

ANTAGONISTIC CHARACTERS IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE: PERFORMANCE, SYMBOLISM, AND AESTHETICS

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Abstract

Antagonistic characters occupy a crucial place in Indian classical dance as they generate dramatic tension, define moral contrast, and deepen the aesthetic experience of performance. Across traditions such as Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Odissi, Mohiniyattam, and Yakshagana, these characters are not merely “villains” in a modern narrative sense; rather, they are carefully constructed embodiments of bhāva, rasa, and symbolic conflict. Their presentation draws on the interrelated languages of abhinaya, gesture (mudrā), facial expression, costume, makeup, rhythm, and music to produce a layered performance that can evoke fear, disgust, wonder, irony, or tragic intensity. Classical treatises such as the Nāṭyaśāstra and Abhinaya Darpana provide the conceptual basis for this performance grammar, where oppositional characters help illuminate the relationship between virtue and vice, order and chaos, devotion and ego, or dharma and adharma. In regional

performance traditions, antagonistic figures also reflect local social memory, ritual worldviews, and cultural attitudes toward power, gender, and embodiment. This article examines the meaning, classification, and performance of antagonistic characters in Indian classical dance, arguing that they are central to both dramaturgy and aesthetics. It further shows how these characters have evolved through modernization, stage adaptation, and global presentation, while retaining their symbolic force in the performance ecology of Indian dance.

Keywords: Indian classical dance, antagonistic characters, abhinaya, rasa, nāṭyaśāstra, abhinaya darpana, Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, symbolism, aesthetics.

Introduction

Indian classical dance is not only a medium of grace and spiritual expression but also a highly structured dramatic art. Within its narrative world, antagonistic characters perform an essential function by creating

conflict, testing values, and intensifying emotional response. These characters may appear as demons, kings, arrogant men, jealous rivals, cruel queens, tyrants, or unrighteous forces, depending on the story and genre. Their portrayal is central to the dramatic and aesthetic logic of the performance because they make visible the struggle between opposed moral and cosmic principles.

In classical Indian thought, performance is never limited to imitation; it is a crafted experience of meaning. The stage becomes a space where the audience not only watches action but also experiences emotion through the performer's body, expression, and rhythm. The antagonistic character is therefore significant not simply as a negative figure, but as a device through which the dance clarifies ethical and aesthetic contrasts. The power of such characters lies in the way they are stylized, codified, and symbolically charged rather than psychologically "realistic" in a modern theatrical sense.

Review of Literature

Scholarship on Indian dance aesthetics consistently emphasizes the centrality of *rasa*, *bhāva*, and *abhinaya* in performance. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* remains foundational in understanding dramatic representation, while the *Abhinaya Darpana* provides a practical vocabulary for gesture and expression. Contemporary scholarship also highlights how Indian dance is shaped by social, political, and historical forces, especially caste, gender, colonial modernity.

Research on Bharatanatyam and related forms has shown that performance is never neutral; it is embedded in moral, devotional, and social codes. Studies of Kathakali are especially useful for understanding antagonistic characters because its makeup system and character taxonomy explicitly distinguish noble, heroic, demonic, and forest-based types through color and facial design. Broader scholarship on Indian dance criticism also demonstrates that aesthetic judgment often emerges through embodied spectatorship and not only textual description. Together, these works suggest that antagonistic characters should be studied as aesthetic constructions, symbolic agents, and social mirrors rather than as simple plot devices.

Research Aim

To examine the role of antagonistic characters in Indian classical dance as aesthetic, symbolic, and performative entities across major dance traditions.

Objectives

- To define antagonistic characters in the context of Indian classical dance.
- To classify their major types and narrative functions.
- To analyze their performance techniques through *abhinaya*, *mudra*, body language, costume, makeup, music, and rhythm.
- To explore their symbolic meanings using the frameworks of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpana*.

- To compare their representation across Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Odissi, Mohiniyattam, and Yakshagana.
- To assess their social and cultural significance in historical and contemporary contexts.

Hypotheses

1. Antagonistic characters in Indian classical dance are primarily symbolic constructions that embody moral and cosmic opposition.
2. Their effectiveness depends on the integrated use of gesture, facial expression, costume, music, and rhythm.
3. Different classical dance forms represent antagonistic characters in distinct regional and aesthetic styles, though they share a common dramaturgical foundation.
4. The portrayal of antagonistic characters reflects changing social values, including shifting ideas of gender, power, and devotion.

Meaning and Concept

Antagonistic characters may be understood as those figures in a dance narrative who oppose the protagonist or the moral order represented within the performance. They include demons, villains, arrogant rulers, jealous rivals, deceptive women, oppressive kings, and destructive forces. However, the Indian classical framework does not reduce them to moral absolutism. Instead, they often function

as carriers of rasa—especially raudra (anger), bhayanaka (terror), bibhatsa (disgust), and sometimes vira (heroic opposition) when conflict is valorized through struggle.

In the classical system, the antagonistic character is an aesthetic instrument. It enables the performer to display technical mastery, while allowing the audience to experience emotional and ethical opposition in stylized form. Thus, evil on stage is not merely condemned; it is transformed into dramatic energy.

Classification of Characters

Antagonistic characters in Indian classical dance may be classified as follows:

- Mythological antagonists: Ravana, Kamsa, Duryodhana, Putana, sisupala.
- Demonic or supernatural beings: asuras, rakshasas, pisacas, and other threatening entities.
- Royal antagonists: proud kings, violent rulers, or unjust authorities.
- Social antagonists: jealous rivals, deceptive courtiers, scheming companions, or oppressive figures.
- Psychological antagonists: ego, arrogance, greed, lust, and cruelty personified in narrative form.
- Gendered antagonists: seductive, manipulative, or morally ambivalent female characters in certain dance dramas, often shaped by patriarchal narrative structures.

In some forms, character classification is highly codified. Kathakali, for instance, distinguishes types through makeup categories that signal nobility, villainy, or ferocity. In other forms like Bharatanatyam or Odissi, classification is often more narrative and expressive than mask-based.

Characteristics of Characters

Antagonistic characters typically exhibit the following features:

- Exaggerated facial expression to show anger, pride, greed, or cruelty.
- Sharp and forceful gesture patterns.
- Strong rhythmic attack and dynamic movement quality.
- Larger-than-life presence through costume, stance, and eye movement.
- Distinctive costume colors or symbolic accessories.
- Use of stillness, sudden movement, and dramatic pauses to heighten menace.
- Musical cues that underline tension, conflict, or suspense.

These features make the antagonistic character immediately legible to the audience. The character is not subtle in a realist sense, but highly stylized in a classical sense.

Performance Techniques

Abhinaya

Abhinaya is the core expressive system through which antagonistic characters are rendered visible. The dancer conveys emotion through *angika* (body), *vacika* (speech/sound), *aharya* (costume/ornament),

and *sattvika* (inner emotional intensity). Antagonistic roles require precise control over all four modes, especially intense eyes, angular movement, and authoritative gesture.

Mudras

Mudrās function as visual signs that can indicate threat, attack, command, or derision. The same gesture may take different meaning depending on context, but in antagonistic scenes, hand language often sharpens narrative clarity and moral contrast.

Body Language

The body of the antagonistic character often uses grounded steps, turned-out stances, expanded chest, and forceful direction changes. In Kathakali and Yakshagana, body weight and spatial dominance are especially important. In Bharatanatyam and Odissi, controlled but vivid poses communicate hostility or arrogance through sculptural form.

Costume and Makeup

Costume and makeup are essential to character recognition. Kathakali offers the clearest system, where color and facial design identify character categories such as noble, fierce, or evil. In Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi, antagonistic roles are often marked by dramatic costume contrast, jewelry, and headgear, while in Yakshagana vivid face painting and costume exaggeration intensify the demonic or forceful presence.

Music and Rhythm

Music and rhythm help shape antagonistic energy. Faster tempo, percussion accents, and abrupt rhythmic breaks can suggest aggression or danger. In contrast, slower passages may intensify suspense before the antagonistic action erupts. The relationship between rhythm and emotional effect is crucial to the performance of conflict in classical dance.

Symbolism and Aesthetics

The symbolic function of antagonistic characters lies in their role within the larger architecture of rasa. The Nāṭyaśāstra does not treat conflict as a weakness in performance; rather, it recognizes drama as structured around emotional transformation. Antagonists stimulate powerful audience response, allowing the performance to move beyond plot into aesthetic experience. ebooks.inflibnet.ac+1.

From an aesthetic perspective, these characters are often not “realistic” but emblematic. A demon is not just a demon; he may symbolize ignorance, desire, disorder, or cosmic imbalance. A cruel king may symbolize unjust power, while a jealous rival may represent social fracture or moral blindness. The audience experiences these figures as part of a symbolic universe in which good and evil are stylized into visible form. This is especially true in forms such as Kathakali, where makeup and facial color encode moral and narrative identity.

Form-wise Representation Bharatanatyam

In Bharatanatyam, antagonistic characters are usually rendered through expressive abhinaya rather than mask-like makeup. Dancers rely on eye movement, eyebrow tension, posture, and rhythmic stamping to suggest pride, anger, or deception. Characters from epics and devotional literature are often shown in relation to divine or moral opposition.

Kathakali

Kathakali provides the most elaborate taxonomy of antagonistic character types. Facial makeup, beard style, color, and costume clearly mark villainous or demonic figures, making moral identity visible from a distance. The form’s highly codified system allows antagonism to become both theatrical and ritualized.

Kuchipudi

Kuchipudi often presents antagonistic roles in dance-drama narratives, especially in mythological works. The performance tends to combine speech, song, and dance, allowing antagonistic characters to appear witty, dramatic, and socially charged. Conflict is often framed through the dramatic exchange of dialogue and gesture.

Kathak

Kathak presents antagonistic figures more through narrative interpolation, expressive footwork, and mime. In courtly and devotional contexts, antagonists may

appear as kings, demons, or rivals in stories drawn from epic and bhakti traditions. The emphasis is often on narrative speed and interpretive refinement.

Odissi

In Odissi, antagonistic characters are frequently integrated into lyrical and sculptural storytelling. The form's aesthetic softness can make antagonistic force appear through contrast: stillness against motion, delicacy against aggression, or devotional poise against narrative rupture.

Mohiniyattam

Mohiniyattam generally emphasizes grace and fluidity, so antagonistic characters are less frequently central than in Kathakali or Yakshagana. When they appear, they are often rendered through narrative contrast rather than overt physical aggression.

Yakshagana

Yakshagana foregrounds dramatic excess, vivid costume, and powerful speech-inflected performance. Antagonistic characters are often loud, visually intense, and morally charged, making them indispensable to the genre's public and theatrical energy.

Social and Cultural Significance

Antagonistic characters are culturally important because they translate abstract ethical ideas into embodied performance. They help audiences negotiate questions of dharma, authority, temptation, justice, and communal identity. In many cases, they also reflect social fears and political anxieties, such

as the abuse of power, the threat of disorder, or the breakdown of social norms.

At another level, these figures reveal how Indian classical dance organizes gender and hierarchy. Some antagonistic roles are masculinized through forceful movement, while others are feminized through seduction or moral ambiguity. This means antagonistic characters can also be read as historical records of how society imagines danger, power, and difference.

Evolution of Characters

The portrayal of antagonistic characters has changed with modernization, proscenium staging, and global circulation. In early ritual and temple-based or folk-classical contexts, such characters were deeply tied to religious and communal performance. In modern stage productions, they became more polished, compressed, and sometimes psychologically nuanced. Contemporary choreographers also reinterpret antagonists through feminist, caste-aware, or political lenses, making them less one-dimensional and more critically layered.

At the same time, the visual grammar of antagonism remains powerful. Even when the narrative changes, the audience still recognizes the moral and symbolic weight of these characters through expressive conventions inherited from classical theory.

Discussion

Antagonistic characters are central to Indian classical dance because they activate the dramatic architecture of performance.

They are not simply “negative roles,” but aesthetic engines that make virtue visible, sharpen audience emotion, and intensify narrative meaning. Their representation demonstrates the unique power of Indian dance to combine ethical storytelling with sensory beauty.

The analysis also shows that classical dance is not static. Each form adapts the antagonistic figure according to its own aesthetic priorities, whether through makeup, mime, rhythm, or spectacle. This flexibility explains why antagonistic characters continue to matter in both traditional and contemporary performance cultures. They remain one of the clearest ways in which classical dance connects narrative, emotion, and symbolism.

Conclusion

Antagonistic characters occupy a central position in the dramatic and aesthetic framework of Indian classical dance. Their significance extends far beyond the conventional notion of the “villain,” as they function as essential agents of conflict, transformation, and moral inquiry within dance narratives. Rooted in the principles of the *Natyasastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana*, these characters enrich the expressive possibilities of classical dance by providing performers with opportunities to explore a wide spectrum of emotions (*bhavas*) and aesthetic experiences (*rasas*). Through carefully codified techniques of *abhinaya*, gesture (*mudra*), facial expression, costume, makeup, music, and rhythmic movement, antagonistic characters

become powerful embodiments of arrogance, greed, jealousy, anger, pride, deception, and the abuse of power.

The study demonstrates that antagonistic characters are indispensable in maintaining the dramatic structure of Indian classical dance. They create the necessary tension that enables the audience to appreciate the triumph of righteousness (*dharma*) over unrighteousness (*adharma*). Rather than portraying evil as an isolated phenomenon, classical dance presents antagonistic figures as symbolic representations of universal human weaknesses and social conflicts. Their presence reinforces ethical values while encouraging audiences to reflect upon the consequences of destructive behaviour, excessive ambition, ego, and moral decline.

Across major classical dance traditions—including Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Odissi, Mohiniyattam, and Yakshagana—the portrayal of antagonistic characters reflects remarkable regional diversity while remaining firmly grounded in shared classical aesthetics. Kathakali employs an elaborate system of colour symbolism, facial makeup, and codified body language to distinguish heroic and villainous characters, whereas Bharatanatyam and Odissi rely primarily on nuanced *abhinaya* and sculptural movement vocabulary. Kuchipudi integrates dramatic dialogue with expressive dance, Kathak emphasizes interpretative storytelling and rhythmic virtuosity, Mohiniyattam presents antagonistic forces through subtle narrative contrast, and Yakshagana heightens dramatic

impact through elaborate costumes, vigorous movements, and theatrical spectacle. These variations demonstrate the adaptability of Indian classical dance in communicating complex moral and psychological narratives while preserving its traditional aesthetic principles.

The research further reveals that antagonistic characters possess profound symbolic significance. They represent not only individual moral failings but also broader social, cultural, political, and philosophical concerns. Figures such as Ravana, Duryodhana, Kamsa, Shakuni, Hiranyakashipu, and Keechaka continue to resonate because they embody timeless struggles between justice and injustice, humility and arrogance, compassion and cruelty, wisdom and ignorance. Their portrayal enables audiences to engage with ethical dilemmas that remain relevant across historical periods and contemporary society.

In addition, the evolution of antagonistic characters illustrates the dynamic nature of Indian classical dance. While traditional performances emphasized mythological and religious narratives, contemporary choreographers increasingly reinterpret these characters through perspectives of gender studies, social justice, political criticism, environmental ethics, and psychological complexity. Such reinterpretations demonstrate that classical dance is a living tradition capable of responding to changing cultural realities without compromising its artistic integrity. Modern productions often portray antagonists

as multidimensional individuals shaped by social circumstances, thereby encouraging audiences to engage critically with issues of power, identity, inequality, and human behaviour.

From an educational perspective, the study highlights the importance of antagonistic roles in dance training. Performing these characters demands exceptional technical precision, emotional intelligence, interpretative skill, and mastery of abhinaya. Through the portrayal of complex personalities, dancers develop a deeper understanding of character construction, emotional transformation, and dramatic communication. Consequently, antagonistic roles contribute significantly to the holistic development of performers while preserving the narrative richness of India's classical dance heritage.

Ultimately, antagonistic characters remain indispensable to the expressive, symbolic, and philosophical dimensions of Indian classical dance. Their continued presence across diverse dance traditions demonstrates that classical performance is not solely concerned with beauty and devotion but also with conflict, transformation, ethical reflection, and the exploration of human nature. By embodying the eternal struggle between opposing forces, these characters enrich the aesthetic experience of performance and reaffirm the enduring relevance of Indian classical dance as a profound artistic, cultural, and intellectual tradition. Future research may further explore comparative representations of antagonistic characters across Asian

performance traditions, interdisciplinary approaches combining psychology and performance studies, and contemporary choreographic innovations that continue to redefine the role of antagonism in classical dance.

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