

Grace Has No Gender: Rethinking Masculinity and Femininity in Odissi

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the presumed naturalness of gendered movement within Odissi, arguing that the discipline's association of particular gestures, costumes and expressive registers with masculinity or femininity constitutes a culturally produced convention rather than a biological given. Employing Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the paper traces how femininity became inscribed upon Odissi through the devotional Mahari tradition, while the Gotipua tradition—in which young male dancers embodied the same feminine-coded vocabulary—evidences that such qualities are constituted through repetition rather than inherent to female embodiment. It further considers how colonial-era codification consolidated these distinctions, and how contemporary practitioners increasingly destabilise them through cross-gender portrayals and revised costuming. Informed by the author's own training, the paper concludes that strength and grace operate as complementary, not oppositional, artistic competencies.

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Gotipua Tradition, Indian Classical Dance, Odissi, Judith Butler

1. Introduction

Indian classical dance has long been recognised not only as an artistic tradition but also as a cultural institution through which societies express and reproduce ideas about identity, religion, power and gender. Among India's eight recognised classical dance forms, Odissi occupies a unique position because of its deep historical association with devotion, temple worship and storytelling. Originating in the eastern state of Odisha, the dance form combines intricate footwork, expressive facial gestures, sculptural postures and lyrical movements that have evolved over centuries. While Odissi is celebrated for its aesthetic beauty and spiritual significance, it also provides an important lens through which to examine the construction and performance of gender. The dance demonstrates how cultural traditions do not merely reflect social norms but actively participate in creating, reinforcing and sometimes challenging them.

This paper explores the relationship between gender and Odissi by examining three interconnected aspects of the dance. First, it analyses how Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain that the association between particular bodily movements and gender is not natural or biologically determined but socially constructed through repeated performance. Second, it examines how costume, appearance and visual presentation reinforce normative understandings of masculinity and femininity within classical dance traditions. Finally, it argues that although many gestures and movements in Odissi have historically been associated with either femininity or masculinity, contemporary dancers increasingly challenge these conventions by demonstrating that artistic expression transcends biological sex. Drawing upon sociological theory alongside my own experiences as an Odissi dancer, I argue that it is precisely this flexibility and ambiguity that allows one of India's oldest classical dance traditions to remain meaningful within an increasingly diverse and evolving society.

2. Historical Foundations of Gender in Odissi

For centuries, Indian classical dance has been shaped by social norms that associated specific bodily movements, facial expressions and aesthetic qualities with either femininity or masculinity. These associations did not arise naturally from the movements themselves. Rather, they developed through cultural traditions, religious practices, historical institutions and patriarchal ideas regarding how men and women were expected to behave within society. Dance therefore functions not merely as entertainment or artistic expression but also as a mechanism through which social expectations surrounding gender are transmitted across generations. Through repeated training, public performances and institutional practices, dancers learn not only choreography but also culturally accepted ways of embodying masculinity and femininity.

2.1 The Mahari Tradition and the Construction of Femininity

Historically, Odissi originated in the temples of Odisha, particularly in connection with the worship of Lord Jagannath at the Jagannath Temple in Puri [1]. Early forms of the dance were performed by the Maharis, women who dedicated their lives to temple service through ritual dance and music. Unlike performers in a theatrical setting, the Maharis danced primarily as an act of devotion (bhakti), believing that movement itself could become a form of worship. Their performances emphasised fluidity, delicacy, emotional depth and expressive storytelling. Graceful torso movements, subtle facial expressions and gentle transitions between poses gradually became associated not only with devotional practice but also with broader cultural ideals of femininity. As these performances became institutionalised, the characteristics embodied by the Maharis were increasingly interpreted as naturally feminine. Qualities such as gentleness, modesty, patience, emotional sensitivity and self-restraint became closely linked with the visual language of Odissi. However, these associations reflected prevailing social

expectations about women's roles rather than any inherent quality of the movements themselves. In other words, society projected its understanding of femininity onto the dance, transforming culturally specific behaviours into seemingly natural expressions of womanhood.

2.2 The Gotipua Tradition and the Fluidity of Gender

Alongside the Mahari tradition developed another equally significant performance tradition—the Gotipuas. Unlike the Maharis, Gotipuas were young boys who dressed in feminine costumes and performed many of the same choreographic techniques that characterised temple dance [2]. They wore elaborate jewellery, flowers, makeup and traditional attire while mastering graceful postures, expressive facial gestures and delicate body movements that audiences identified as feminine. Although biologically male, these dancers convincingly embodied feminine characters through disciplined training and repeated performance. The existence of the Gotipua tradition presents an important challenge to essentialist understandings of gender. If young boys could successfully perform movements considered feminine, then femininity cannot be understood as something that naturally emerges from the female body. Instead, it becomes evident that gendered behaviour is learned, rehearsed and socially recognised. The Gotipua tradition therefore demonstrates that what audiences interpret as feminine is often the result of sustained cultural training rather than biological identity. This historical reality complicates contemporary assumptions that Odissi has always been an exclusively feminine dance form. Instead, its own history reveals that gender within Odissi has long been fluid, negotiated and performed. Despite this historical complexity, public perceptions of Odissi gradually shifted over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

2.3 Colonial Codification and Costume as a Marker of Gender

During the revival and codification of Indian classical dance following colonial rule, efforts were made to standardise choreography, pedagogy and performance practices [2]. While this process contributed significantly to preserving Odissi as a recognised classical tradition, it also reinforced increasingly rigid distinctions between masculine and feminine styles of performance. Female dancers were encouraged to embody elegance, restraint and emotional expressiveness, whereas male dancers were expected to emphasise physical strength, heroism, authority and vigour. Mythological roles likewise became increasingly gendered, with women frequently portraying Radha or other female devotees while men predominantly represented Krishna, Shiva or heroic kings. These distinctions extended beyond choreography into costume and visual representation. Female dancers traditionally wear brightly coloured silk sarees, elaborate silver filigree jewellery, flowers, traditional makeup and carefully arranged hairstyles that collectively symbolise beauty, grace and refinement. Male dancers generally perform in dhotis with comparatively minimal ornamentation, costumes that emphasise muscularity, discipline and

physical presence rather than decorative elegance. Such visual differences are often interpreted as natural reflections of masculinity and femininity. From a sociological perspective, however, they are better understood as culturally produced symbols that communicate socially accepted gender identities to audiences before a performance even begins.

The relationship between costume and gender becomes particularly significant when examined through sociology. Clothing is never simply functional; it communicates identity, status and social expectations. Costumes therefore become symbols through which audiences immediately categorise performers according to culturally recognised notions of masculinity and femininity. These visual markers influence not only how audiences interpret performances but also how dancers understand themselves within the tradition. By repeatedly presenting particular costumes alongside particular movements and characters, Odissi contributes to the broader social process of gender socialisation.

The historical development of Odissi therefore demonstrates that ideas of femininity and masculinity have never existed independently of cultural institutions. Rather, they have been continually shaped through religion, tradition, education and performance. Dance functions as both a reflection of society and a participant in constructing social reality. The body becomes a site upon which cultural meanings are written, repeated and transmitted across generations. Understanding this relationship between movement and gender provides the foundation for examining Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which offers one of the most influential explanations of how gender itself is socially produced rather than biologically determined.

3. Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity

3.1 Gender as the Repeated Stylization of the Body

The historical development of Odissi demonstrates that ideas of femininity and masculinity have never existed independently of culture. Rather, they have been shaped through religion, education, social institutions and artistic traditions that continually reproduce particular understandings of gender. To understand how these meanings become attached to the body, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers one of the most influential sociological and feminist frameworks. Butler argues that gender is not a fixed biological reality but a social process that is continually created through repeated actions, behaviours and performances [3]. Her work fundamentally challenges the assumption that characteristics traditionally associated with men and women are natural or universal. Instead, she suggests that these characteristics are learned, repeated and reinforced until they appear innate.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler questions the long-standing distinction between biological sex

and social gender. Traditional feminist theory often argues that while biological sex is determined by anatomy, gender consists of the cultural expectations that societies attach to being male or female. Butler extends this argument further by suggesting that even what societies understand as “natural” sex cannot be separated entirely from culture because our understanding of bodies is itself shaped by language, institutions and social discourse [3]. Consequently, she argues that gender is not an expression of an inner identity but something that individuals continuously produce through repeated acts. One of Butler's most influential statements is that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body” [3, p. 33]. This idea lies at the centre of her theory of gender performativity. According to Butler, people are not born performing masculinity or femininity. Instead, from childhood they learn how society expects them to move, speak, dress, behave and interact with others. These behaviours are repeated every day until they become so familiar that they appear natural both to the individual and to society. Gender therefore functions less as a personal identity than as a social performance that is continually reproduced through repetition. Importantly, Butler distinguishes performativity from performance. A performance generally suggests a conscious act in which an individual deliberately assumes a role before an audience. Performativity, however, refers to the unconscious repetition of social norms that gradually construct identity itself. Individuals do not simply choose to perform gender in the same way an actor chooses to play a character on stage. Rather, they are born into societies where particular forms of behaviour are already recognised as appropriately masculine or feminine. Through family life, education, religion, media and cultural institutions, these behaviours are reinforced until they become accepted as ordinary and unquestioned [4].

3.2 Odissi as Embodied Performativity

Dance provides one of the clearest illustrations of Butler's theory because it centres upon disciplined bodily practice. Every Odissi dancer spends years learning the correct posture, movement, expression and gesture through continuous rehearsal. The body is carefully trained until movements become instinctive rather than consciously controlled. Butler would argue that this process mirrors the broader social construction of gender itself. Just as dancers repeatedly practise choreography until it feels natural, societies repeatedly teach gendered behaviours until masculinity and femininity appear to arise spontaneously from the body. This perspective encourages us to question why certain movements in Odissi are labelled as feminine while others are considered masculine. Graceful torso movements, delicate wrist articulations, soft facial expressions and lyrical transitions are frequently associated with femininity, whereas broader stances, forceful footwork and commanding expressions are commonly interpreted as masculine. Yet there is nothing biologically feminine about grace, nor biologically masculine about strength. These meanings exist because generations of dancers, teachers, choreographers and audiences

have repeatedly interpreted such movements through culturally established gender norms. Through centuries of repetition, these interpretations have acquired the status of tradition and consequently appear self-evident. From Butler's perspective, this process demonstrates that movement itself possesses no inherent gender. Instead, gendered meanings are assigned to movement through cultural interpretation. The body does not naturally communicate masculinity or femininity; rather, societies teach audiences how to interpret particular gestures as signs of one gender or another. The same movement can therefore signify different things depending upon the historical period, cultural context or performance tradition in which it appears.

3.3 Revisiting the Mahari and Gotipua through Butler's Lens

This insight is particularly significant for Odissi because its own history reveals that identical choreographic vocabularies have been performed by both women and men at different moments in time. The Mahari and Gotipua traditions discussed earlier provide compelling historical evidence supporting Butler's argument. The Maharis came to embody an idealised vision of devotional femininity through centuries of ritual performance, while the Gotipuas demonstrated that young boys could convincingly perform those same movements after undergoing rigorous training. Their success depended not upon biological sex but upon disciplined repetition, technical mastery and cultural understanding. Butler's theory helps explain this phenomenon by suggesting that femininity was never contained within the body of the Mahari herself. Rather, it was produced through repeated gestures, costumes, expressions and practices that could equally be learned by another performer. Consequently, the Gotipua tradition challenges essentialist assumptions that women naturally possess qualities such as grace, delicacy or emotional sensitivity. Instead, these characteristics emerge as culturally valued forms of bodily expression that can be acquired through education and rehearsal. The historical existence of male dancers performing conventionally feminine roles therefore demonstrates that gender within Odissi has always been more fluid than contemporary stereotypes often suggest. Rather than contradicting Butler's theory, the history of Odissi provides a striking illustration of her central claim that gender is socially produced through repeated bodily acts rather than biologically predetermined.

4. Personal Reflections: Training, the Guru and the Body

While Judith Butler's theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the social construction of gender, its significance becomes even clearer when viewed through lived experience. As an Odissi dancer, I have been trained within a classical tradition that places great emphasis on discipline, precision and the preservation of cultural heritage. Every movement is practised repeatedly until it becomes instinctive, and every performance requires careful attention to posture, rhythm, facial expression and emotional interpretation. Through this training, I have gradually realised that the techniques themselves are not inherently masculine or

feminine. Instead, it is society that assigns gendered meanings to particular movements and forms of expression. My experience as both a dancer and a sociology student has therefore led me to question many of the assumptions surrounding gender within classical dance.

When I first began learning Odissi, my primary concern was mastering technique rather than understanding its sociological implications. Like every beginner, I focused on developing balance, flexibility, rhythm and coordination while learning the basic postures and movements that form the foundation of the dance. Only later, through studying sociology, did I begin to recognise that these movements carried meanings extending beyond artistic performance. Certain gestures were repeatedly described as graceful, delicate or elegant, while others were characterised as powerful, commanding or heroic. Although these descriptions initially appeared to be purely aesthetic, I gradually realised that they reflected wider cultural assumptions about femininity and masculinity. This observation closely reflects Butler's argument that gender is produced through the repeated performance of socially recognised behaviours rather than through biological difference [4].

4.1 Repetition, Nature and the Illusion of Innateness

In Odissi, dancers spend years rehearsing specific bodily movements until they appear completely natural. However, what becomes natural is not only the choreography itself but also the cultural meanings attached to those movements. The repeated association of softness with femininity and strength with masculinity gradually creates the illusion that these qualities naturally belong to women and men respectively. Butler argues that this process of repetition gives gender its apparent stability. Society mistakes repetition for nature, forgetting that what appears innate has actually been learned through continuous practice [3].

4.2 The Guru's Role and Shared Technical Foundations

Reflecting upon my own training, I have become increasingly aware that every dancer, regardless of gender, is expected to master exactly the same technical foundations. Every student must develop physical strength, stamina, flexibility, precision, balance and expressive control. Executing a chowk posture requires considerable muscular endurance, while maintaining fluid torso movements demands flexibility and coordination. Likewise, expressive storytelling through abhinaya requires emotional intelligence, concentration and subtle control of facial muscles. None of these skills belong exclusively to either men or women. They are artistic abilities acquired through discipline, patience and sustained practice. This raises an important sociological question: if every dancer develops the same physical and expressive abilities, why are some movements still described as masculine while others are considered feminine?

Butler's theory suggests that the answer lies not within the body itself but within the cultural

frameworks through which bodies are interpreted. Societies classify behaviours according to existing gender norms and then encourage individuals to reproduce those behaviours through education, family life, religion and cultural institutions. Dance schools become one of many spaces where these expectations are transmitted, consciously or unconsciously, from one generation to the next. The role of the guru is particularly significant within this process. In Indian classical dance traditions, the guru is not merely an instructor of technique but also a custodian of cultural values and artistic conventions. Through years of training, students learn not only how to move but also how particular movements should be understood and embodied. Choreography, corrections, performance feedback and even the selection of repertoire can subtly reinforce expectations regarding how male and female dancers ought to present themselves. While these practices are often intended to preserve tradition, Butler's work encourages us to ask whether they also contribute to reproducing gender norms that have become accepted through historical repetition rather than artistic necessity [2].

4.3 Strength and Grace: Complementary, Not Opposed

At the same time, my own experience has shown that these expectations are neither absolute nor unchangeable. Throughout my training, I have performed movements requiring both physical power and emotional sensitivity. A single choreography may demand forceful footwork followed immediately by delicate facial expressions and moments of profound vulnerability. At no point have these transitions felt contradictory. Instead, they reveal that qualities commonly labelled as masculine and feminine coexist naturally within every performer. Rather than existing as opposites, strength and grace complement one another, allowing the dancer to communicate a wider emotional and narrative range. This understanding has fundamentally changed the way I interpret Odissi. I no longer view grace as an exclusively feminine quality or strength as an exclusively masculine one. Instead, I understand both as artistic tools that every dancer must cultivate. Butler's theory reinforces this interpretation by arguing that gender categories exist only because societies continually reproduce them through repeated acts [3]. If dancers begin to perform outside these conventional expectations, those categories themselves become open to question. Dance therefore possesses the potential not only to reflect society but also to challenge it.

One aspect of Butler's work that I find particularly compelling is her argument that repetition creates the possibility for change. Because gender depends upon repeated performances, it is never completely fixed or permanent. Every new performance carries the possibility of altering established meanings [3].

This idea resonates strongly with my own experiences in contemporary Odissi, where dancers increasingly move beyond traditional gender boundaries without diminishing either the technical

integrity or cultural authenticity of the dance. Female dancers confidently portray heroic male characters such as Krishna, Shiva or Arjuna, while male dancers perform emotionally expressive devotional roles traditionally associated with female performers. These interpretations do not weaken the tradition; instead, they reveal the remarkable flexibility of its expressive language.

As I have continued my training, I have become increasingly convinced that the true essence of Odissi lies not in preserving rigid gender roles but in preserving the dance's extraordinary capacity for storytelling, devotion and emotional expression. The technical vocabulary of Odissi is capable of communicating courage, compassion, longing, anger, joy and spiritual devotion regardless of the biological sex of the performer. It is the dancer's interpretation, discipline and emotional sincerity—not their gender—that ultimately determines the success of a performance. From this perspective, my own experience supports Butler's broader sociological argument that identity is continuously constructed through social interaction rather than simply inherited through biology. Every rehearsal, every performance and every interaction between dancer, guru and audience contributes to shaping how gender is understood within the tradition. Yet because these meanings are socially produced, they also remain open to reinterpretation. This realisation has transformed not only the way I dance but also the way I understand the relationship between culture, identity and the body. Rather than seeing Odissi as a dance that simply reflects traditional gender roles, I now view it as a dynamic cultural practice capable of preserving its heritage while simultaneously encouraging more inclusive understandings of gender and artistic expression.

5. Contemporary Reinterpretations of Gender in Odissi

The application of Judith Butler's theory to Odissi demonstrates that gender within classical dance is neither fixed nor biologically determined but continually negotiated through performance. If gender is produced through repeated social practices, then it follows that changing those practices has the potential to transform the meanings attached to them. Contemporary Odissi increasingly illustrates this possibility. While the dance remains deeply rooted in centuries of religious, cultural and artistic tradition, modern performers, choreographers and teachers are reinterpreting many of its gendered conventions in ways that preserve its classical foundations while making it more inclusive and reflective of contemporary understandings of identity.

5.1 Cross-Gender Role Portrayals

One of the most significant developments in recent decades has been the growing willingness of dancers to perform roles traditionally associated with another gender. Historically, male dancers were expected to portray heroic figures such as Krishna, Shiva or royal warriors, while female

dancers most often performed characters such as Radha, the Gopis or other female devotees. These conventions reflected broader social assumptions about masculinity and femininity rather than any technical requirement of the dance itself. Today, however, these boundaries are becoming increasingly fluid. Female dancers regularly portray powerful male deities with conviction and authority, while male dancers perform emotionally expressive devotional pieces that emphasise tenderness, longing and vulnerability. Such performances challenge the belief that certain emotions or bodily movements belong exclusively to one gender. From Butler's perspective, these changing performance practices reveal the instability of gender norms. If audiences can accept a female dancer convincingly portraying Shiva or a male dancer embodying Radha's emotional devotion, then the relationship between gender and movement becomes exposed as socially constructed rather than biologically inevitable. Rather than undermining tradition, these performances demonstrate the remarkable adaptability of Odissi's expressive vocabulary. The emotional and spiritual depth of a performance depends upon the dancer's technical mastery, interpretative skill and sincerity rather than upon their biological sex [2]. This shift is particularly significant because dance functions as a form of cultural communication. Performances do not simply entertain audiences; they also shape collective understandings of identity, social roles and acceptable behaviour. Every performance becomes a public representation of cultural values. Consequently, when dancers challenge traditional gender expectations on stage, they also invite audiences to reconsider assumptions that extend beyond the performance itself. Classical dance therefore possesses the capacity not only to reflect society but also to participate in social change by presenting alternative ways of understanding gender.

5.2 Costume and the Negotiation of Tradition

Costume remains one of the most visible sites where these negotiations take place. Traditionally, Odissi costumes have functioned as immediate visual indicators of gender. Female dancers wear brightly coloured silk sarees, elaborate silver jewellery, flowers, waist belts and decorative headpieces, while male dancers generally perform in dhotis with comparatively minimal ornamentation. These conventions communicate gender before a single movement is performed, shaping audience expectations from the very beginning of a performance. However, contemporary choreographers increasingly question whether costume should determine artistic identity. Some productions experiment with simplified or gender-neutral costume designs, while others retain traditional attire but cast performers in roles historically associated with another gender. These innovations suggest that costume functions as a cultural symbol rather than as evidence of an essential identity. Butler argues that clothing is one of many performative acts through which gender is recognised and reproduced [3]. Consequently, altering costume conventions has the potential to disrupt established assumptions about masculinity and femininity without diminishing the artistic integrity of the dance itself.

5.3 Debating Authenticity and Change

At the same time, it is important to recognise that discussions surrounding gender in classical dance are often accompanied by concerns regarding the preservation of tradition. Some scholars and practitioners argue that maintaining established performance conventions is essential for protecting the historical authenticity of Odissi. They contend that classical dance is inseparable from the religious, philosophical and aesthetic principles from which it emerged, and that significant changes risk weakening its cultural identity. These concerns deserve serious consideration because classical traditions survive precisely through the careful transmission of knowledge across generations.

Nevertheless, preserving tradition does not necessarily require preserving every historical social assumption that accompanied it. Cultural traditions have never been completely static. Throughout its history, Odissi has continually evolved in response to changing political, religious and social circumstances. The transition from Mahari temple performances to the Gotipua tradition, the twentieth-century revival movement, the codification of technique and the expansion of international performance communities all demonstrate that adaptation has always been part of Odissi's history. Rather than representing a break from tradition, contemporary reinterpretations continue this long process of cultural evolution. As both an Odissi dancer and a sociology student, I increasingly understand tradition as something that is sustained through dialogue between the past and the present rather than through unchanging preservation.

My own experience has taught me that every dancer develops the same technical discipline regardless of gender. We all spend countless hours refining posture, rhythm, coordination, flexibility, stamina and expressive ability. None of these qualities belongs naturally to men or women. They are artistic skills cultivated through dedication and practice. Studying sociology has encouraged me to question why these shared technical foundations are so often interpreted through gendered language. Why should grace automatically be associated with femininity? Why should power immediately signify masculinity? Throughout my training I have experienced both qualities as inseparable aspects of the same artistic practice. A successful Odissi performance requires physical strength to maintain demanding postures and intricate footwork, while simultaneously requiring emotional sensitivity to communicate the inner lives of mythological and devotional characters. Separating these qualities according to gender oversimplifies both the complexity of dance and the complexity of human identity.

This perspective has transformed the way I approach performance. Rather than viewing myself as reproducing predetermined gender roles, I now see dance as an opportunity to communicate universal human experiences. Emotions such as devotion, love, courage, grief, compassion and resilience cannot be confined within masculine or feminine categories. They belong to every

individual and can therefore be expressed authentically by every dancer. The effectiveness of a performance depends upon artistic interpretation rather than conformity to conventional gender expectations.

6. Limitations and Broader Significance

From a broader sociological perspective, challenging gender stereotypes within Odissi contributes to wider discussions surrounding identity, representation and equality. Cultural practices influence how societies understand themselves. When audiences repeatedly witness performances that move beyond traditional gender expectations, they may gradually begin to question similar assumptions operating within everyday life. Dance therefore becomes more than artistic expression; it becomes a site where social meanings are negotiated, contested and reimagined.

At the same time, Butler's theory should not be accepted without criticism. Some scholars have argued that her emphasis on discourse and performance risks underestimating the influence of material realities such as biological difference, institutional power and structural inequalities [5]. Others suggest that focusing primarily on performativity may overlook the ways in which economic conditions, caste, class and access to cultural institutions shape opportunities within the performing arts. These critiques are valuable because they remind us that gender operates within multiple systems of power rather than through performance alone. Nevertheless, Butler's framework remains particularly effective for analysing dance because dance itself is fundamentally concerned with the disciplined use of the body. Few cultural practices illustrate the relationship between repeated bodily action and social identity as clearly as classical dance.

7. Conclusion

Ultimately, the enduring relevance of Odissi lies in its ability to preserve its rich cultural heritage while remaining open to reinterpretation. Its technical vocabulary has survived for centuries because it has continually adapted to changing historical circumstances without losing its artistic identity. Recognising that movements, costumes and expressive qualities are cultural performances rather than fixed expressions of biological gender does not diminish the tradition; instead, it reveals its remarkable capacity for growth and renewal. As I continue my journey as an Odissi dancer, I increasingly believe that the greatest strength of the dance lies in its ability to transcend categories that society often treats as fixed. Grace should not be understood as feminine, nor strength as masculine. Both qualities coexist within every performer, just as discipline, devotion and creativity transcend biological sex. By embracing this understanding, Odissi can continue to honour its history while fostering a more inclusive vision of artistic expression. It is precisely this openness to reinterpretation that allows one of India's oldest

classical dance traditions to remain meaningful within contemporary society. Rather than simply preserving the past, Odissi demonstrates that tradition is strongest when it possesses the confidence to evolve.

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