine protection and miraculous intervention.

Second, the choreographic structure was analysed section by section. The study examined how the opening *samanīla* position, neck and eye movement, *cholkettu*, three speed *adavus*, *arudi*, *tāḷṭumēṭṭu*, *nālucari*, *meyyādavu* and final prostration organise the performance. Each section was assessed according to three questions: What textual meaning is being conveyed? What movement vocabulary is used? And how does the choreographic choice alter or expand the rasa of the original words?

Third, the study applied a comparative historical lens. The early Kalamandalam varnam, described as relying mainly on *padārthābhinaya* without elaborate *adavus* or *sanchari*, was compared with the later, more expanded varnam structure evident in *Sāturā Kāminī*. This comparison helps identify the historical shift from restrained word-gesture rendering toward a fuller dance-dramatic form. Published accounts of Kalamandalam's revival and repertoire formation provide contextual support for this comparison.

Fourth, the study used rasa theory as an analytical framework. Following the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Abhinavagupta, rasa is understood as emerging from the coordinated operation of textual, musical, gestural and spectatorial elements. In practice, this means that the paper does not ask only whether a gesture correctly corresponds to a word. It also asks whether the gesture, placed within rhythm, melody and narrative sequence, produces an intensified aesthetic experience.

The limitations of the methodology should be acknowledged. The analysis relies primarily on one documented choreographic version rather than on a large comparative corpus of performances. Different dancers may interpret the same varnam differently, and live performance includes variables—musical tempo, audience response, stage space and performer's body—that written description cannot fully capture. Nevertheless, a close reading of one substantial case allows the paper to demonstrate the mechanisms of *rasaparinamam* with

precision. The aim is not to establish a single authoritative version of *Sāturā Kāminī*, but to show how literary meaning becomes choreographic meaning in Mohiniyattam.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From word to gesture

The first major finding is that the adaptation of *Sāturā Kāminī* operates through a graduated movement from literal meaning to suggested and emotional meaning. The performance begins from *samanīla*, with the dancer moving forward as neck and eye movements accompany the opening line. This immediately establishes the heroine's inward condition before any explicit narrative action occurs. The body does not merely wait for words; it creates an atmosphere of expectancy and vulnerability.

The *arudi* after the three-speed *adavus* illustrates the choreographer's interpretive freedom. Traditionally, the *arudi* is a rhythmic conclusion; in this version, however, it is also matched to meaning. For the phrase associated with "Sāturā kāminī," the dancer shows "she, there," "in distress," and "sits exhausted" across the rhythmic syllables. This is a clear example of *rasaparinamam*: a percussion-oriented structural unit becomes a vehicle for *karuṇa* and *śṛṅgāra*. The rhythm does not interrupt emotion; it gives emotion a bodily shape.

The treatment of the *sakhī* further demonstrates the transformation. In the first rendering, the *sakhī* tells Padmanabha about the heroine: she stands thinking of him, wounded by desire and full of longing. When the same lines return, the dancer addresses the heroine directly, showing her entering, sitting in sorrow and being consoled or questioned through gesture. The repetition is therefore not redundant. It changes the dramatic perspective from report to direct address, deepening the emotional stakes. The audience moves from hearing about suffering to witnessing it.

Narrative expansion as rasa-making

The *sanchari* on "sakala lokanāyaka" is the most expansive section of the choreography. The phrase means "lord of all worlds," but the choreographer does not confine its meaning to a regal gesture. Instead, the dancer evokes the Vamana avatar, particularly the measuring of the worlds in three strides, and then moves into the Govardhanodharana episode.

This sequence shows how a single divine epithet can become a narrative world. The dancer becomes rain, lightning, birds, animals, humans and Krishna in turn. The falling rain is welcomed with joy; elephants, peacocks, deer and people rejoice. Then the rain intensifies, water rises into flood, fear spreads, and Krishna lifts the mountain. The people gather beneath it and dance joyfully. The choreography thus converts a theological statement—Padmanabha protects all beings—into a sensory experience of danger, rescue and collective delight.

The rasa effect is complex. The opening pastoral joy carries *śṛṅgāra* and *ādbhuta*; the flood introduces fear; Krishna's intervention produces wonder and relief; the final communal dance returns to joy. This emotional modulation is precisely what rasa theory describes as the orchestration of transient states around a dominant sentiment. In the context of the varnam, the episode also answers the heroine's complaint. If the Lord protects all worlds, why does he not protect the longing woman? The narrative expansion therefore sharpens, rather than dilutes, the central *viraha* tension.

Music, rhythm and the body

The study also finds that music is not a neutral accompaniment but an active agent in the transformation. The source text notes that music functions differently in a concert and in *abhinaya*: when concert music enters dance, it becomes one component of the presentation and is shaped to serve it. In *Sāturā Kāminī*, the long sustained rendering of "kāminī" creates space for the *sakhī*'s address to Padmanabha. The elongated note becomes a performative pause in which emotion can unfold through the face and hands.

Rhythmic passages similarly acquire expressive function. The *anupallavi* uses *adavus* in three speeds, followed by an *arudi* for "Mātaṅgayāna Śrī Padmanābha." The dancer first shows the elephant, then its walk, then

climbing onto its back, and finally Padmanabha travelling upon it. In a later elaboration, the elephant's trunk and ears sway, and the dancer shows Padmanabha reclining on Ananta, with the lotus issuing from his navel. Here, rhythmic structure and iconic description merge. The repeated *adavu* patterns give the body a formal discipline, while the gestures open a devotional iconographic field.

The choreography also incorporates *tāḷṭumēṭṭu* and *nālucari* after the Govardhanodharana *sanchari*. These elements re-establish the dance's rhythmic grounding after narrative elaboration. This alternation between *abhinaya* and *nṛtta* is essential to the varnam's aesthetic balance. Pure narrative without rhythm risks becoming mime; pure rhythm without meaning risks becoming decorative. The successful varnam holds both in tension.

Historical change and choreographic identity

A further finding concerns the historical reshaping of the Mohiniyattam varnam. The early Kalamandalam varnam "Sāmi ninne nammithira" reportedly contained no dance-heavy *adavus* and no *sanchari*; it relied on *padārthābhinaya* alone. By contrast, *Sāturā Kāminī* includes three-speed *adavus*, *arudi*, *sanchari*, *tāḷṭumēṭṭu*, *nālucari*, *meyyādavu* and multiple narrative elaborations. This indicates a substantial expansion of the form's dramatic and kinetic range.

This change should not be interpreted simplistically as Bharatanatyamisation. The use of three-speed patterns does resemble Bharatanatyam practice, and the source explicitly notes this similarity. Yet the manner in which movement is used remains shaped by Mohiniyattam's *lāsya* sensibility. The Govardhanodharana sequence, for instance, incorporates the *varāha vadivu* from *kalari*, Kerala's indigenous martial tradition. The result is not a wholesale borrowing from another form but a selective integration that widens Mohiniyattam's expressive boundaries while retaining its regional and stylistic identity.

The transformation of footwork is equally revealing. The source notes that early Mohiniyattam followed an unwritten rule that the stamping of feet should not be heard; in the present period, dancers often plant the feet firmly so that the sound is audible. This shift changes the audience's experience of the body. The dancer is no longer only a visual embodiment of lyric grace; she also becomes a rhythmic instrument. Such a change has implications for gender, virtuosity and stage presence, since audible footwork makes the dancer's command of rhythm more publicly visible.

Selective adaptation and creative authority

The choreographer's decision to use only two of the varnam's five *charanas* is another important finding. The source suggests that the selection was likely made to shorten the performance. But selection is also an interpretive act. By choosing particular *charanas*, the choreographer decides which aspects of the deity, the heroine and the devotional relationship will dominate the stage version. The omitted sections remain part of the literary work, but they no longer shape the performed rasa in the same way.

This confirms that adaptation is a form of creative authorship. The dancer-choreographer does not simply transmit Swathi Thirunal's text; she curates it for the body, the stage and the audience. The source describes this process as translation, but stresses that it is not word-for-word conversion. What the dancer conveys need not be identical with the writer's original intention; it becomes an expression of the choreographer's creative intelligence. In this sense, *rasaparinamam* is not corruption of the original but its continuation in another medium.

The final prostration at the Lord's feet provides a fitting conclusion to this process. After the heroine's longing, the *sakhī*'s pleading, the divine narratives and the rhythmic displays, the dancer returns to a posture of surrender. The gesture resolves the performance's emotional complexity into *bhakti*. The heroine's erotic longing, the devotee's prayer and the dancer's artistic offering converge in a single embodied act.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the adaptation of a literary text for Mohiniyattam is best understood

as *rasaparinamam*: a transformative process in which verbal meaning, musical structure and bodily expression are reorganised to produce a new aesthetic experience. The case of Swathi Thirunal's *Sāturā Kāminī* shows that this transformation operates at several levels. Words become mudras; images become spatial movement; narrative allusions become *sanchari*; rhythmic syllables become emotional gestures; and devotional praise becomes a staged relationship between the heroine, the *sakhī* and Padmanabha.

The analysis demonstrates that Mohiniyattam adaptation is neither pure fidelity nor arbitrary invention. The choreographer must respect the literary text's semantic and emotional potential, but she must also make choices about selection, repetition, expansion and movement. In *Sāturā Kāminī*, the choice to elaborate "sakala lokanāyaka" through Vamana and Govardhanodharana does not depart from the text; it makes the text's claim of universal protection visible and emotionally persuasive. Likewise, the use of only two *charanas* reflects practical stagecraft, but it also determines the performance's interpretive emphasis.

The study also shows that Mohiniyattam's contemporary identity has been formed through historical change. The movement from an early varnam based largely on *padārthābhinaya* to a fuller structure involving three-speed *adavus*, *arudi*, *sanchari* and narrative episodes represents an expansion of the form's choreographic language. This development parallels the broader institutional revival of Mohiniyattam at Kerala Kalamandalam, where practitioners such as Kalamandalam Sathyabhama helped shape the repertoire and pedagogy of the modern form. The presence of Swathi Thirunal's compositions in this repertoire further confirms the importance of courtly musical patronage in the form's modern consolidation.

The implications for choreography are significant. Innovation in Mohiniyattam should not be sought merely through new themes, modern costumes or spectacular movement. It should emerge from a deeper engagement with the internal possibilities of the chosen text. A choreographer who understands the raga's mood, the *tāḷa*'s architecture, the literary image's cultural resonance and the body's expressive capacity can create work that is both traditional and contemporary. The Govardhanodharana *sanchari* offers a model: it uses recognisable mythological material, incorporates a Kerala martial posture, shifts rapidly among multiple roles, and ultimately returns to the varnam's central devotional appeal.

Future research should compare multiple choreographic versions of the same varnam, examine the role of musicians in shaping *abhinaya* decisions, and study audience reception across different performance contexts. Such work would further clarify how *rasaparinamam* varies according to performer, institution, region and historical moment. Nevertheless, the present case establishes a central point: in Mohiniyattam, literature does not simply provide a subject for dance. Through the dancer's body, it is transformed into a living aesthetic event.

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