

Confronting Orientalism

A Self-Study of Educating through Hindu Dance

Sabrina D. MisirHiralall



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Montclair State University, New Jersey, USA



SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI

A C.I.P. record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: 978-94-6351-189-6 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-94-6351-190-2 (hardback)

ISBN: 978-94-6351-191-9 (e-book)

Published by: Sense Publishers,
P.O. Box 21858,
3001 AW Rotterdam,
The Netherlands
<https://www.sensepublishers.com/>

Printed on acid-free paper

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PRAISE FOR *CONFRONTING ORIENTALISM*

“Through a unique combination of postcolonial theory and self-study, Sabrina MisirHiralall has developed important tools to help educators working in a variety of pedagogical spaces with a range of audiences to decolonize their practices. MisirHiralall uses her own life experiences as a Kuchipudi dance teacher as an entry way into understanding the complex epistemological, ethical, and pedagogical obstacles to overcoming colonizing stereotypes often at work when Westerners approach Hindu traditions. In short, MisirHiralall’s research highlights the role of contemplation and critical-self reflection in creating opportunities for true intercultural relations that respect the epistemologies of traditionally marginalized and stigmatized non-Western religions and cultures. This is essential theoretical and practical research for a multicultural society that is grounded in first-person, lived experience.”

– **Tyson E. Lewis, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Art Education, University of North Texas**

“In her postcolonial self-study of confronting orientalism through Kuchipudi Hindu classical dance pedagogy, Sabrina MisirHiralall responds to Said’s call for cultural connection rather than separation and embraces his conceptualization of the complexities of cultural forms in their hybrid, mixed, and impure states. Using her own unique and hybrid voice through the sharing of her experiences and dance pedagogy practices, she illustrates the postcolonial realities of teaching non-Hindus about Hinduism and Indian culture. Most impressive is that MisirHiralall is walking her talk through a thoughtful and lyrical self-study that is situated in the in-between: between the mind and body, the gaze of the Other and the self, the Eastern and Western worlds, and the fields of dance, religion, philosophy, cultural studies, and teacher education.”

– **Monica Taylor, Ph.D., Professor and Deputy Chair of the Department of Secondary and Special Education, Montclair State University**

“In MisirHiralall’s *Confronting Orientalism*, the reader is gifted with a rare glimpse into a philosopher-educator’s wrestling with her teaching through the medium of Hindu dance. This pedagogical self-study framed in the context of the challenges of postcolonialism is a rigorously argued treatise but also an excellent example of self-study methodology. All who think seriously about the context and impact of their teaching in connection with their core values can benefit from reading of this book.”

– **Michael D. Waggoner, Ph.D., Professor of Postsecondary Education, University of Northern Iowa, Editor of Religion & Education**

Om Satchitananda Rupaaya

*I dedicate this text to the feet of Satchitanand (Supreme Being).
My accomplishments are only through the blessings of Satchitanand.*

Matridevo Bhava

I offer salutations to the feet of my mother.

Pitridevo Bhava

I offer salutations to the feet of my father.

Acharyadevo Bhava

I offer salutations to the feet of my Guru.

Atithidevo Bhava

I offer salutations to the feet of Guests, who are the readers of this text.

– Taittiriya Upanishad

I especially dedicate this text to my father,

Gorak Dat “Hansoo” Misir.

Daddy, may your soul find eternal bliss with Satchitanand.

Thank you for your eternal blessings.

I love you daddy.

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PREFACE

One evening during the Contemporary and Social Philosophy doctoral class that Tyson Lewis taught at Montclair State University, my peers and I were asked to think about final paper topics for the course. I was not sure where to begin. Tyson advised me to begin with who I am, a faith-based Hindu dancer. He told me that I should think about who my family is, who I am, and what that means for me as an educator. From that point, the dissertation journey began. This text develops from my larger dissertation project. Tyson worked diligently with me as my Dissertation Chair on this manuscript. I consider Tyson to be a lifelong mentor as he continues to advise me and helps me to navigate the world of academia.

I am grateful that I was a doctoral student at MSU when the Educational Foundations department collaborated with the then joint Philosophy and Religion Department to staff the Pedagogy and Philosophy doctoral program. I must acknowledge the professors of the Philosophy and Religion Department who helped me to grow as a scholar. They each taught me in a unique manner as I pursued my doctoral studies. I am one of the last graduates of the Pedagogy and Philosophy doctoral program at MSU.

Throughout my journey at MSU and the journey of writing this book, I gained insight into who I am, where I come from, and where I am going. I learned a great deal about myself in relation to my place in the world. As I journeyed from campus to campus and conference to conference to present on Hinduism and dance, I learned that there is a lack of religious diversity across our nation that causes a great deal of misunderstanding. The basic foundational knowledge that I assumed college-aged and middle-aged adults had on Hinduism proved to be missing in most cases. Thus, I came to understand my role in sharing who I am as a faith-based Hindu dancer in higher education.

First, I must seek the blessings of the Supreme Being. Without the blessings of the Divine, I would not be able to move through the journey of life. I also request the blessings of my parents, especially my deceased father whose soul I know blesses me spiritually. In addition, I seek the blessings of my brother, a born Brahman pandit, and my bouji, who is mother-like. I pursue the blessings of my ancestors and of my family members. I seek the blessings of my Guruji (Spiritual Teacher) and Gurumaa.

To continue, I would like to acknowledge the dedication of my Dissertation Committee who provided feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript when it was in the form of a dissertation. Tyson Lewis, my abovementioned Dissertation Chair, worked with me tirelessly on draft after draft of each chapter with the utmost attention. My undergraduate students frequently tell me that they appreciate my work ethic and I tell them that my mentor, Tyson, influences how I work. I would send Tyson a chapter of my dissertation and often within the hour, he would send it

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back to me with intense revisions. He taught me to work efficiently with dedication. In addition, Monica Taylor served on my Dissertation Committee as a self-study research expert. Monica introduced me to the Self-Study of Teaching Practices SIG of the American Education Research Association. Monica helped me to develop my self-study methodology for the dissertation project and beyond. Also, Dorothy Rogers, who at the time was Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Montclair State University, served on my Dissertation Committee. Currently, Dorothy serves as Chair of the now separate Religion Department at MSU. During my time as a graduate student at MSU, I worked closely with Dorothy on several projects. Aside from corresponding and conversing with me in person about my research, Dorothy taught me how to serve as an administrator. Dorothy encouraged me to work with her on several projects such as Women in the Tradition Then and Now (WIT), Philosophy and Religion Club, and the Society for the Study of Women Philosophers (SSWP). In fact, Dorothy invited me to present my first campus-wide lecture and dance presentation at Montclair State University.

Although not on my Dissertation Committee, David Benfield from the then joint Department of Philosophy and Religion was present for my Dissertation Defense. David became a mentor from the time that we met. We spent many hours working on departmental projects together, such as the Philosophy and Religion Club, when I was a graduate student. Throughout writing my dissertation, I would often not know where to start when I was going to write a chapter. I knew what the chapter was going to be about but did not know how to frame it. David would talk to me for at least an hour immediately before I began to draft each chapter. He asked pressing questions to help me gain insight into how to frame my writing. David helped me to develop a sense of confidence as I wrote with ease after conversing with him.

My professors at MSU nurtured me as a scholar and cared for me in a way that I never thought educators at the college level would. I now as a professor maintain a philosophy of education that has roots in my time as a graduate student at Montclair State University. My undergraduate students, who are spread across campuses, develop bonds with each other as scholars and friends. I am very grateful to have such supportive students who look to me as a mentor and help one another. I sincerely care for my students as my professors care for me. It is evident to me through my experience that social harmony can exist when humans learn to care and love one another. On this note, I humbly present to you this text, which I ask that you read critically in the hopes of thinking about moving past the illusionary boundaries of the West and the East and towards a social harmony that acknowledges each other as a part of humanity.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A Postcolonial Self-Study

WHO AM I?

As I emerge from a Supreme Being as a human in this world, I consider it necessary to fulfill my life's purpose, which considers the legacy of my ancestors coupled with future generations of the world. For this reason, it is imperative for me to relate a de-Orientalized pedagogy, as an educator-dancer, that helps humanity to engage in interreligious and intercultural relations. Before I introduce the goals of this project, it is crucial for me to share a brief portion of my narrative to provide some insight on how this endeavor developed. Although some of my experiences were indeed traumatic, these experiences were central to the significance of this venture. Thus, it is vital for me to share these vulnerable experiences to shed light on the urgency of a need for humanistic considerations. This project is linked to humanistic development that is an inevitable reality for individual beings in this world.

After I briefly introduce my personal narrative, I will move on to discuss Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dance. I will then explain Edward Said's (Said, 1999) theory of Orientalism (Said, 1978) as the central concept that informs this project. To this extent, I will relate the questions for this project that develop based on Orientalism. I aim to show how I will confront Orientalism as a Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dancer. It is my hope that this introductory chapter will provide insight on how my identity causes me to realize the urgent need for humanity to think about the essentialness of interreligious and intercultural relations with a de-Orientalized framework in mind.

If asked who am I, I would answer first by saying that I am a child of a Supreme Being. For me, as I think of a Cosmic Father and a Cosmic Mother who are both *Ardhanarishvar* (One), I would say that I am a child of Shivaji (The Śiva-purāṇa, 1969), the Supreme Being in Hinduism who is the Cosmic Father and Durga Devi Ma (Vijnanananda, 1986) who is the Cosmic Mother. This means that everything else beyond being a cosmic human daughter is temporary for this life span. I do not aim to say that I am a celestial being but rather what I am saying is that foremost, I acknowledge that I come from a Supreme Being and hope to merge back to a Supreme Being upon death.¹ I strongly believe that my life has a meaningful purpose that is tied to my ancestry, which is why I was born into the home chosen for me by the Supreme Being.

My temporary life on this earth officially began when I was born on the twenty-sixth of June in Riverside General Hospital, which is now the Meadowlands Hospital,

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in Secaucus, New Jersey. Although, I cannot remember my time in my mother's womb, I do sense that it was spiritually filled. My mother and father prayed often together with my brother as a family. Perhaps this influenced my development from the time I was conceived. My parents are Choondai Misir, also known as "Sona," and Gorak Dat Misir, also known as "Hanso." My elder brother, Pt.² Bhisham Malcolm Misir, who is commonly known as Pt. "Jito," celebrated his birthday on the twentieth of June a few days before I was born.

I am a light-brown-skinned American female of Guyanese and Indian descent with long, black hair, and black eyes. Since I was a teenager, I always weighed about a hundred pounds. As a woman of Guyanese and Indian descent, who is about five feet three inches tall with long black hair, I feel vulnerable to exoticism because the colonial gaze (Hunt & Lessard, 2002) looked upon Indian women as sexual creatures. The Cantonment Act of 1864 (Tambe, 2009) regulated prostitution of Indian women in colonial India. Indian women, who were assigned to serve British soldiers, became the foreign object of the male fantasy. In addition, Asian women are often depicted as exotic in the media today. For this reason, non-Hindus might see me as exotic. I do not use the terms "Hindu" and "non-Hindu" to indicate two absolute binaries. On the contrary, I acknowledge that these terms are cultural distinctions that create a dichotomy. These terms separate humanity into two distinct categories, which I do not endorse. However, for the purposes of this project, I will use these terms to refer to the false categories that developed in the colonial era based on the desire of colonialists to civilize "Hindus" or "non-Christians" to "Christians." Regardless of an individual's religious creed, these distinctions propagate division among humanity. With these illusionary distinctions in mind, I will use the term "Hindu" to refer to those who endorse a way of life according to the sacred religious scriptures of Hinduism such as the *Manu Smriti* (Manu & Sastri, 1952), the *Vedas* (Hinduism, n.d.), the *Ramayana* (Valmiki & Sastri, 1952), the *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana* (Goswami, Sastri, & Prabhupada, 1971), and the *Srimad Devi Bhagavatam* (Vijnanananda, 1992), to name a few, which are essentially ethical guides for humanity. I will use the term "non-Hindu" to refer to those who do not engage in a way of life based on the sacred religious Hindu scriptures. The religious scriptures do not label people as "Hindu" but instead, whether one identifies as "Hindu" or not, individuals who practice a "Hindu" way of life based on the religious scriptures are "Hindu."

When I was two years old, my brother and I were faced with the death of our father who passed away in our residence, which at the time was Thirteen Lord Avenue in Bayonne, New Jersey. We lived near the First Street Park where a body of water flowed. Although I have very few memories of my father, I do remember his presence. Our family always sang Hindu bhajans (religious songs) together with family friends. Oddly enough, I do remember my father's voice and can see him in my mind playing the harmonium (organ) and singing bhajans with my brother playing the dholak (drum). When I pray daily, I feel connected to my father's eternal soul. It is as if he blesses me on a daily basis. I am at peace when I sense this profound connection. I must thank my mother for guiding me to have this

experience. My mother taught me to pray ever since I was in her womb. She is a faith-based Hindu whose devotion to the Supreme Being inspires me. My mother remarried when I was about seven years old. Pooran Hoobraj became a father-figure for me. We spent a great deal of time together when I was a child. He conveyed a father-like love.

Around the age of two, I do remember my brother taking me to the First Street Park everyday in the afternoon, my little tiny hand in his. I could still feel the warm sun gently touch my face as if blessing my brother and me as we walked on the sidewalk. My brother would push me for what seemed like hours on the swings. My brother was my human protector growing up. Once when I was about two years old at Thirteen Lord Avenue, I accidentally fell into a swimming pool in the backyard. I remember climbing onto the wooden deck and trying to get hold of the floating toy in the pool. That's when I fell into the cold, water-filled swimming pool. My mother screamed for my brother since she saw me. My fully clothed brother jumped into the pool with a speed to save my life. I still remember the panicked look of fear on his face, his arms around me, and the firm sound of his scolding voice. As a young child, I never played near the pool without supervision again. I was not scared of the water because my brother was always with me. My brother became a pandit around the age of twenty as he began to intensively study sacred mantras.

My earliest memory with my mother was in daily prayer. During my early years, every day my mother would always have me sit with her to pray. While most babies probably were rocked to sleep with children's lullabies, my mother sang to me in a wooden rocking chair singing Hindu bhajans. I still feel my mother's warm arms around me while she sang to me as if she would give her life to protect me using her faith in the Supreme Being as a shield. I currently sing many of the songs that my mother sang to me when I was a young child. Ironically, when my brother married my bouji (sister-in-law) when I was sixteen and they lived with my parents³ and me for about a year, my bouji would sing Hindu chants to me in the evening before we would go to sleep. Her voice is like the sound of soft, graceful "Devi" (a female Hindu Goddess). Thus, it is quite fitting that her name as a human is "Devimatie." One of the first Hindu chants my bouji sang to me was, "Namah Shivaya Shankara Bam Bhola Baba." (Let us speak the name of Shivaji who is also known as the Cosmic Shankara who dances to the beat of the drum.) It was as if she reminded me that our family came from Ardhanarishvar and will return to Ardhanarishvar upon death. Growing up, wherever my family was, my home always had the sound of a Supreme Being. In fact, even though the family I grew up with has all branched into separate residences, each of our respective homes still has the very same sound and an even stronger presence of a Supreme Being. We all aim to attain moksha (merge back to a Supreme Being) upon our death and reunite as a family in an eternal abode of spiritual bliss. This is part of the reason why I dance Kuchipudi (Suresh, 2003).

I dance Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dance because it is a part of my purpose in this world as a human. This is not something that I chose but rather is what the Supreme Being chose for me. When I hear Kuchipudi music, I hear

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the rhythm of the universe. The sounds are controlled sounds that move through time with the ability to penetrate my pores with the sound of the cosmos. There is a divine energy that I feel in the sounds of the song. As I dance, I wear the sacred Ghungaroos (bells) on my feet, which contribute to the interconnected sound. There is an ambiance of intention for the sounds to accompany particular moods for specific songs. For instance, the drumming and the loud cymbal-like pinging sound in the powerful *Mahishaasura Mardini Stotram* (Śaṅkarācārya, 1994) depicts the divine energy of Durga Devi Maa's thundering wrath, which kills demonic entities. To some who are unfamiliar with Hinduism, this powerful energy might seem frightening. However, to me, the sounds are a melodious reminder that good will always triumph over evil as the world's clock tick-tocks. The divine energy of Durga Devi Maa will always prevail in the battle of the demons that we encounter during the world's existence.

I am a child of the Supreme Being who aims to seek moksha through the avenue of Hindu dance. In other words, I dance Kuchipudi because I hope to attain moksha and merge back to a Supreme Being upon my death from this world. Of course, I did not realize this when my brother encouraged our mother to enroll me in a West Indian (Guyanese) dance school when I was twelve years old. After a long discussion at the breakfast table on a Saturday morning, my brother and mother agreed that I would learn Indian classical Hindu dance. My naani (maternal grandmother) was harshly against a dance education for me, because she feared it would corrupt me. After my mother explained that I would learn strictly religious dance, then my naani felt at ease.

During the month of April at the age of twelve, my mother enrolled me for dance classes with the *Natraj Cultural Group*, currently now the *Natraj Center for the Performing Arts*.⁴ I started to learn the very basic framework of Hindu dance from didi (sister)⁵ Teshrie Kalicharan. Teshrie was a student of my life-long dance Guru, Smt. Sadhana Paranj. I use the term "Guru" (BharataMuni, 2000) to honor my dance "teacher" as an individual who guides me towards a path of moksha (liberation) through providing me with a Hindu education of dance. My usage of the term "Guru" here is not to be confused with the sacred Guru Diksha (Grimes, 1996, p. 117) sanskar (sacrament) that occurs when Hindus perform a sacred ritual where their children officially begin a religious education under the guidance of a pandit. My Guru Diksha Sanskar is with Pt. Maheshwar Tiwari, a respected Hindu pandit whose ancestry is tied to mine. His grandfather, Pt. Ramphair Tiwari, was the Guruji of my naani (maternal grandmother), Bhagwatie Shankar.⁶ My Guruji, Pt. Mahesh told me to honor my dance "teacher" as my dance "Guru" because she will guide me towards moksha through Hindu dance.

At any rate, I only wished to learn strict classical Hindu dance because I felt connected to a Supreme Being as I started to learn the basics. Didi Teshrie noticed that I did not want to dance contemporary Bollywood (Varia, 2012) dance. I did not feel this strong connection to a Supreme Being when I danced Bollywood dance. My body felt uncomfortable, even at a young age, with Bollywood dance. There is a distinction here between religious dance and cultural dance. Bollywood

dance is more of a performance-based cultural dance form, whereas Hindu dance is based on the religious scriptures. Soon, didi Teshrie told my mother to contact Smt. Sadhana Paranjhi who would teach me strictly Hindu dance according to the ethics of Hinduism. At the age of sixteen, after a few years of learning Bharatnatyam (Bharata natyam, n.d.), which is the universal dance genre of Hinduism and across regions of India, I began my life-long journey with my dance Guru, Smt. Sadhana Paranjhi. After many years of learning Kuchipudi, my dance Guru along with my primary spiritual Guruji, Pt. Maheshwar Tiwari, joined with family and friends to view my Rangapravesam (dance graduation; debut performance) that marked the beginning of my future as a Hindu dancer. I soon realized that there is a need to teach non-Hindus about Hinduism through Hindu dance. I will now turn to focus on why I feel there is an urgent need to educate non-Hindus about Hinduism through Hindu dance.

WHY DO I TEACH NON-HINDUS?

I teach non-Hindus in an effort to confront the long legacy of colonialism and the thriving phenomenon of Orientalism (Said, 1979), which I will elaborate on later in this introduction. This is evident in my ancestral line. Although many Indians remained in India, masses of Indians endured a forced migration (Roopnarine, 2011) to Guyana in South America after African slavery (Great Britain & Greville, 1828) ended in Guyana and there was fear of a labor shortage from Africans. At that time, present-day “Guyana” was known as “British Guiana” (British Guiana, 1924). In 1966, Guyanese people gained independence from British rule. The country became known as “Guyana” (Guyana, 1966). For the purposes of this project, I will refer to “British Guiana” as “Guyana” because this is how I identify the country – as a current independent nation free of British rule. When my fore-parents arrived in Guyana, they were treated as cheap labor in the British colonies as they worked the plantations (Singh, 1988). They were forced to endure hard labor in the cane fields and rice mills. Indians faced another form of slavery in Guyana under British rule. They were forced to either Christianize for government positions and upward social mobility or remain non-Christians in poverty as cheap labor (British Guiana & Carrington, 1895). Eventually, the laws permitted Indians to send their children to colonial schools where there was an attempt to Christianize young Indian children (British Guiana & Carrington, 1895). The goal in school was to civilize indigenous children with a basic education so that they could have the basic skill sets needed to serve in the colonies as laborers. Bacchus writes, “This education was often aimed at deculturalizing and Christianizing the East Indians who were mainly Hindus and Muslims” (Bacchus, 1994, p. 6). The curricula aimed to Christianize and teach morality to the so-called uncivilized children (British Guiana & Carrington, 1895).

My mother and her siblings endured a Christianizing curriculum as young children in the nineteen fifties and sixties at the Cane Grove Anglican Primary School, which

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was government funded. If the students did not adhere to the rules of the school, they would face a whipping. Before school began for the day, my mother as a Hindu girl, was forced to say the Christian prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen

The teachers would also have the students say a prayer after returning from lunch. At the end of the school day, my mother was forced to recite:

Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the lord my soul to take. Amen

My naana (maternal grandfather), Ganesh Shankar,⁷ and naani (maternal grandmother), Bhagwatie Shankar did not attend school. Instead, they were laborers as children who worked on the plantations. My naana remained faithful as a self-educated Hindu who was well versed in sacred Hindu scriptures and the language of Hindi as taught to him by his parents, my great-naana (great grandfather) Shankar and my great-naani (great grandmother) Sugya who were from India. When my mother and her siblings came home on the weekdays from school under British rule, they would then venture to the Cane Grove Hindi School near the Estate Mandir (temple) where they learned to read and write Hindi in the late afternoon/early evening. During the workday, my naana was a laborer in the fields but in the late afternoon/early evening, he was one of the Hindi School teachers. In addition, my naana taught all of my uncles at home to sing the sacred *Ramayana* (Valmiki & Shastri, 1952) in an ancient Hindi style known as *Ramayana Baani*.

It is important for the world to know that India had a rich heritage as a civilized country with ancient traditions before the British's colonial rule. Hinduism, which developed in India, has a legitimate historical tradition, with a strong sense of morality as a part of humanity. I aim to share this through Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dance in an effort to correct the misconceptions of Hinduism as a pagan religion of uncivilized savages. Even though the British took Indians out of India to Guyana to work as laborers, they could not take Hinduism out of faith-based Hindus. Although the British succeeded at using Christianity as a civilizing force to the point where some Indians came to believe that they were and still are solely Christians, the British could not sever the personal relationship that faith-based Hindus had with Hinduism. My mamooos (mother's brothers; uncles) continued this tradition as they taught Hindi to youths when they migrated to Jersey City, New Jersey. I remember my mamoo Seetaram "Sonny" Ganesh, mamoo Chateram "Parshu" Ganesh, and mamoo Tularam "Narad" Ganesh teaching me to write Hindi

when I was around seven years old at the Hindu Dharmic Sabha Mandir⁸ in Jersey City. My brother ensured the completion of the task as he taught me to read and write Hindi fluently.

Essentially, my ancestors were forcibly transported from India to Guyana where they endured a lifestyle under harsh socioeconomic conditions that prevented them from the achievement of upward social mobility without compromising their faith as Hindus. My father migrated to the United States in the 1970s, along with my mother, who then sponsored their relatives to also migrate to escape the poverty they were forced into under British colonial rule. Here in this nation, my family had a dream to pursue a lifestyle as faith-based Hindus who work in a fair society – if there is such a concept. My ancestry reminds me that my personal struggle is not new, but rather is intertwined into a long legacy where my ancestors faced similar struggles. My father embraced people of different religions and cultures when he came to this country. Yet, he remained a faith-based Hindu who shared Hinduism in an effort to promote interreligious and intercultural relations. He did not achieve his doctorate as desired, due to his unforeseen death, but he inspired me to pursue my doctorate and maintain a voice in the public sphere to promote interreligious and intercultural relations. He taught me that there is a need to help each other understand that we are a part of a humanitarian family who needs to think about interreligious and intercultural connections despite the long legacy of colonialism that had an impact on all indigenous people.

Although I endured a great deal of racism as an elementary student, I am proud to be a faith-based Hindu who is a descendant of India. I will sing my bhajans (songs), say my slokas (prayers), and wear my traditional clothing, regardless of where I go. The colonialists could not and still cannot take Hinduism out of the blood of faith-based Hindus like myself. While this might seem like an aggressive stance, I am not furious with the British. They felt the need to colonize Indians to help foster a more “civilized” society. This is not an excuse for the era of indentured servitude and Christianizing in the Caribbean, but rather is a plea for an understanding that could help humanity to move forward. As many believe the great Mahatma Gandhi said, “An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.”⁹ Throughout the years, I came to realize that some people have a desire to learn about Hinduism and Indian culture but do not have access to the information to help them gain this education. While I probably cannot confront the ignorance of supremacists who may not even read this text, I can make my scholarly voice heard to help individuals gain a framework of the ancient traditions of Hinduism and Indian culture through Kuchipudi Indian classical Hindu dance. I beg the pardon of those of British descent who might feel attacked through this text. My goal is not to attack British descendants but rather to shed light on Hinduism and Indian culture in an effort to develop an understanding that will end the need to Christianize and colonize Indians and all people of indigenous descent as I hope to foster interreligious and intercultural relations.

CHAPTER 1

MY BODY

It is imperative to acknowledge some of the struggles that I endured from a personal dimension to understand why I view this project as urgent. Aside from my bullying experiences in elementary school, as a young girl, I endured a great deal of personal body issues, on several levels, which I will not elaborate on here. These experiences most certainly contributed to my sense of self worth and body image. While I was the “tribal, savage girl” during my elementary school years to mostly white children and teachers, I was the exotic, beautifully-sexually-figured girl to Indians who did not see Hindu ideals. I also became an exotic, beautifully-sexually-figured woman to mostly non-Hindus as a graduate student. This was a living paradox for me, which I found difficult to live with.¹⁰

I felt very uncomfortable in my body to the point where I just wanted my soul to leave my body. I had to learn to overcome this discomfort before I could use my body as a pedagogical tool to engage in Hindu dance. I do not mean to say that Hindu dance is a therapeutic tool used to deal with trauma. While Hindu dance might be therapeutic, it is first a sacred art form used to fulfill a deep sense of purpose.

Although my body is scarred with the marks of bullies and predators, I am an empowered woman who confronts my own personal history as I dance. Sometimes, I feel as if my inner soul is pushing against the walls of my body screaming to escape from a human existence in the world. I immediately remember that, as my brother always told me, I was sent to the earth from a Supreme Being to fulfill a particular purpose in life. Before I die, I must fulfill my purpose for the duration of my life, which will end when the Supreme Being feels that I completed my life’s tasks. I will not let my fear of exoticism prevent me from engaging in Hindu dance because it is a part of my life’s purpose. When I dance, I feel that the wounds heal as I connect to a Supreme Being who bestows blessings to me that rid the blemishes on my body. I become a stronger, empowered, assertive woman with each Hindu dance that gives my body the spiritual weapons to battle any exoticism that may arise before, during, and after the dance. In other words, the gaze from a Supreme Being overpowers any exoticism that I may endure. In addition to my personal sensory experiences, I feel obligated to teach non-Hindus about Hinduism through dance because it is imperative to understand the urgency of interreligious relations to develop an appreciation for humanity.

ABOUT KUCHIPUDI

Before continuing to discuss Kuchipudi dance as an educational issue, I will briefly explain Kuchipudi dance. Kuchipudi dance adheres to the cosmic law of Hindu dharma, which means that dancers aim to perform virtuous, dutiful actions before, during, and after the dance. In essence, for Kuchipudi dancers, virtue involves the observance of religion, as a way of life that leads to unity with a Supreme Being. According to Rao (1992), “Kuchi” refers to Manmadha, the deity of love, and “pudi”