

HINDU EXOTICA IN RUTH ST. DENIS'S DANCES “RADHA” (1906), “NAUTCH” (1909), “INCENSE” (1906)

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ABSTRACT

Ruth St. Denis was an iconic figure in the early 20th century who is often hailed as the mother of Modern dance in America. Along with Isadora Duncan and Lois Fuller, she is credited with the sweeping changes in movement and dance and perceptions about the same in the said era. Ruth St. Denis's art was a synthesis of different cultural influences. Predominant among these were Hindu beliefs and Hindu culture. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent of these influences and the depth of St. Denis's engagement with the Hindu philosophy and culture and the manner in which it impacted her work as an artist. Her three defining works, 'Radha', 'Incense' and 'Nautch' are studied closely to judge the authenticity of her influences

KEYWORDS: Ruth St. Denis, Hindu culture, 'Radha', 'Incense' and 'Nautch'

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is the following:

- To explore the full extent of Ruth St. Denis's engagement with Hindu themes and its implications with respect to modern dance in America.
- To contextualize St. Denis's artistic and creative explorations with regard to her East Indian dances by dwelling briefly upon the times she lived in and the circumstances that shaped her.
- To examine the authenticity and depth of her research that led to the creation of the dances mentioned above.
- To determine if her early creative explorations of the Hindu traditions influenced her work in the later years.

America: At the Turn of the Century

In order to understand the origins of Ruth St. Denis's solo creations in the early part of the 20th century, it is imperative to understand the changes taking place in America around the early impressionable years of Ruth St. Denis's life (1879-1969). In many ways what was happening in Europe influenced America to a great extent. In her dissertation, “The Role of Ruth St. Denis in the History of American Dance, 1906-1922”, Schlundt speaks of the four distinct stages in American history with respect to the development of arts and culture. In the first stage, America merely followed the developments in arts and science in Europe. In the second stage of the country's cultural evolution, American born youth travelled to Europe to acquire skills thought to be necessary for a well rounded education. As the country advanced to the third stage, it began to develop its own institutions which were however staffed by foreign instructors. Finally, by the

fourth stage of cultural evolution, these institutions had developed sufficiently enough to have their own native born Americans as instructors thus bringing an end to the reliance upon Europeans for the same (1-2).

It is important to note that in these early years of St. Denis's childhood and subsequent youth, dance in America was still struggling to find its own voice, as it were. As Schlundt states in her book, dance in America was last of the arts to achieve status in the American culture (18). In the late 19th century ballet was already languishing, and there weren't any ballet programs to speak of in the concert halls (14). American society at large didn't look upon dancing as respectable vocation for women. But as the country advanced into the 20th century, attitudes began to change, although slowly. Vaudeville and its variety shows aimed for the morality conscious middle classes, especially its women, became a compelling medium of entertainment around this time. Devoted to providing novel varieties of

Amusement, while mindful of its puritanical clientèle, the Vaudeville circuit opened doors for dancers like Ruth St. Denis, Isadora Duncan and Loie Fuller to experiment with their art (18). It is also relevant to examine the developments in American arts and consequently in dance which were subject to influences from outside of the country and reached its shores via Europe. Particularly popular was the Delsarte system which caught the imagination of many educated Americans. The Delsarte system was developed by a French professor of declamation who propounded that every physical gesture had a corresponding emotional and spiritual state. Yet another system of philosophy that made inroads into the American around the late nineteenth century was the Theosophical Society. Theosophists drew their ideas from Indian theological beliefs of karma, reincarnation and a divine absolute (Shelton 10).

Yet another cultural trend that had an impact on popular culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was Orientalism. Although Holly Edwards explores the nature of Orientalism in American art in her essay, "A Million and One Nights: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930", she also discusses how this trend seeped into the popular culture of these years. Oriental images began to flourish in a wide variety of commercial media like paintings, prints, advertisements, photographs, films, fashion and performing arts thus capturing the imagination of the public (16). Prompted by these images, Americans drew their own varying inferences and impressions of the Orient. The predilection for oriental exotica heightened around the years preceding the first world war. Americans continued to foster an inaccurate stereotype of the oriental cultures yet there was a significant demand for wide-ranging oriental motifs to serve the purpose of personal and commercial embellishment (Shelton 89-90). For example, in an article titled "Orientalism" which appeared in the June 1873 issue of Knickerbocker magazine, the anonymous author evokes a rich image of the Orient suffused with notions of its imagined splendor, luxury of indolence juxtaposed with mystical symbols and hints of the erotic (479-480). Edwards who discusses the article in her essay makes a pertinent observation that the anonymous author associates oriental culture with "enticing" geographical regions like Constantinople, Cairo, and Damascus which are not part of the West yet are "accessible". On the other hand, she notes that he speaks of East Asians such as Chinese, Sikhs, and Tartars as "straggling figures in the picture" (19). It is hence apparent that in the early years of the twentieth century when St. Denis was setting out on a career as a soloist, America was witnessing a cultural change. Young and robust, it was receptive to ideas from Europe and beyond, assimilating and modifying them to define its own unique voice.

The Early Years

Early influences in Ruth St. Denis's life included people like Mrs. Plunkett, a Christian Scientist who is referred to in Shelton's *The Divine Dancer* by her last name only, and John W. Lovell, a New York based publisher who was a

Theosophist. In fact one of the latter's publications 'The Idyll of the White Lotus', a book based on the spiritual journey of a young Egyptian priest, had a very deep impact on young Ruthie's mind. Both Mrs. Plunkett and Lovell were frequent visitors at Pin Oaks often engaging in "veranda discussions" on theological matters, undoubtedly contributing to St. Denis's interest and fascination for the esoteric (10). This proclivity for the spiritual frequently manifested in her dancing and choreography, a significant example of which is "Radha". St. Denis's early training in dance included Delsarte exercises which were supervised by her mother. But it was not until she saw Genevieve Stebbins an exponent of the Delsartian form, that St. Denis began to see the beauty of the human body: "through Mrs. Stebbins I glimpsed for the first time the individual possibilities of expression and the dignity and truth of the human body, (St. Denis 16)" It is pertinent to note that although Stebbins was primarily a practitioner of the Delsartian principles, she evolved her own theory of motor energy based on her studies in disciplines that included yoga and oriental dance among others (Shelton 11-13). It is not unreasonable to assume that Stebbins's movements were drawn from the Indian principle of yoga and perhaps Indian classical dance especially since she designed "exotic" routines that were driven by breath. The Serpentine Arm Drill was an excellent example of this and St. Denis used this drill to devise her own famous arm undulations. Furthermore, Shelton quotes Stebbins in her book as observing that nature as we know it, is a stranger to straight lines, it is, instead, defined by spiral motion, a movement pattern which she identified in "the slowly shifting weight of the oriental dancer which, 'coupled with the natural balance of head, arm, and torso, produces the spiral line from every point of view' (14)." It is interesting to note that at least few of the people that St. Denis was most influenced by in her childhood, who in some way or the other contributed to shaping her beliefs and hence her aesthetic in dance, had themselves engaged with Hindu philosophy to evolve their respective world views. Lovell and Stebbins are definitely striking examples.

St. Denis began her professional career as a skirt dancer in the dime museums of New York. Dime museums were at the lowest rung of the theatre district and were often 'educational' in their choice of amusements which included among other things oddities displayed to capture the public gaze (Schlundt 22) This was an age when professional dancing was associated with stigma and hence considered disreputable for women. However, fortunately for St. Denis, Vaudeville, although characterised by some hypocrisy, reflective of the popular middle class mindset that was curious yet self conscious and puritanical, was beginning to open its doors to innovation, propelled by the need to find new means to entertain its burgeoning audiences (Schlundt 24-25). This change coincided with St. Denis's inward quest to find her own metier in dance. As she mentions in her autobiography, *An Unfinished Life*, the definitive moment that changed her destiny was in a drugstore where she saw a cigarette poster of Egyptian Deities, a popular cigarette brand of the time. The poster had an image of the Egyptian Goddess Isis seated on a throne. By her own admission, although she realised much later how inauthentic the representation was, she was at the time intensely drawn to the beauty and power of this image (52). This incident is a telling example of the rampant use of oriental imagery in commercial popular culture at the time. While speaking of the deep impact the image had on her she says in her autobiography, "the world of antiquity and the Orient with all its rich poetry of the human soul opened up and possessed me" (St. Denis 53). Being a current generation Indian, the indiscriminate use of the word "orient" both amuses and bothers me. However I try to imagine the average American mind of the early 20th century and its befuddled understanding of the Eastern cultures. This drives me to ask the question: how much of St. Denis's infatuation with the 'orient' was genuine and how much of it was driven by a need to fill the artistic vacuum in the burgeoning entertainment industry? As Shelton astutely notes and I am inclined to agree with her, St. Denis's interest in Eastern philosophy and mysticism was not entirely an ingenuous affair but quite possibly tethered to

her shrewd grasping of the need of the times (41). It is not a coincidence that most of her dances in her early years as a soloist were based on strong individualistic female characters drawn from native mythologies who symbolised beauty and power, yet who were for most part unknown to the American public.

Let us not forget that this was an age in the grip of the oriental fad: the more exotic and esoteric, the better. St. Denis's research into the 'orient' which in all probability began with a blurred notion of what it constituted, led her inadvertently from Egypt to India. It happened when she visited the Coney Island in New York, an amusement park, where she stumbled into a recreated setting of an East Indian village. It was here that she saw for the first time, what have now become clichés of Indian exotica: snake charmers, holy men, nautch dancers. Again, a very striking example of the orientalism that Edwards talks about in her essay. Unfortunately, these popular myths about India haven't changed much in the last hundred years! The word 'nautch' dating back to British colonial times, is a corruption of the word 'naach' which is Hindi for dance. It is a well documented fact in India that the 'nautch' dancers were really classically trained dancers some of whom were forced into prostitution with changing socioeconomic conditions. In her autobiography, St. Denis speaks of going to the Astor Library to research on nautch costumes, and how this led her to the subject of temple dancers and subsequently to the "name" of Radha. As the center of interest began to shift from Egypt to India, she claims that she read all that she could about India and "saturated myself with the atmosphere" (55). This may well be true, for to give her credit, a good two years passed between the time that she first saw the Egyptian Deities poster in 1904 (Shelton 46) and her first presentation of "Radha" in 1906. It may be inferred that St. Denis spent most of that time gathering material for her production.

A hundred years ago information wasn't as readily available as it is today and even rarer to come by was accurate information on Eastern cultures. I find it admirable therefore that St. Denis managed to glean enough knowledge to know for instance that a Hindu was not the same as a Muslim, a difference, I have discovered, some Americans are still unaware of. I am also surprised to learn that St. Denis knew that although Radha had a following of devotees in her capacity as the beloved of Krishna, a popular Indian deity, she wasn't worshiped as a female godhead. She knew that their earthly love for each other depicted widely in mythological lore, folk lore and classical literature was really a symbol for spiritual union. She had also researched enough to know that nautch dancers weren't the same as devadaasis who were essentially temple dancers. Interestingly, the result of all her "jumbled" ideas was the emergence of three simultaneous pieces: "Radha", "Incense" and "Nautch" (St. Denis 56-57). Yet knowing what she did, she choreographed "Radha" depicting Radha as a deity in a temple who comes to life, dances the dance of "five senses" and goes back to her shrine (Shelton 51).

In her autobiography, St. Denis justifies this conspicuous inaccuracy by claiming that she was never deeply interested in either the rituals, practices or the dances to faithfully "imitate" them but was seized by the "mood" and the "symbolism" of Radha (57). It would be worthwhile to briefly discuss the books, resources and people St. Denis relied upon in her research before she embarked upon the project of creating her Hindu dances. Shelton mentions Pierre Loti's *India* as one of the books that St. Denis drew her exotic images of India from (50). Pierre Loti (1850-1923) was a French naval officer who wrote romantic travelogues based on his travels across the world (<http://wikipedia.org/>). While in the Astor library she also chanced upon an old book written by a missionary, the title of which Shelton fails to mention, where she came upon the heroine of her piece, namely Radha (50). St. Denis had already been introduced to Radha via *The Light of Asia*, a Buddhist poem by Sir Edwin Arnold (1832-1904) who was a British poet and journalist. Yet another source of information that St. Denis used that Shelton mentions in her book was a series of books called *Great Religions of the*

World in which she was struck by an essay on Brahmanism by A.C Lyall (1835-1911), who in his capacity as a British civil servant in colonial India wrote many historical accounts of India (<http://wikipedia.org/>). In the essay, Lyall wrote about how the Hindu aspires to reach a state of liberation from the bondage of the senses (51). I find it noteworthy that all the books St. Denis read to further her study of Hinduism and Indian history were written by Westerners. This might have led to a one-sided, narrow view of the culture, especially since she hadn't yet been to India or formed any meaningful relationships with Indians thus far.

It would be inaccurate to state that Ruth St. Denis had no interaction with Indians at all because she did meet and make the acquaintance of a few Coney Island Indians over time with whom she formed a company; whom she relied upon from time to time for questions regarding India and Hindu traditions. They also took on the part of Indian characters in her dance pieces. This entourage of Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims met a few times a week at her apartment for rehearsals. It is my guess that the group wasn't very informed since most of them were store clerks, a few were students from Columbia University and few of them St. Denis herself dismissed as "ne'er-do-wells" (St. Denis 56). Hindu temple rituals are an esoteric subject and not every one, unless highly informed, would have complete understanding of the same.

Hence, I would infer that what St. Denis knew of the temple rituals at this point was rudimentary and possibly inauthentic. One really wonders though what this odd mix of Indians thought of St. Denis's attempts to create an 'Oriental' dance? Sadly we will never know. It is obvious that these relationships did not develop beyond the perfunctory business of gleaning information, for neither Shelton nor St. Denis herself name any of them. They remain anonymous. The Bhumgaras are the only Indians who are spoken of at some length by both Shelton and St. Denis. The Bhumgaras were wealthy Parsee merchants who ran a store in New York. St. Denis claims that the Bhumgara family was very encouraging when they learned of her attempts to create a temple dance. She was allowed access to their store which was rich with "enchanted silks and jewels and rugs" (58).

I am inclined to think that beyond being generous sponsors, the Bhumgaras couldn't have contributed artistically to St. Denis's creation of either "Radha" or "Incense" being Parsees and not Hindus and hence not in a position to have guided St. Denis with authentic information with regards to Hindu practices and customs. Interestingly enough, it was at the behest of the Bhumgaras that St. Denis performed her Hindu dance, "Incense", for the first time to an illustrious Indian audience namely the Gaekwar of Baroda and his queen. St. Denis makes particular mention of this incident and speaks of it at length (58), while Shelton mentions it only in the passing (58). It is my conjecture that since "Incense" was presented along with "Radha" at the Hudson Theatre, the Gaekwar of Baroda probably saw St. Denis dance "Incense" in 1906. It is unfortunate that there is no documentation of how St. Denis's Hindu dances were viewed by the Indian community living in America at the time, there is only a succinct mention of the Rani of Baroda complimenting St. Denis on her dance (St. Denis 59).

One of St. Denis's most ardent supporters and promoters during this time was Edmund Russell, whom Schlundt describes as the "social lion of Newport" (57) and St. Denis herself describes as an aesthete who "gave extraordinary and famous parties" (59). Russell best symbolised the fad of orientalism that had gripped the imagination of Americans in the early 20th century. He, along with the rich hostesses of New York society who had artistic and intellectual pretensions, helped and encouraged St. Denis considerably to put together and subsequently present her grand Hindu offering to the world, "Radha" at the Hudson Theatre in 1906. St. Denis couldn't have chosen a more opportune moment to unveil

“Radha” as this was a time when the turn-of-the-century fad of oriental exotica turned to a “serious intellectual pursuit”, thanks to trade and shipping and growing contact between the Eastern and Western worlds. Scholars and laymen alike took an interest in the Eastern philosophies; translations of the Bhagvad Gita the sacred text of the Hindus, were readily available along with Delsarte's Hindu Philosophy in a Nutshell; furthermore, people like Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, an art historian of the 20th century, were creating awareness about Indian art among Americans (Shelton 54-55).

Thus, St. Denis's “Radha”, “Incense” and “Nautch” although riddled with some serious inconsistencies decidedly caught the imagination of the American elite. Some of these inconsistencies were technical for instance in her first presentation of “Radha” St. Denis recreated a Jain temple as her setting (Shelton 54). The latter is vastly different from a Hindu temple. The other detail that leaped to my attention as I studied pictures of the dance was that her temple priests wore turbans, while the reality is that Hindu priests do not wear turbans! These were some minor inconsistencies, the more serious flaw, as mentioned earlier was with the choice of her heroine, Radha, as the goddess in the shrine. The dance itself although suggestive of Indian movements was not strictly adherent to any of the Indian classical styles. The music was not Indian either, but borrowed from French composer Delibes's famous opera “Lakme,” which was in turn based on yet another romantic tale set in British India (<http://wikipedia.org>).

Reconstructions of “Incense” and “Nautch” by the Denishawn Repertory dancers are available on a videotape titled Denishawn Dances On, thanks to the New Jersey Dance Collective. While I watched both “Incense” and “Nautch” I had to constantly remind myself that a hundred years had passed between the time that St. Denis first performed these dances and now. I tried to keep that in mind in order not to judge St. Denis's attempts too harshly.

“Incense” (1906)

The dance opens with the dancer dressed in a sari-like drapery, with a plate held aloft on the palm of her hand. She moves slowly towards two lamps strategically placed downstage left and right. She periodically simulates the act of dropping something into them while the “incense” symbolised by the two lamps continues to emanate curls of smoke. She accentuates this ascending spiral pattern of the smoke with undulating arm movements. There is very little dancing except for the characteristic arm movements which are reminiscent of Stebbins's Serpentine Arm Drill mentioned earlier. It appears that St. Denis was smitten by the idea of Indian temple rituals. In the dance she isolates the use of incense, glorifying it, such that it ceases to be a mundane practise and transforms into a solemn ceremony. Speaking of “Incense” in her book St. Denis says, “the rising smoke of the incense was to me a symbol of devotion, of prayer and meditation” (69).

“Radha” (1906)

Unfortunately the only available film print of “Radha” is housed in the dance collection of the New York Public Library. For the sake of information, I depend on the elaborate description of the dance provided by Jane Desmond in her article “Dancing Out the Difference Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's *Radha* of 1906.” Jane Desmond was a professor of Anthropology and Women's Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 2007 (<http://americanajournal.hu/>). Desmond describes “Radha” as a spectacle alluding to its use of elaborate sets and costume. The piece begins with St. Denis as Radha in a meditative pose in an elaborately designed set of an Indian temple in the opening and closing sequences and has five distinct segments where Radha celebrates the pleasure of the senses-sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch-which end with frenzied spinning at the completion of which she goes back to her shrine and returns to the state of deep contemplation. Desmond describes the dance as comprising of geometrical spatial

patterns-circular and square-which were built upon simple movements, embellished with swirls and turns, and a few steps drawn from ballet and Delsartian limb exercises. Desmond also dwells at length on St. Denis's choice of costume, her exposed midriff and her barefoot dancing which scandalised the conservative American audiences (257-58). Yet, in my opinion, it was this clever duality of sensual presentation and spiritual theme that worked in St. Denis's favour and elevated her to the status of a saint from that of a variety show skirt dancer. The other thing that strikes me as singular about "Radha" is St. Denis's adroit assimilation of assorted influences: ballet, Delsartian exercises, Stebbins's oriental dances, the nautch dances she saw at Coney Island, exotic motifs. This eclecticism is one of the cornerstones of modern dance in America.

St Denis took her repertoire of "Incense", "Radha" and "Cobra" to Europe in 1906 (St. Denis 89). The latter was a street dance hastily put together after yet another trip to Coney Island where St. Denis saw a snake charmer in an act known as the "The Streets of Delhi" (Shelton 57). It was while she was in Europe that St. Denis created two more dances namely "Nautch" and "Yogi" completing the series of Hindu dances that sprung from her initial research (St. Denis 97). St. Denis knew by now that the Nautch dancers were entertainers and not religious dancers but that they embodied some aspect of Krishna and Radha in their dances (St. Denis 106). "Yogi" was purportedly about spiritual consciousness and as St. Denis remarks in her book, based on her "study of yoga" (97-98). I am a little skeptical of this claim: who did she study yoga from and when? Anyone who has studied or indeed practises yoga in its holistic form will know that it cannot be gleaned from books. This claim in my

Opinion is symptomatic of St. Denis's cursory perusal of Hindu culture and traditions, a culture that she drew from and owed her success to but quite likely failed to appreciate in its entirety.

"Nautch" (1909)

My inferences with respect to "Nautch" are based on a reconstruction of the dance, as mentioned earlier, on the videotape entitled *Denishawn Dances On*. In the opening sequence, the dancer dressed in a billowing skirt, anklets and a scarf, drops the scarf to the floor and begins her dance of exuberant turns, swirls and leg lifts (hardly Indian!). Again as with the other pieces, the music is conspicuously non-Indian and the choreography has a few Indian elements like the hand gestures suggesting the flute of Krishna, the delicate foot placements and of course the unmistakable undulations of the arms. With these Hindu dances came considerable success and critical acclaim. Thus, Ruth St. Denis's rose in her career as a solo dancer in the years between 1909 and World War I (Shelton 91). Although Shelton talks of St. Denis's continued enquiry into Eastern mysticism and philosophy, it is relevant to note that she subscribed to her own particular brand of mysticism which was as eclectic as her Hindu dances. She was influenced by a wide variety of philosophies ranging from American Transcendentalism, Christian Science, Vedanta and the Theosophical Society mentioned earlier in the paper (Shelton 93). American Transcendentalists, principal among them being noted writers, poets and scholars of the time like Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau were in turn deeply influenced by the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta (Shelton 97). Vedanta, as any aware enlightened Hindu will explain, is premised on the idea of a universal soul or consciousness and the union thereof of the individual soul with this universal soul. The introduction of Vedanta in America in fact dates back to 1893 when Swami Vivekananda attended the World Parliament of Religions held at Chicago as one of its delegates. A highly venerated luminary from India, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was one of the chief advocates of Vedanta outside of India. Shelton suggests that Ruth St. Denis's mother may have heard him speak on one of his lecture tours (93).

Vivekananda's approach may have appealed to St. Denis, for the Vedanta magazine, "The Message of the East" contained references to St. Denis even as late as in 1933 (Shelton 94).

The Later Years

Ted Shawn, a dancer and later St. Denis's husband, was relatively unknown when he met Ruth St. Denis, who was a star in her own right. The two got married in 1914 and went on to create many more exotic pieces drawn from ethnic cultures as wide ranging as American Indian (Schlundt 110) and Arabia (Schlundt 112). St. Denis's solo career however was more or less over. By now in addition to "Radha", "Incense", "Nautch", "Cobra" and "Yogi", St. Denis had choreographed other Hindu dances like "Bakawali" (1913) and "The Legend of the Peacock" (1914) being chief among them. Some of Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis's collaborative pieces were also strikingly Hindu in theme of which "The Garden of Kama" (1914) is a good example. Ted Shawn may have shared some of Ruth St. Denis's enthusiasm for East Indian culture. His first gift to St. Denis was a copy of *The Gardener: Lyrics of*

Love and Life by the Nobel Laureate and Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (Shelton 121). The following years saw the birth of Denishawn in 1915 in Los Angeles, the first dancing school of its kind in America, its eventual dissolution in 1929 and that of the marriage too in 1930. Jane Sherman, the youngest pupil at Denishawn between 1925 to 1928 and one of its principal dancers, mentions in her book *Soaring* that St. Denis taught her students her Oriental dances but it was Ted Shawn who trained them more in the technique which was essentially classical ballet but also included interpretations of ethnic expressiveness (24).

It would be worthwhile at this point to talk of Jane Sherman's experiences on Denishawn's Far Eastern tour in 1925. Sherman speaks at length on the rich, varied and enlightening experiences while on the tour. The dancers performed the Indian dances extensively on this tour, "Nautch" being chief among them. She claims that the natives received these East Indian dances with enthusiasm; however one must remember that dancing in India was restricted to male and female prostitutes at the time thus inviting a certain degree of disapproval (91). Interestingly, Sherman also mentions watching an authentic North Indian nautch dance by a sixty year old woman but appears disappointed by the lack of "any real dancing" (99). This must have been a momentous occasion for Ruth St. Denis as she watched for the first time an authentic performance of the nautch. Sherman writes informatively of the sights and sounds of India, its religious, cultural and philosophical diversity and expresses her amazement in frank terms. She claims to have captured enough of the song, rhythm, color and suggestiveness to do a nautch dance while admitting that in order to do a more truly Indian dance she would have to study the Indian culture in depth (122).

The aesthetic that St. Denis had developed in her solo career thus continued to inform her work and eventually led to the shaping of modern dance. The spirit of Denishawn eventually traveled across the nation through some of its stellar dancers like Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey. Dancers like Martha Graham broke away from the excessive exoticism of Denishawn to experiment with movement vis-a-vis the body and gave modern dance its unique character; interestingly enough, however, there is at least once instance of Graham choreographing a Hindu dance called "The Flute of Krishna" in 1926, after she had formally left Denishawn (Thomas 92).

CONCLUSIONS

The Hindu element in Ruth St. Denis's solo dances had the exotic appeal that pandered to the American society's curiosity for novelty in this period. These attempts while hailed by few as path breaking, were viewed as charming and diverting at best by others. The spiritual loftiness of these pieces rescued them

From being merely decorative, lavish and derivative. That these dances weren't in any way authentic either theologically or choreographically hardly seemed to affect their popularity. One is, however, forced to ponder on the inherent weaknesses of these oriental dances. The dances although ambitious in spirit lacked the depth of understanding that is imperative when crossing cultures. To my mind, Ruth St. Denis's dances and the subsequent evolution of modern dance find an echo in the assimilative nature of America as a nation itself. It is a land of immigrants that has drawn and continues to draw from outside yet manages to adapt these influences to make them uniquely American. The exotic nature of St. Denis's dances was partly the reason for their success as well as for their eventual fading out of public consciousness. Would American modern dance such as it is be any different had Ruth St. Denis followed at least to some degree the principles of East Indian dance? It is difficult to say. But it wouldn't be wrong to say that modern dance had one its initial stirrings in Ruth St. Denis's "Radha", "Incense" and "Nautch".

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