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DANC 1400

### Akram Khan

Akram Khan is a well-known soft-spoken dancer, widely acknowledged for his mastery in the classical Indian dance in the form of Kathak. In fact, he has undergone constant training in this dance form coupled with the supreme gift of blending it with other vocabularies such as *Giselle* or iconic ballet and *Kaash* which is a combination between classical Indian music and contemporary instruments and movements. This has been immensely helpful as it has helped him to develop a personal signature style of elemental force (O'Shea 121). Essentially, the work of Akram Khan is deemed a contemporary venture that underscores some of the popular trends in the English society through his reflection and improvement of performances such as in the dance *Giselle*. A good example of Khan's contribution to English society is his inculcation of multiculturalism in art. The diverse background of Khan reflects his fascination with cultural hybridism, a background that he applies in the creative process, choreographic style and artistic philosophy to enrich the artist Choreographer Profile as discussed in this paper.

Akram Khan encapsulates cultural characteristics in his artistic work through the use of movement and gestures that are reflected through the use of the body. This is attributed to his cultural heritage as an Indian where art is characterized by body movements and gestures. In fact, Schwab (12) affirms that the style happens without him realizing it because as the mind transfers the thoughts, the body stores the movements beneath the consciousness. Consequently, Smith (79) a social and cultural theorist also notes that as one dances, the body becomes an academic enquiry through which various moves are drawn without the cognizance of the dancer.

It is therefore clear that, bodily movement acts as one of the key sources of communication and this is well placed within the cultural heritage of the dancer.

The movement of Khan is a reflection of cultural hybridity through which he explores the ideas from the East and compares them with those from the West (Akram Khan: Interview at Dancetheater.Gr). Through his movement, he reflects a contemporary mastery of the Indian dance. The dancing used acts as a vital facet through which one understands and develops various cultural practices. Therefore, as portrayed by the Akram Khan Dance Company, the dancing human body is the key to socio- cultural understanding. It is, therefore, evident that human body is constructed by human understanding and existence of the cultural surroundings, thus contributing to the development of the human self image (O'Shea 123).

The human body is one of the primary means of communication through which people correspond to each other and interact with objects surrounding them (Stahl 40). Through cultural embodiment, the human body becomes a cultural artifact that integrates with the outside space in which it exists. Smith (81) defines culture as a characteristic feature of civilization that undercuts social institution, beliefs, artistic and material products. In view of these facts, classical Indian dance is one aspect of the Akram Khan's artistic works that has a strong cultural background. In fact, the ancient history of this work is reflected in the creation of the movement involved (Smith 81). In particular, the Indian dance has the strong religious beliefs of its people as one of its main concepts. As well, European romantic ballets also underscore religious tradition of its people.

The approach where Khan co-joins Kathak and contemporary dance opens the rest of the world to the Indian culture. Through the evaluation of the historical Indian Kathak dance, it is clear that today's audiences have an insight to the values and stories attributed to the Indian

culture (O'Shea 123). This sort of contributes to the growth of diversity as the audience learns to appreciate the Indian culture and dancing style.

Khan appeals to his audience through incorporating multicultural aspects. In most of his choreographies, Khan borrows a lot of movement and dancing styles from his Indian culture. As a matter of fact, Khan upholds the Indian ethnicity, which is revealed, through his dance movement. In fact, Khan's choreography can be described through a dazzling mixture of speed and stiffness as well as stunning and intricate approaches to movements. This is vital as it gives the audience an opportunity to not only engage but also to have an understanding of racial identification through his work (Stahl 43). Through the embodiment of Indian cultural aspects, there has been an increasing influence on the classical Indian form of dancing. Most importantly, Khan's choreography uses Indian Kathak technique as a basis for his movement and dancing style. According to the cognitive conscious theory, Khan demonstrates a subconscious mixing that includes the learning process of contemporary and Kathak through which he expresses a unique movement (Smith 85).

*Rush* is referred as the physical state that exists between serene stillness and tremendous speed. The dance starts with three dancers who wait in the darkness with an intimidating stillness. This dance is compared to *amad* in the Kathak form where the dancers wait standing erect and relaxed while looking directly ahead. The performance of the dance is a symbolism of the beginning of the blurring of the cultural boundaries that exist between the Western and the Eastern culture (Akram Khan: Interview at Dancetheater.Gr). As observed from the Kathak dancers, the energy emanates from the torso and consequently flows to the extremities. These among other energy control mechanisms in this dance are a clear indication of how contemporary dance and Kathak movement qualities influence his work thus resulting in a fusion

of movement. Depicting the theme of pairing and encounters, the *Zero Degrees* dance is a synchronized narrative commentating about social issues and also bringing two cultures together (Smith 86). It assumes a narrative approach that involves mesmerizing singing and tabladrums which are vital elements of traditional Indian music. Khan and his fellow performer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui sit cross-legged at the front part of the stage which is divided using a single white line. This is where they start talking to the audience regarding the exciting trip from Bangladesh to Calcutta. Essentially, this is considered as a viable example where people move from their origin so as to come and work together.

Khan has an Indian heritage and his knowledge has a diverse identity ranging from south London where he was born and this has significantly helped to enrich his dance. In fact, his integration of cultures and hybridization is currently being experienced everywhere in the world. Actually, Khan is an artist who is always looking past boundaries which can help societies to mingle with others thus resulting in a notion of ethnic fusion that has extended the cultural diversity. For example, he has managed to work with a variety of people like Sidi Larbi to come up with unique pieces such as the *Zero Degrees* which won several awards. Through this, he not only depicts cultural diversity, but the eventual dance is unique and full of depth. The work of Khan is not just a depiction of his wish to enrich his dances, perhaps it was an attempt to co-join his Indian background together with the Western culture where he grew up and lived. In his company website, Khan depicts his wish for the support of both cultures stating that “Akram Khan Company...embracing an artistic vision that both respects and challenges indian Kathak form and contemporary dance” (Akram Khan Company web). In his quest to depict an understanding of both cultures, Khan borrowed the two ideologies and worked through both the Indian and contemporary dance moves to create harmony in various pieces.

Khan understood the need for diversification and thus he created his pieces to attract both the Indians and other audiences who were more interested in contemporary art. It seems that Khan understood the dynamism of his audiences whose love for various forms of dance is ever changing depending on seasons. He also understood the need for a unique brand through the maintenance of his Indian culture. For this reason, Khan's approach of dancing is one described as Kathak-injected contemporary dance. His approach has been successful so far as he remains as one of the most feted dancers in Britain.

In conclusion, the work of Akram Khan is directly linked to the cultural aspects that form an ideal example of how culture is moving and evolving. Evidently, the work of Khan is a strong embodiment of culture that co-joins Kathak with contemporary performances. Therefore, Khan's choreography has not only an international appeal to his audiences but is also geared towards realizing multi-cultural, multi-religious, and multi-lingual facets.

## References

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