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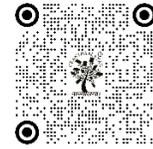
GENDERED REPERTOIRE AND ABHINAYA IN THE TANJORE QUARTET TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how gender is structured within the Bharatanatyam repertoire shaped by the Tanjore Quartet and how abhinaya functions as the primary medium through which gendered identity is performed on stage. By organising the modern margam and positioning emotionally intensive items such as varnams, padams, and javalis at its centre, the Quartet shaped not only formal sequence but also expressive hierarchy. Gender in this repertoire is produced through sahitya as well as through bodily technique, timing, restraint, and emotional sequencing. The analysis highlights the centrality of the nayika, whose voice carries longing, persuasion, complaint, negotiation, and assertion, while the nayaka is framed as distant, withheld, or idealised. Drawing on aesthetic theory and devadasi performance contexts, the paper demonstrates that gender is communicated through gaze, stillness, breath control, micro-movement, and calibrated bodily articulation rather than overt narration. It further considers how the twentieth-century revival shifted abhinaya from lived social practice to institutional pedagogy, reshaping gender expression while retaining its internal emotional structure. The study argues that the Tanjore Quartet established a gendered expressive system that continues to organise Bharatanatyam performance practice.

Keywords: Bharatanatyam, Tanjore Quartet, Abhinaya, Gender, Nayika-Nayaka, Margam, Devadasi Tradition, Shringar, Performance Studies

INTRODUCTION

The modern Bharatanatyam repertoire derives much of its structure from the compositional and organisational work of the Tanjore Quartet: Chinnayya, Ponnayya, Sivanandam, and Vadivelu. They served the Maratha courts of Thanjavur, Mysore, and Travancore in the early nineteenth century Kothari (1982). Trained within hereditary devadasi performance and nattuvanar pedagogy, they reorganised existing court dance practices into a structured margam that continues to guide Bharatanatyam training and performance. They formalised items such as alarippu, jatiswaram, shabdham, varnam, padam, javali, and tillana, arranging them as a progressive sequence in which musical, narrative, and emotional intensity develops over time.

Their work connected court, temple, and theatrical spaces. In addition to dance compositions, they set musical and dramatic material for performance, enabling similar expressive structures to circulate across ritual and courtly contexts. These settings shaped both repertoire and performance logic. Within the margam, abhinaya-centred items such as the varnam and padam function as the

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principal sites of emotional narration, where expressive development takes precedence over physical display [Kothari \(1982\)](#). In these items, abhinaya organises meaning and regulates how the dancer sustains emotion across musical duration.

The Quartet's varnams are grounded in shringar and were originally performed in courtly settings where emotional address structured performance. These compositions unfold through longing, hesitation, complaint, and intimacy. Sahitya, musical pacing, and controlled bodily articulation shape their progression rather than speed or virtuosic expansion [Kersenboom \(1987\)](#), [Soneji \(2004\)](#). The narrative voice in most abhinaya items is that of the nayika, who speaks in the first person to the nayaka, whether king or deity [Puri \(2014\)](#). She waits, approaches, withdraws, and negotiates through gaze, pause, breath, and restraint. Gender emerges here through temporal and bodily control rather than through explicit description.

Although scholarship has examined the Quartet's role in shaping the Bharatanatyam repertoire, the gender logic embedded in their abhinaya structures has received less sustained analysis. In many compositions, the nayika inhabits states of longing, persuasion, and measured assertion, while the nayaka appears distant or idealised. Desire is negotiated through restraint, timing, and emotional regulation rather than overt action [Kersenboom \(1987\)](#), [Soneji \(2012\)](#). Emotional movement is thus concentrated in the female body, while masculine presence is marked through absence, response, or symbolic authority. Gender in the Quartet tradition is organised through interiorised expression rather than external plot.

This study approaches gender as a structure produced through sahitya, bodily technique, and abhinaya practice. It analyses how feminine subjectivity and masculine positioning are constructed in Quartet compositions and realised in performance. The discussion draws on observation of performance practice and focuses on the margam's internal progression, especially in varnams and padams where emotional and narrative duration expands. Abhinaya is treated as the primary medium through which gender takes form in Bharatanatyam performance. The paper argues that the Tanjore Quartet not only composed repertoire but also organised gender through abhinaya grammar, timing, and bodily discipline, positioning femininity as the central site of expressive labour within the tradition.

THE TANJORE QUARTET AND THE FORMATION OF AN ABHINAYA-CENTRIC REPERTOIRE

The Tanjore court of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries functioned as a ceremonial centre where music, dance, literature, and ritual operated within a structured system of patronage. Under the Maratha rulers Tulaja II, Serfoji II, and Sivaji II, dance formed part of cultivated court practice linked to kingship, devotion, and codes of refined conduct rather than serving as entertainment alone [Subramaniam \(1995\)](#), [Seetha \(1981\)](#). This environment shaped performance aesthetics. Female dancers articulated intimacy, authority, and emotional nuance through decorum and measured abhinaya. Performance moved between durbar and temple contexts, where courtesans, nattuvanars, and musicians collaborated closely. Within this framework, expressive clarity, verbal address, and controlled bodily articulation carried greater weight than overt physical display [Vishwanathan \(2008\)](#).

In this milieu, the devadasi functioned not only as a performer but as a trained custodian of aesthetic knowledge. Training integrated music, gesture, poetic interpretation, and social communication. Nattuvanar pedagogy developed alongside this system. The guru composed, conducted, sang, and shaped the dancer's expressive grammar. The relationship between nattuvanar and devadasi was collaborative and practice-based. Repertoire emerged through performance rather than written notation. The central concern was how emotion unfolded across musical duration and took form in the body [Vishwanathan \(2008\)](#).

The Tanjore Quartet entered this environment as trained nattuvanars, composers, and performers grounded in temple and court traditions. They did not impose fixed choreographic texts. Instead, they worked within collaborative performance systems in which hereditary courtesan dancers shaped meaning through abhinaya and musical interpretation [Kersenboom \(1987\)](#), [Soneji \(2012\)](#). Their major intervention was structural. They reorganised earlier nirupana formats into a shorter, progressive sequence that later came to be known as the margam [Kittappa \(1961\)](#). In this arrangement, abhinaya-centred forms such as the varnam and padam occupied the core of performance time. Scholars observe that the varnam gradually assumed a central position in the recital format, becoming the primary site for sustained narrative development, affective expansion, and corporeal discipline. This shift repositioned the dancer as an emotional narrator rather than a presenter of discrete items [Meduri \(2008\)](#).

The Quartet structured their compositions through sahitya, raga, and tala, which provided an expressive framework rather than a fixed movement script. Within this structure, dancers elaborated meaning through padartha interpretation, sanchari bhavas, and nuanced bodily articulation. [Meduri \(2008\)](#) argues that historical transmission privileged interpretive dancing and embodied knowledge, enabling performers to negotiate meaning through personalised grammar instead of reproducing standardised sequences. Varnams and padams thus functioned as flexible emotional architectures in which timing, pause, and internal rhythm carried equal importance to kinetic execution. This flexibility allowed abhinaya to operate as a dynamic language rather than a closed choreographic code [Kittappa \(1961\)](#).

[Gaston \(1996\)](#) notes that even as Bharatanatyam moved from temple to proscenium theatre, this emotional grammar continued to shape performance. The Quartet aesthetic emphasises restraint, stillness, and emotional pressure sustained through micro-movement. Within this repertoire, shringar operates as a gendered practice. The female body enacts longing, negotiation, and delay, while masculine presence is invoked through suggestion rather than embodied action. Abhinaya in this context does not merely represent gender relations; it organises them through the temporal ordering of emotion and address. Through this structural

reconfiguration, the Tanjore Quartet established a repertory in which expressive depth and interpretive flexibility became central principles of the margam.

GENDER AS PERFORMED AND EMBODIED IN CLASSICAL DANCE

In Indian aesthetic theory, performance does not aim to reproduce personal identity. It seeks to embody bhava through disciplined technique. The *Natyashastra* defines the performer's task as the enactment of emotional states rather than the presentation of individual selfhood Ghosh (1951). The spectator encounters a trained body that communicates through codified gesture, posture, gaze, and rhythm. Gender in this framework is shaped through convention, pedagogy, and bodily regulation rather than biological reference.

In Bharatanatyam, this logic appears clearly in the nayika–nayaka structure. Derived from Sanskrit dramaturgy and later poetic traditions, the nayika functions as the emotional centre of address, while the nayaka appears as addressee, catalyst, or withheld presence. Classifications of the heroine; waiting, offended, confident, deceived, yearning, organise emotional time within performance. Devadasi practice shaped these roles through lived embodiment rather than textual recitation. Dancers engaged layered emotional situations instead of reproducing fixed character types Kersenboom (1987). Even when male dancers perform the nayika, the gendered structure remains intact because it operates through expressive logic rather than anatomy. Longing, hesitation, pride, and complaint are carried through modulation of the body.

Abhinaya makes this grammar visible. *Nritta* establishes rhythmic structure, but abhinaya produces social and emotional meaning. Through calibrated eye movement, eyebrow articulation, neck shifts, torso control, and breath, the dancer organises emotional agency. The face functions as a communicative field. Eyebrows indicate intention. Eyelids regulate intimacy. Pupils suggest approach or withdrawal. The mouth frames affect without exaggeration. The *Natyashastra* assigns particular importance to the eyes, neck, and facial expression in the communication of *rasa* Ghosh (1951).

Eye movement carries specific gendered implications. A sustained direct gaze may signal confidence or challenge. A lowered or oblique glance may indicate hesitation, modesty, or desire. In *varnams* and *padams*, the nayika's gaze oscillates between imagined presence and inward reflection. Meduri (2008) argues that in the Quartet repertoire, emotional development depends on the duration and withdrawal of the look. Timing becomes expressive. Masculinity, when performed, often appears through steadier gaze and reduced fluctuation, signalling composure and authority. Femininity is structured through modulation, delay, and calibrated exposure.

Meduri's study of Tanjore Quartet *varnams* further shows that emotional labour is concentrated in the female voice. The nayika negotiates desire, patience, refusal, and persuasion through subtle bodily adjustments rather than expansive spatial movement Meduri (2008). A pause, a delayed glance, or a restrained gesture becomes an indicator of position within the emotional exchange.

Sattvika abhinaya intensifies this structure. Unlike *angika*, which relies on visible gesture, *sattvika* works through internal states expressed in breath, muscular tone, and facial change. The performer cultivates stillness, moisture of the eyes, controlled breathing, and measured tension so that emotion appears embodied rather than illustrated. Ananda Coomaraswamy (1957) emphasises that Indian aesthetic thought privileges suggestion over external display, valuing interiorised expression. In Bharatanatyam, desire and emotional conflict are often shown through suspended transitions, reduced movement, and regulated breath instead of overt expansion.

These aesthetic structures also define boundaries. The nayika operates within recognised emotional territories: waiting, pleading, reproaching, testing, reconciling. Authority rarely manifests as overt force. It appears through persistence, moral appeal, and affective pressure. Gaston (1996) observes that as Bharatanatyam moved from temple and court contexts to the modern proscenium stage, this emotional order remained, though its intensity was moderated within middle-class performance culture. The dancer may shape nuance, but the structural role determines which emotional registers are available and how far they may extend.

Within abhinaya grammar, dancers negotiate emphasis, duration, and tonal shift. Training inscribes technique into muscle memory: how long a glance is sustained, how tension releases, how weight settles into stillness. Gender operates here as a technical discipline. It is produced through repetition, restraint, and aesthetic calibration across musical time Soneji (2012). In Bharatanatyam, gender is not simply represented. It is enacted through embodied practice and sustained through the ordering of emotion in performance.

GENDERED VOICES IN TANJORE QUARTET COMPOSITIONS

The compositional structure associated with the Tanjore Quartet is organised largely through a feminine narrative voice. In *varnams*, *padams*, and *javalis* attributed to the Quartet, the speaking subject is most often the nayika. She addresses the nayaka directly, sometimes through a *sakhi* and sometimes in open appeal. The dancer does not simply enact a narrative. She assumes the position of the speaking subject, through whom desire, hesitation, pride, and vulnerability are articulated. Meduri (2008) notes that the Quartet's *varnams* were conceived as highly expressive works for courtly courtesans trained to carry emotional meaning through calibrated bodily expression rather than expansive movement. Gender is therefore established first as a vocal and emotional position,

and only then as a physical one. In varnams such as Mohamana (Bhairavi, Ata tala), the composition unfolds through persuasive address and controlled longing rather than dramatic external action.

The nayika's emotional register moves across recognisable states. She waits, imagines, recalls, and measures time through absence. In pieces such as Ni Sati Doraa and Daanike, desire appears through persuasion rather than command. In Sarasalanu Ipuđu, the heroine questions delay while reaffirming exclusivity through moderated complaint rather than confrontation. Longing often leads to reproach. She tests loyalty and marks neglect through tonal variation, repetition of key phrases, and restrained gesture. She appeals to shared memory, virtue, beauty, and mutual suitability. Argument unfolds through affect rather than authority. At certain moments she asserts her worth and desirability. Meduri (2008) observes that Quartet varnams allow the courtesan to articulate confidence in her own desirability while remaining within courtly decorum. In javalis such as Saramaina Matalantivi, this assertion becomes playful, yet it remains governed by timing, pause, and gaze rather than overt confrontation. Abhinaya structures these shifts through modulation of the eyes, torso restraint, eyebrow articulation, and calibrated silence.

Male presence in this repertoire is configured differently. The nayaka rarely undergoes emotional expansion on stage. He appears as distant, powerful, withheld, or divine at times king or patron, at times Shiva or Krishna. In each case, he functions as the focal point toward which emotion moves rather than the source of expressive development. Gaston (1996) argues that emotional narration in Bharatanatyam resides primarily in the female body, while the male figure remains comparatively idealised and less embodied. In performance, the nayaka is constructed through spatial orientation, imagined dialogue, and temporal suspension. Even in varnams such as Mohamana, his presence is shaped through the nayika's gaze and rhythmic delay rather than through independent emotional articulation. When the dancer briefly enacts him, authority is conveyed through vertical alignment, reduced fluctuation, and steady gaze.

The nayika may appear dependent because she waits, requests, persuades, and endures delay. Emotional vulnerability is embedded in the lyrics and realised through controlled bodily expression. Yet she determines narrative progression. The composition unfolds through her emotional sequencing. Without her longing, complaint, and insistence, the varnam does not advance. Kersenboom (1987) notes that devadasi performance enabled women to occupy a visible aesthetic space in which emotional articulation itself functioned as authority, even within hierarchical court structures. The nayika may not command through force, but she regulates attention, rhythm, and interpretive focus.

Power in these compositions operates through endurance and affective intensity rather than dominance. The nayika sustains emotion across musical duration and negotiates presence and absence through repeated address. Abhinaya allows the dancer to determine the duration of a glance, the modulation of complaint into persuasion, and the emergence of assertion without rupture of decorum. Gendered voice in the Quartet repertoire is thus structured not only by who speaks, but by how emotion is timed, restrained, intensified, and resolved through disciplined embodiment.

DEVADASI EMBODIMENT AND THE LIVED GENDER OF ABHINAYA

The earliest interpreters of the Tanjore Quartet repertoire were devadasi artists trained within temple and courtly systems. The varnams, padams, javalis, and shringar-oriented compositions attributed to the Quartet were created for performers already fluent in expressive technique. These dancers carried abhinaya through daily ritual participation, patronage relationships, musical study, and public presentation. Shankar and Ganesan (2021) argue that devadasis functioned as custodians of expressive knowledge, sustaining emotional narrative through controlled physical presence rather than display-driven virtuosity. In this context, abhinaya operated as a mode of lived communication.

The social position of devadasis shaped how gender was articulated on stage. They occupied a complex role that joined ritual service, artistic labour, and courtly intimacy. Training often began in childhood within hereditary lineages. Instruction integrated music, dance technique, poetic comprehension, and social etiquette. Reddy and Sridevi (2019) explain that pedagogy relied on observation, correction, and embodied repetition rather than written notation. Gesture, gaze, timing, and emotional progression were internalised through habit. Gender thus emerged as a patterned way of inhabiting space and time, not as a temporary role assumed only during performance.

Within this framework, devotion and erotic address were not mutually exclusive. The nayika's voice could shift between lover and devotee without contradiction. The same performer who enacted ritual service addressed king or deity through shringar Puri (2014). The study *Living History, Performing Memory* (2004) observes that devadasi expression combined intimacy with discipline, allowing erotic feeling to remain within regulated aesthetic structures rather than appear as social transgression. In Quartet compositions, longing does not abandon decorum. Desire unfolds through delay, refinement, and poetic articulation. Respectability is maintained through the controlled carrying of emotion rather than through its suppression.

Embodied experience contributed to the credibility of abhinaya. Interpreting devadasi performance as historically situated practice aligns with Kapila Vatsyayan's analysis of Indian dance traditions as integrated cultural systems rather than isolated theatrical forms Vatsyayan (1977). The devadasi did not merely simulate emotional states. She navigated relationships with patrons, institutions, and audiences in lived contexts. Waiting, persuasion, complaint, and reconciliation were not abstract themes. Shankar and Ganesan (2021) suggest that the emotional density of Quartet varnams reflects the social negotiations of courtly women whose

artistic survival depended on sustaining attention without overt confrontation. This correspondence between social experience and compositional structure gave abhinaya particular weight. The dancer's body carried experiential memory alongside poetic text.

When Bharatanatyam later entered institutional and proscenium frameworks, this experiential base changed. Training became standardised and detached from hereditary economies. Yet the gendered vocabulary established within earlier practice remained embedded in the repertoire. What had once been sustained through lived negotiation became formalised pedagogy. The credibility of the nayika continued to depend on disciplined timing, spatial control, and emotional calibration. Gender, therefore, was not externally imposed upon the dance. It was inscribed within embodied technique and transmitted through performance practice itself.

GENDERED ABHINAYA IN A TANJORE QUARTET REPERTOIRE

The repertoire structured by the Tanjore Quartet operates through a clearly gendered narrative framework. In varnams, padams, and javalis, the dominant expressive voice is that of the nayika. She desires, waits, questions, persuades, asserts, and yields. The nayaka, by contrast, remains distant. He appears as king, patron, or deity. This compositional pattern creates an asymmetry within abhinaya: emotional articulation is concentrated in the female subject, while the male figure functions as the imagined focus of her address rather than as a fully embodied stage presence [Viswanathan \(1984\)](#), [Puri \(2014\)](#).

The female subject in these works is not passive. The nayika speaks directly and negotiates intimacy. She affirms her worth, refers to her beauty, and challenges delay or neglect. Her body carries emotional variation through calibrated technique. Longing, impatience, pride, vulnerability, and pleasure are articulated through controlled glances, measured pauses, lifted brows, softened shoulders, regulated breath, and shifts in stance. Even in devotional contexts, the expressive grammar remains intimate. Gender in abhinaya operates not only at the level of narrative but through trained physical detail. The torso, eyes, and hands are disciplined to project a recognisably feminine affective field.

The nayaka rarely emerges as a sustained character. He is invoked, remembered, imagined, or addressed. In courtly settings, he appears as a ruler whose authority intensifies the risk embedded in the nayika's approach. In devotional contexts, he becomes a deity whose distance generates emotional tension. In both cases, abhinaya functions through asymmetry. The woman is visible and expressive; the man is powerful yet withheld. The dancer must render absence perceptible through embodied timing and sustained emotional projection.

Historically, this repertoire was created for hereditary women performers working within court and salon systems. The compositions presuppose a female performer's body, vocal quality, and social position. Abhinaya pedagogy developed within this assumption. Emotional metaphors, poetic codes, and gestural conventions correspond to feminine experience as configured in nineteenth-century court culture. Gender is therefore embedded in the structure of the compositions themselves.

When male dancers interpret this material, the structural specificity becomes evident. They may adopt a feminised gaze and bodily modulation, or they may neutralise gesture and present emotion in abstract form. Both strategies indicate that the repertoire is not gender-neutral. The compositions do not simply depict romance; they organise how gender is embodied, regulated, and displayed within performance [Subramaniam \(1995\)](#).

Gendered abhinaya in the Tanjore Quartet tradition is thus structural rather than incidental. It is inscribed in sahitya, compositional design, pedagogical transmission, and technical training. The nayika's longing drives narrative progression, while the nayaka's distance sustains emotional tension. Together, they produce a system in which femininity becomes the principal site of expressive labour and authority within Bharatanatyam performance practice.

POST REVIVAL SHIFTS AND CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE

The early twentieth-century revival of Bharatanatyam altered the social and aesthetic conditions under which the Tanjore Quartet repertoire was transmitted. Material that had circulated within devadasi, nattuvanar, and court networks entered newly formed institutions, sabhas, and urban teaching systems [Venkataraman \(2015\)](#). Quartet varnams, padams, and javalis remained central to the margam, but their interpretive frame shifted. Training moved from experiential transmission within hereditary lineages to structured classroom pedagogy [Subramaniam \(1995\)](#). The revival recast dance as cultural heritage and national art, distancing it from hereditary performers and adapting it for middle-class audiences [Soneji \(2012\)](#), [Venkataraman \(2015\)](#). Abhinaya, once embedded in lived social exchange, became a refined technique systematised through instruction.

This transition reshaped the expression of gender. The nayika retained structural centrality, yet her emotional register was moderated. Courtly intimacy and explicit erotic address were recalibrated into regulated sentiment. Performance emphasised visual polish and moral restraint, which influenced how desire could appear on stage [Gaston \(1996\)](#), [Venkataraman \(2015\)](#). Longing, reproach, and persuasion continued to define the repertoire, but they were reframed as aestheticized emotion rather than social negotiation. The dancer now presented feeling within a proscenium setting oriented toward spectatorship.

Shringar underwent the most visible regulation. In devadasi contexts, erotic address functioned as a communicative mode connecting performer, patron, and deity. In post-revival practice, shringar was filtered through standards of respectability. Gestures became lighter, glances more contained, and bodily proximity symbolic rather than suggestive. [Reddy and Sridevi \(2019\)](#) argue that

revival aesthetics repositioned Bharatanatyam within nationalist and urban cultural discourse. Femininity came to be associated with decorum, virtue, and cultural refinement rather than sensual authority. Emotional intensity shifted from relational negotiation to aesthetic display.

These changes affected women and men differently. For women performers, authority increasingly derived from technical precision, institutional training, and stage polish rather than from lived social negotiation. The nayika continued to articulate desire and complaint, but her voice functioned within artistic convention rather than transactional context. For male dancers, the revival created space to perform nayika roles without the stigma attached to hereditary practice and to expand male repertoire. Yet the underlying gender grammar remained stable. Even when enacted by men, the nayika's emotional structure continues to determine timing, gaze, modulation, and restraint [Subramaniam \(1995\)](#).

The post-revival transformation did not remove gender coding from the Quartet repertoire. It reorganised it within new institutional and ideological frameworks. Quartet compositions still structure emotional progression in performance, but the bodies that interpret them operate within pedagogical systems and public cultural expectations distinct from earlier court and temple settings. Gender in contemporary Bharatanatyam continues to be produced through abhinaya, though it's meaning now emerges primarily from aesthetic discipline and institutional regulation rather than from lived social position.

CONCLUSION

Gender in the Tanjore Quartet tradition is articulated through abhinaya rather than theme alone, and it is embedded in sahitya, structure, pedagogy, and bodily technique. The nayika carries the central emotional labour through longing, complaint, persuasion, and restraint, while the nayaka remains distant and minimally embodied, functioning as the focus of address rather than its source. Through gaze, breath, timing, stillness, and micro-movement, abhinaya produces femininity as a disciplined embodied practice rather than a fixed identity. Historically grounded in devadasi performance contexts, this expressive grammar shifted under revival aesthetics and institutional pedagogy, yet its internal ordering of emotion endured. Gendered abhinaya in the Tanjore Quartet repertoire is therefore structural rather than decorative; it shapes how bodies are trained, how emotion unfolds across musical duration, and how authority is enacted on the Bharatanatyam stage.

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