


Martha Graham: yoga, and Indian dance

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Abstract. This paper examines Martha Graham's early engagement with Indian and Indian-derived ideas, which she initially received from her mentor, Ruth St. Denis. Subsequently, as documented in her *Notebooks*, Graham engaged with various Indian writings likely inspired by St. Denis that continued beyond the Denishawn period and enriched her understanding of Indian philosophies and aesthetics, serving as a meaningful source of inspiration for her choreographies. I study the interplay between Graham and Indian dance, which is best understood through the impact of yoga on her technique and its role in integrating Indian aesthetics into her later choreographic dramaturgy, as documented in her *Notebooks*.

Keywords: Indian ideas; *Kundalini* yoga; *bhakti* (devotion); liberation; orientalism

[sp] Martha Graham: yoga y danza india

Resumen. Este artículo examina el temprano acercamiento de Martha Graham a ideas procedentes de India o derivadas de ella, las cuales recibió inicialmente de su mentora, Ruth St. Denis. Posteriormente, tal como se documenta en sus *Notebooks*, Graham se interesó por diversos escritos indios, inspirada, probablemente, por St. Denis. Este interés continuó más allá del periodo en el Denishawn y enriqueció su comprensión de las filosofías y estéticas indias, convirtiéndose en una fuente significativa de inspiración para sus coreografías. Se estudia la interacción entre Graham y la danza india, la cual se comprende mejor a través del impacto del yoga en su técnica y del papel que este desempeñó en la integración de la estética india en su dramaturgia coreográfica posterior, según se recoge en sus *Notebooks*.

Palabras clave: Pensamiento indio; yoga *kundalini*; *bhakti* (devoción); liberación; orientalismo

1. Introduction

In this paper, I aim to parse “Graham’s India”, or the image of India instilled in Graham’s imagination early in her career through prominent Western conceptions of India at the time and through imported orientalized theories passed down to her from mentors and readings. From 1916 to 1923, Graham studied at the Denishawn School, where she learned yoga-influenced breathing and

meditation techniques from guest lecturer Swami Paramananda, whose workshops Graham had already attended during the prior summer. In accord with Paramananda's instructions, breathing, meditation, and Vivekananda's "doctrines" were taught at the Denishawn School (Vivekananda was Paramananda's guru)¹. For example, St. Denis's classes incorporated meditation in the lotus position and seated breathing, which Graham's biographer Agnes de Mille noted as valuable "periods of mental discipline"². During these sessions, Graham also grasped the importance of physical contact with the floor.

It is well known that early twentieth century American theater and dance were rife with parodic caricature of Asia. "The Oriental specialty number", writes Mark Frederick Wheeler, "was a common feature in vaudeville shows and, in the first quarter of the century"³. We also know that early modern dance came up through popular theater and sought to distinguish itself from entertainment. It gave rise to a long list of early female soloists who performed exotic pieces "of the east"⁴. However, despite the racist edge to such representations, they often came not out of malice, but out of genuine, if misguided, interest in Indian culture. Meanwhile, Indian mysticism and spirituality were very much in vogue in bourgeois circles, with East coast high society being a particular hotbed of the Indian culture craze⁵.

Yoga came to the U.S. in the nineteenth century through the Theosophical Society and was popularized by Vedanta philosopher Swami Vivekananda⁶. At the World Parliament of Religions at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Jennifer F. Aubrecht quotes Vivekananda as saying, "'We [Hindus] believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true.' Rather than asking yoga practitioners to abandon their families, homes... He preached a form of universal acceptance..."⁷. With his publication of neo-Vedanta work, *Raja Yoga*, in 1896, Vivekananda (in the *Ramakrishna* tradition) underscored that *bhakti* (devotion), rather than any particular physical posture, is the key to communing with the divine. This enduring philosophy of yoga, which emphasizes the concept of devotion, not only appealed to St. Denis for teaching at Denishawn but also stayed with Graham, demonstrating its lasting impact on her. With reference to Sarah Strauss, Aubrecht notes that Vivekananda's "four-fold" yoga sought "to delimit the

¹ Jennifer F Aubrecht, "Choreographers and Yogis: Untwisting the Politics of Appropriation and Representation in U.S. Concert Dance" (Doctoral thesis, University of California Riverside, 2017), 71.

² Agnes De Mille, *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham – A Biography* (New York: Random House, 1991), 46.

³ Mark Frederick Wheeler, "The Orient in America: Fertile soil for Martha Graham", *Choreography and Dance* 5, no. 2 (1999): 43.

⁴ Amy Koritz, *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Early Twentieth-Century British Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 2-3.

⁵ While Mark Frederick Wheeler, "Surface to Essence: Appropriation of the Orient by Modern Dance" (Doctoral thesis, Ohio State University, 1984); Eileen Or, "Body and mind: The Yoga Roots of Martha Graham's 'Contraction' and 'Release', Communication presented at the *Proceedings of Society of Dance History Scholars, Border Crossings: Dance and Boundaries in Societies, Politics, Gender, Education and Technology*, Joint Conference with The Association for Dance in Universities and Colleges in Canada, Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, May 10-14, 1995; Kara Lynn Miller, "Re-imaging Modern Dance as Transnational Phenomenon Through the Lens of Yoga" (Doctoral thesis, University of California Davis, 2015); and Aubrecht, "Choreographers and Yogis"'s work show the interest in yoga and Eastern philosophies in the US; Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), and Jane Desmond, "Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's Radha of 1906", *Signs* 17, no.1 (Autumn 1991): 28-49 discuss American interest in the exotic dances focussing on Ruth St. Denis.

⁶ Aubrecht, "Choreographers and Yogis", 48. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), an Indian Hindu monk and celebrated spiritual leader, became famous after his impactful speech at the 1893 Chicago World Parliament of Religions. He remained in the United States for a few years and gave lectures on Hindu philosophy, Vedanta, and yoga, including at the Graduate Philosophical Society of Harvard University.

⁷ Aubrecht, "Choreographers and Yogis", 48. Vivekananda, a follower of the non-dualist *Advaita* school of Vedanta, founded the Ramakrishna Mission, named after his Guru, Ramakrishna Paramhansa. Ramakrishna (1836-1886) was a significant figure in nineteenth-century Bengal, teaching that all religions are different paths to God. He simplified complex spiritual ideas lucidly into intelligible language, and Vivekananda spread these teachings globally through the Ramakrishna Mission, emphasizing that the soul is not different from *Brahman*.

boundaries of yoga, and to make *bhakti* yoga (devotion), *karma* yoga (service), *raja* yoga (study), and *jñāna* yoga (knowledge) more central or authentic than other forms of yoga”⁸. Reacting to world philosophies of the time such as Christian Science, Swedenborgianism, Transcendentalism, and Theosophism, Vivekananda stressed “devotional meditation as central to the attainment of *samādhi*”⁹. St. Denis was highly engaged with thinkers like Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy, moving naturally from “American Transcendentalism to the Swedish mysticism of her parents’ Englewood colony, to her explorations of Christian Science, and ultimately, Vedanta, the spiritual and philosophical background of Hinduism”¹⁰.

Graham’s Denishawn curriculum thus included exoticized interpretations of Indian aesthetics brought in by St. Denis. Neil Baldwin recounts St. Denis telling Graham she was “too old to become a dancer”, but was welcome “to take hatha yoga”, while Ted Shawn said Graham was “like a lit lamp / that does not flicker”, a reference to St. Denis’ “beloved Gita”, understood here to mean the Indian *Bhagavad Gita*¹¹. Both Shawn and St. Denis found Graham “different” than Denishawn’s other dancers, but Shawn saw her “burning desire to dance” and enrolled her “in his morning ballet class and afternoon character dancing, ethnic dance, and Dalcroze eurhythmics, encouraging bare feet and mobile arms”¹².

Graham first appeared on the Denishawn stage in spring 1916’s *A Dance Pageant of Egypt, Greece, and India*¹³. Later that Fall, she would perform “a selection from *Gitanjali*”, based on Indian Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s collection of poems, for her “fellow students” at the Cumnock School¹⁴. In March 1917, she performed “Javanese dance” at Santa Barbara and was acknowledged in the press as “a dancing pupil of Ruth St. Denis for a month last summer”. In Shawn’s words, Graham “came to life” that same year in “‘Bailarina Real,’ a hybrid Moorish-Spanish routine danced to *Serenata*, op. 13”¹⁵.

Graham also appeared in many Eastern-inspired productions at Denishawn, which Wheeler says included “solos ‘Moon of Love,’ ‘Serenata Morisca,’ ‘Lantern Dance,’ and the large-scale ‘Xochitl!’”¹⁶. Three years after leaving Denishawn, Graham offered her first independent concert at the Forty-Eighth Street Theater in New York on April 18, 1926, performing a series of eighteen dances, including work-in-progress *The Three Gopi Maidens* excerpted from *The Flute of Krishna*¹⁷. At that very time, St. Denis was on tour in India¹⁸. A month later, on May 9, Graham’s first completed choreography, *The Flute of Krishna* (1926), premiered in Rochester and was filmed with experimental colors by the Eastman-Kodak Company. Amongst the exotica that fit the bill of early modern dance, India-themed work was prominent.

⁸ Aubrecht, “Choreographers and Yogis”, 48, note 14. Swami Vivekananda illustrates *Raja Yoga* as a meditation-oriented path to self-realization and liberation through mental control. Key practices include concentration and devotional meditation, culminating in *Samādhi* (superconsciousness). Distinct from other yoga forms emphasizing physical movement, *Raja Yoga* focuses on the four yoga paths, impacting Vivekananda’s followers and influencing St. Denis’s yoga studies.

⁹ Aubrecht, “Choreographers and Yogis”, 47-48.

¹⁰ Shelton cited in Aubrecht, “Choreographers and Yogis”, 49.

¹¹ Neil Baldwin, *Martha Graham: When Dance Became Modern* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2022), 38.

¹² Baldwin, *Martha Graham*, 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42. *Serenata*, op. 13 was composed by Italian composer Mario Tarenghi.

¹⁶ Wheeler, “Surface”, 108.

¹⁷ The Library of Congress holds her programme online: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ihas.200153243.0/?sp=3>.

¹⁸ Uttara Asha Coorlawala, “Ruth St. Denis and India’s Dance Renaissance”, *Dance Chronicle* 15, no. 2 (1992): 123-152.



Figure 1. Graham, Martha Performer. *Flute of Krishna*, no. 3. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2023860538/>. Robert Ross as Krishna, Thelma Biracree, Constance Finkel, and Betty MacDonald as the Gopis. Courtesy of the Martha Graham Collection, Box 246/26, Library of Congress Music Division, circa 1926 (photographer unknown).

The Flute of Krishna is based on the Hindu myth of God Krishna, who uses his flute to enchant women (fig. 1), including his divine beloved Radha, to dance with him¹⁹. The score was written by Cyril Scott (himself influenced by Indian philosophy and yoga in his own work) and produced by the Eastman Kodak Company. Denishawn's orientalism came through in the flamboyant costumes, set, and music. However, *The Flute of Krishna* also displays a more accurate understanding of Indian aesthetics than St. Denis' exoticized choreography ever did, as discussed in the next section.

Both Jane Desmond and Priya Srinivasan discuss St. Denis' work as part of "the American passion for exotica"²⁰. Desmond analyzes St. Denis in context of a U.S. culture, of "changing social attitudes toward the body, and popularization of the 'exotic' in cultural forms"²¹. She argues that St. Denis' *Radha* "presents a hyperbolization of categories of otherness, mapping markers of race, orientalism, and sexuality onto the white middle-class female body"²². Similarly, one can

¹⁹ Graham's students who performed in the choreography were Robert Ross as Krishna, Evelyn Sabin as Radha, and Thelma Biracree, Constance Finkel, and Betty MacDonald as the Gopis. Susanne Vivanti is also named as a performer: <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihms.200182444/>.

²⁰ See also the scholarship of Suzanne Shelton, *Divine Dancer: A Biography of Ruth St. Denis* (New York: Doubleday, 1981); Elizabeth Kendall, *Where She Danced: The Birth of American Art-Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); and Wheeler, "Surface", who argue that St. Denis's *Radha* was typical of "Oriental exoticism".

²¹ Desmond, "Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis's *Radha* of 1906", 33.

²² *Ibid.*, 30-31.

imagine Graham's body as a "white middle-class female body" able to mediate this fascination for the female spectator. Srinivasan explores how the "labor of the Indian artists" who tutored St. Denis leading up to *Radha* was potentially exploited by St Denis²³. Srinivasan effectively argues that St. Denis was a cultural appropriator, who stood to benefit professionally from Indian work in ways Indian artists themselves could not. Of course, a similar charge could be brought against Graham by dance scholars, as Srinivasan does, calling the Indian influence in Graham's work a "more subtle, hidden appropriation"²⁴.

2. Comparative Orientalism: St. Denis' *Radha* and Graham's *The Flute of Krishna*

Graham's 1926 concert presented several choreographies that today would widely be considered orientalist. There were eighteen short dances: *The Three Gopi Maidens*, *Chorale*, *Novelette*, *Tanze*, *Intermezzo*, *Maid with the Flaxen Hair*, *Arabesque No. 1*, *Clair de Lune*, *Danse Languid*, *Désir*, *Deux Valses*, *Four Songs*, *Masques*, *Trois Gnossiennes*, *From a XII Century Tapestry*, *A Study in Lacquer*, *Danse Rococo*, *The Marionette Show*, and *Portrait – After Beltran-Masses*. Apart from a few dances including *The Three Gopi Maidens*, the dances were mostly solos performed by Graham. *A Study in Lacquer* portrayed Chinese and Japanese figures as if found in lacquered boxes, with the dancer Martha Graham wearing "gold satin" robes²⁵. In 1973, Graham looked back on her first performances as "a hodge-podge of what I did at Denishawn plus new things"²⁶.

While *The Flute of Krishna*²⁷ similarly had Denishawn's orientalist stamp upon it, it differed from St. Denis' *Radha* in crucial ways. The film of *The Flute of Krishna* shot in Rochester shows us a choreography characterized by the interplay of Krishna with Radha, his greatest devotee, and the Gopis²⁸. The set, designed by Norman Edwards, depicts the open entrance to a home curved and pointed on the top, with round stairs leading up inside. The experimental color film, shot only in red and green, rendered the walls in green with white *alpana* designs²⁹. The piece begins with Krishna searching for the Gopis and his beloved Radha, playing his flute to lure the women out of the house. Robert Ross as Krishna wears a white *dhoti* instead of pants, a white turban, and a long scarf, wrapped at times around his flute-holding hand (fig. 2). Though his skin appears green in the film, it was, in reality, colored blue to match traditional depictions of Krishna, also known as *Neela Madhava* (*Neela* meaning blue and *Madhava* being another name for Krishna).

As Krishna searches for the Gopis, a dancer descends the stairs with a decorative tray of petals and flowers, engaging in a playful and joyous interaction with him. Two other Gopis, dressed in *saris* and adorned with traditional jewelry, *bindis* (a colored dot worn on the center of the forehead as part of Hindu female makeup), *sinthi* (chained head jewelry), and white flowers in their tied hair, join her. They dance by waving their *saris* over their heads and curving backward rhythmically. Radha appears in a white *ghagra* (long flared skirt), holding a branch, as the Gopis facilitate a dance between her and Krishna, dancing with light, soft steps, and rapid movements. When the Gopis exit, Radha falls, and Krishna gently helps her up. The scene concludes by depicting their union, with Radha holding the branch before them (fig. 3), embodying her devotion as a divine lover of Krishna in mythology.

²³ Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 23.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁵ Alice J. Helpern, "The evolution of Martha Graham's dance technique" (Doctoral thesis, New York University, 1981), 128.

²⁶ Graham cited in Helpern, "The evolution", 128.

²⁷ Videos are available online at <https://vimeo.com/235137709>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3AoXHoQCQ1Y>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dp--tv0iwy8>; <https://vimeo.com/149233479>; and <https://vimeo.com/486463437>. Kara Lynn Miller's dissertation links Graham's *Radha* in her *Flute of Krishna* as connected to St. Denis' *Radha*, which had been "widely publicized" for its use of Hindu mythology and media. Miller, "Re-imaging Modern Dance", 54–55.

²⁸ The Sanskrit meaning of Gopi typically refers to a cow-herd-girl. In the myths of Radha and Krishna, there are thousands of Gopis who danced with Krishna while he played his flute.

²⁹ *Alpana* are traditional South Asian folk art designs with symbols of flowers or patterns drawn on floors or walls with rice paste or powder. They can be white or colored.



Figure 2. Graham, Martha Performer. *Flute of Krishna*, no. 6, Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2023860541/>. Robert Ross as Krishna. Courtesy of the Martha Graham Collection, Box 246/26, Library of Congress Music Division, circa 1926 (photographer unknown).



Figure 3. Graham, Martha Performer. *Flute of Krishna*, no. 5, Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2023860540/>. Robert Ross as Krishna, Evelyn Sabin as Radha. Courtesy of the Martha Graham Collection, Box 246/26, Library of Congress Music Division, circa 1926 (photographer unknown).

Later, Graham revisits this imagery, that dancer Ernestine Stodelle notes how the “seeds” of Graham’s innovative ideas about dance were emerging in her work, even as she remained

influenced by Denishawn's exotic style³⁰. The music was played in a Hindustani-inspired score on traditional instruments like the *tanpura* (a traditional string instrument with a long neck) and *sarod* (a gourd-shaped stringed instrument). Many songs performed in Indian classical dance highlight Radha's devotion (*bhakti*), a deeply held familial and sexual value in patriarchal Hindu society. Historically, *bhakti*, or devotion, has been crucial in establishing a direct and personal relationship with the divine and legitimizes a path to salvation³¹. Although Graham was not fully aware of the complexities of *bhakti*, moments like Radha's final action with the branch showcase her understanding of the character in its original context. The branch, resembling a piece of jewelry, symbolizes their intimacy and graces the space between them. Radha's devotion to Krishna is powerfully expressed through her gesture with the branch as she gazes at him with an expression of deep contentment and love. While this approach is broad, it remains relevant to the original subject matter. Graham's imagery of a branch signifies a profound connection with the divine, highlighting the unity with God that echoes the principles of *bhakti*.

Graham highlighted that *The Flute of Krishna* differs from traditional ballet and is a story that expresses life through dance and rhythm³². Even at this early stage in her career, Graham's ideas, especially her emphasis on dramatizing internal life through movement, were already "consistent with her personal approach to dance as an art form"³³. Helpern noted that she authentically represents cultural aesthetics rather than merely replicating East Indian gestures³⁴. This is evident in the portrayal of Krishna's blue skin, intricate decorations, and the branch's imagery, which embodies the *bhakti*, emphasizing a personal connection with the divine.

Many of Graham's directorial tendencies in *The Flute of Krishna*, including her resistance to sensational orientalism, set the tone for her future work. When she started teaching at the Anderson-Milton School and Eastman Schools in 1925, one year before *Flute*, she began her "earnest... quest" to find her own new technique and choreography³⁵. In *Radha*, St. Denis depicts a deity coming to life in a temple, performing the dance of "five senses", and going back to her shrine after a grand finale of hyperactive whirling³⁶. St. Denis neither sought nor claimed any authenticity in her portrayal of Radha, a character connected rather peripherally to the five senses³⁷. St. Denis' 1939 autobiography confirms that she primarily understood Krishna to be a popular Indian god of love and was aware that Radha was not worshipped outside of her role as Krishna's lover³⁸. Though the Krishna-Radha relationship represents *bhakti*, St. Denis only knew this term from her study of Vivekananda's doctrine, not the *bhakti* which dispenses with the intimacy and complex emotion underlying this form of devotion. Anurima Banerji, for example, describes temple dance centering *bhakti* as "a private, sensuous exchange with the deity"³⁹.

³⁰ Stodelle cited in Helpern, "The evolution", 126-128.

³¹ Uttara Asha Coorlawala, "Classical and contemporary Indian dance: Overview, Criteria and a Choreographic Analysis" (Doctoral thesis, New York University, 1994), 24-25.

³² Graham in Baldwin, *Martha Graham*, 98.

³³ Helpern, "The evolution", 83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁵ Dee Reynolds, *Rhythmic Subjects: Use of Energy in the Dances of Mary Wigman, Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham* (Hampshire: Dance Books Ltd., 2007), 100; and also see Wheeler, "Surface", 110.

³⁶ St. Denis's *Radha* is a five-part "dance of the senses", culminating in a "delirium of the senses". The performance features a goddess seated in a lotus position on a podium, lifting her arms in prayer, surrounded by priests in a semicircle. The dance concludes with her lying on the floor after a series of spins and gestural bent toward the priests. This description is based on Jacob's Pillow recording of her 1941 performance: <https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/ruth-st-denis/the-delirium-of-senses-from-radha/>.

³⁷ St. Denis understood that Radha, Krishna's beloved, was not a goddess but a symbol of spiritual union, as noted in her autobiography. She envisioned Radha as an idol in her temple, brought to life briefly to convey a message to devotees. Ruth St Denis, *Ruth St. Denis: An Unfinished Life; An Autobiography* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1939), 56-57.

³⁸ St Denis, *Ruth St. Denis*, 57.

³⁹ Anurima Banerji, "Dance and the Distributed Body: Odissi, Ritual Practice, and Mahari Performance" in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment*, edited by Mark Franko, 413-448 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 435.

Omitting Radha's passion and longing, St. Denis both flattens and romanticizes the character, who, in her view, "for a brief time was infused with life and danced a message for her devotees"⁴⁰. She purposefully transforms the devotee to a goddess for her own romantic satisfaction. Instead of being Krishna's divine devotee, St. Denis' Radha is a deity with devotees of her own — this Radha is without Krishna, and thus without anyone to devote herself to. As Kowal expresses it by referring Shelton: "when she put them into her dance it became something else... the actual cold line of the thing was lost"⁴¹. The character Radha's original identity as a divine devotee was lost, and she became a deity instead in St. Denis's dance. Despite taking the exoticizing tendencies of her mentor as a starting point, Graham nonetheless understood what was at the heart of this subject matter.

But even as Graham builds her piece around a resonant interpretation of the myth, elements of Denishawn style shine through. Graham's Gopis twirl across the stage, executing steps reminiscent of St Denis' spins and whirls. And though Graham was right to incorporate sensuality in *bhakti* with the deity as a private exchange symbolically through her branch which St. Denis had left it out, she overcorrects, moving from the sensual to the erotic. Janet Eilber, Artistic Director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, described the Gopis removing and swinging their *saris* as a kind of "striptease"⁴². While it's likely Graham had seen or studied such a move in Indian dance, she lacked the contextual knowledge to deploy it correctly. At the same time, *bhakti* is such an essential idea that its meanings are necessarily multiple and in historical flux. Though not evident in Vivekanandan doctrine, *Bhagavad Gita*, or any other source Graham was likely to be familiar with, *bhakti* developed erotic undertones as of the sixteenth century, when Hindu Vijayanagaram lost the "battle of Talikota to Islamic rulers"⁴³. The inter-religious environment that resulted led to the formation of "many streams" of ritual and faith, including regions where erotic content began to creep into devotional songs⁴⁴.

Dance scholar Uttara Asha Coorlawala traces the historical impact of inter- and intra-migration on *bhakti* in Indian art and dance⁴⁵. One consequence of eroticism fusing into *bhakti* is the emergence of a patriarchal gaze. Coorlawala discusses one of the *Abhinayas* (expressive dance) performed by late Odissi Guru Shri Kelucharan Mahapatra, in which Mahapatra performs a song from the famous twelfth century *Geeta Govinda* written by poet Jayadev. The song recounts Radha inviting Krishna to decorate her with clothes and ornaments while "the two become absorbed in the ecstatic communion of God and devotee"⁴⁶. Guru Mahapatra performs the poem-dance with a stylized Odissi walk and facial expressions mimetic of the faces Radha makes to Krishna⁴⁷. Coorlawala observes here a "subtle reversal of the gaze within the performed narrative, Radha's position, which started as adorned erotic object, gradually shifts to the male position of seeing-constructing subject"⁴⁸.

Coorlawala draws attention to what is lost (or supplemented) when a male Odissi Guru performing a poem by a male poet attempts to portray the feminine object of divine male erotic love, describing it as a "combination of secular and erotic with devotional fervor"⁴⁹. Immediately following her Denishawn training, Graham would not have had any better understanding of Indian

⁴⁰ St Denis, *Ruth St. Denis*, 56.

⁴¹ Rebekah J. Kowal, *Dancing The World Smaller: Staging Globalism in Mid-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 82. In her book *Dancing The World Smaller*, Rebekah J. Kowal writes about La Meri's interaction with St. Denis. When La Meri demonstrated certain Kathak steps to St. Denis, she picked them up quickly, but immediately transformed them when integrating them into her own work.

⁴² *The Flute of Krishna*, uploaded Dec 2, 2020 at 10:10 pm, <https://vimeo.com/486463437>.

⁴³ Coorlawala, "Classical and contemporary", 24.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁶ Uttara Asha Coorlawala, "Darshan and Abhinaya: An Alternative to Male Gaze", *Dance Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (Spring, 1996): 20.

⁴⁷ Coorlawala, "Darshan and Abhinaya: An Alternative to Male Gaze", 21. A preview of the dance that Coorlawala discusses can be seen online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXCS5ckDN8I>.

⁴⁸ Coorlawala, "Darshan and Abhinaya: An Alternative to Male Gaze", 21.

⁴⁹ Coorlawala, "Classical and contemporary", 25-26.

concepts or the orientalist pitfalls of working with them than St. Denis did. Flawed as the Gopis' "striptease" might be, it represents an early, earnest attempt on Graham's part to interpret patterns in the complex Indian subject matter she had been incompletely taught. Graham would return to *bhakti* in her later work, innovating a more sophisticated, psychoanalytically-driven approach to its portrayal as in her post-tour choreography *Embattled Garden* (1958)⁵⁰.

Upon leaving Denishawn, Graham found herself without the funds necessary to pay the school for the rights to teach their techniques in her own classes⁵¹. Graham would instead shed many components of their method, including moving even further away from interest in exoticism. In an archival video by George Eastman Museum MID, Janet Eilber says that Graham "revolted against it very soon after this film was made"⁵². Graham credited her mentors throughout her life for teaching her the "theatricality of fabrics"⁵³, which she later revolutionized by using the fabrics not decoratively, as in *The Flute of Krishna*, but to represent emotional and psychological states⁵⁴. She continued developing her use of fabric in *Night Journey* (1947), in which "changing garments" was "symbolic of different psychic states... a process of transformation"⁵⁵. But before she arrived at these innovations in choreography, design, and dramaturgy, she set out to create her own new technique.

After *Flute*, Graham wanted to move away from character dancing. As her later protagonists suggest, she was most comfortable in a female point of view; having to put on the patriarchal gaze to portray Radha and the Gopis felt unnatural to her. Franko, via Margaret Lloyd, quotes Graham saying, "I was through with character dancing. I wanted to begin, not with characters, or ideas, but with movements. So I started with the simplest —walking, skipping, leaping— and went on from there"⁵⁶. From here, she cultivated an interest in what she called "significant movement", movements that were neither "beautiful" (prettiness) nor "fluid", but "fraught with inner meaning"⁵⁷. Important qualities for determining a movement's "significance" would be breath, energy, beauty (as distinct from prettiness), masculinity, and rhythmic power.

3. Yoga in Graham's early development of her technique

In order to break from Denishawn in building her new style, Graham started with the simple walking, running, skipping, leaping, a focus on breathing in warm-ups, and particularly contraction and release⁵⁸. She started every class with a cross-legged sitting position that resembled yoga and deep-breathing. In *Blood Memory*, she confesses to arriving early to each rehearsal to sit in silence, "cultivating my Buddha nature"⁵⁹. In their respective biographies of Graham, both Ernestine Stodelle and Agnes de Mille wrote about Graham's yoga practice. Stodelle wrote: "(I)n

⁵⁰ See Kakali Paramguru, "Martha Graham and India" (Doctoral thesis, Temple University Philadelphia, 2023), 103–151. https://scholarshare.temple.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12613/8582/PARAMGURU_temple_0225E_15245.pdf?sequence=1 on her post-Tour choreography *Clytemnestra* (1958). However, *Embattled Garden* (1958) is relevant here, as it shows how Graham's experience during her Indian Tour greatly refined her ability to dramatize *bhakti* and the complexities of divine love.

⁵¹ Reynolds, *Rhythmic Subjects*, 100.

⁵² *The Flute of Krishna*, <https://vimeo.com/486463437>.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Mark Franko, *Martha Graham in Love and War: The Life in the Work* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 128. Also, see Paramguru, "Martha Graham and India", 103–151. https://scholarshare.temple.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12613/8582/PARAMGURU_temple_0225E_15245.pdf?sequence=1 where I discuss her use of the veil in *Clytemnestra* (1958) symbolizes rebirth, largely in the Indian *tantric* sense of overcoming fear to achieve liberation. Again, knowledge she gained first hand in India is instrumental in the depiction.

⁵⁶ Graham cited in Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism / Performing Politics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 157, note 4.

⁵⁷ Reynolds, *Rhythmic Subjects*, 101.

⁵⁸ Aubrecht, "Choreographers and Yogis", 89; or, "Body and mind", 206; Reynolds, *Rhythmic Subjects*, 100–117.

⁵⁹ Martha Graham, *Blood Memory: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 6.

yoga classes Martha had her first experience of bodily contact with the floor"⁶⁰. Indian influenced training as taught at Denishawn was not totally erased, but instead she found a way to incorporate yoga by 1930: "Graham's Deep Stretches indicates how much her 'new' technique still relied on elements of her Denishawn training"⁶¹.

Aubrecht refers to the yoga content of Denishawn training. Aubrecht's 2017 dissertation highlights the plurality of yogas that have existed over the past hundred years and tackles the variety of ways that different versions of yoga have impacted concert dance practices. She examines Graham's warm up exercises, confirming that Graham's yoga training followed her for years to come: "One exercise set taught by Shawn is of particular interest for this project, as the bodily positions used in it overlap with Graham's 'Deep Stretches.' Floor Set No. 1, taught at Denishawn by Shawn, was probably notated sometime in the 1920s as the Denishawn school was franchised"⁶². She goes on to discuss the circulation of modern postural yoga, focusing on "how meaning adheres to and is created through movement, and how that meaning is transmitted...the different meanings added onto/created through a single posture/position/exercise performed in different contexts: sitting on the floor with the legs spread wide"⁶³.

Graham knew about *kundalini* yoga from early in her creative life. Her student Thelma "Teddy" Biracree from the Eastman School reflects that her study with Graham "was all quite revolutionary for upstate New York"⁶⁴. In his recent book, Baldwin writes that "Graham demanded that Teddy sit cross-legged, close her eyes, and visualize the Kundalini serpent power coiling up her spine, from the sacral plexus to the many-petaled lotus crown at the top of her head, and breathe deeply... a spiral going around and around"⁶⁵. As per Miller: "Kundalini is defined as a cosmic spiraling energy in every individual that exists at the base of the spine and through the practices of yoga travels upwards through the body and out and beyond the head through the shushmna. The Sanskrit word 'kundal' means 'spiral.'"⁶⁶.

According to Miller, *kundalini* yoga and breathing had already been spread by Stebbins and Swami Vivekananda in the United States. St. Denis was well-versed in both, creating exercises at Denishawn that "centered around the use of the breath"⁶⁷. However, the Denishawn curriculum featured *hatha* yoga over *kundalini*. Graham acknowledges in *Blood Memory* the importance of breathing to her contraction and release: "When it breathes in it is a release and when it breathes out, it is a contraction"⁶⁸. The energy centers or "chakras" of *kundalini* yoga also play a role: "The chakras awake the centers of energy in the body, as in kundalini yoga. The awakening starts in the feet and goes up. Through the torso, the neck, up, up, through the head, all the while releasing energy"⁶⁹. Contraction and release are generally considered to be the cornerstones of Graham's technical innovations in dance technique; they are far more dramatic and expressive than meditative.

Such elements of meditation, breathing, and floor exercises appealed to Graham and eventually became part of her technique. Starting out at Denishawn, Graham "worshiped everything about Miss Ruth — how she walked, how she danced..."⁷⁰. However, in time, she increasingly rejected the "weakling exoticism of a transplanted orientalism", even as she recognized its importance in

⁶⁰ Ernestine Stodelle, *Deep Song: The Dance Story of Martha Graham*. (New York: Schirmer Books / Macmillan, 1984), 22.

⁶¹ Aubrecht, "Choreographers and Yogis", 88.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁴ Biracree quoted in Baldwin, *Martha Graham*, 84.

⁶⁵ Baldwin, *Martha Graham*, 84.

⁶⁶ Miller, "Re-imaging Modern Dance", 41.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁸ Graham, *Blood Memory*, 46.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 68. Dance scholar Victoria Phillips questions whether Graham is the true author of *Blood Memory*. I cite the text here neither to agree with nor to refute Philips, but simply to emphasize Graham's bond with St. Denis.

providing her with a thorough training”⁷¹. Although Graham did not believe in the “possibility that non-Oriental dancer[s] could present an authentic performance of an Oriental dance”⁷², Indian influence and orientalist kinesthetics had been baked into her movement. Whether out of respect to Denishawn, or in spite of efforts to decouple from them, Graham could not totally erase yoga from her technique, even as it substantially evolved.

Nor is this to characterize Graham as some kind of victim of Denishawn. Wheeler writes, “In terms of both body technique and theatre aesthetic, it was for Graham to explore the full potential lying in the Oriental heritage she personally inherited from St. Denis”⁷³, stressing that Graham’s own deep interest in Eastern philosophies drew her to St. Denis in the first place and that “an interest in Eastern style and philosophy remained with her even after leaving the Oriental trappings of Denishawn”⁷⁴.

While Eileen Or attributes hallmarks of Graham’s technique, such as contraction and release, to her study of the “ancient Indian system of yoga”, she is also careful not to exaggerate the significance of this connection, noting that “no Indian dancer or choreographer has ever come up with a dance technique that is remotely similar to that of Graham’s”⁷⁵. Scholars who have identified Graham’s yoga background as key to the development of her technique invariably find themselves on one side or the other of a cultural debate. If Graham’s modernist choreography as initiated with early works such as *Heretic* (1929) did not outwardly resemble either yoga exercises or any known form of Indian dance, how can we say there was appropriation? Kara Lynn Miller claims that, for inspiration, both St. Denis and Graham accessed “cultural bodies of knowledge” that were deliberately abstracted to avoid being absorbed or understood:

What early modern dancers such as Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham did was to enact their own voices by silencing the voices of Indian yoga practitioners who had inequitable power relations in the early to mid-1900s[...] They prefer to remain unidentified for many reasons which may include a need for protection from commodification, to avoid misrepresentation, or as a strategy of resistance to adaption to a mainstream secular frameworks or particular religious dominant discourses⁷⁶.

Miller, Wheeler, and Aubrecht all decry appropriation of yoga and Indian techniques by Graham, who they do not perceive as adequately acknowledging and valuing her predecessors. Though Miller attempts to explain the lack of acknowledgement of yogic knowledge, Or does not view their intellectual effects on Graham as carrying over to Graham’s movement practice. Aubrecht shows concern for the “labor of the yogis and yoga teachers” of both St. Denis and Graham, “such as Swami Vivekananda, Swami Paramananda, Yogi Vithaldas, and A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, who strategically and selectively emphasized aspects of their yoga teaching to suit contemporaneous cultural trends and confront Orientalist fantasies”⁷⁷. Yet, these thinkers fail to acknowledge the positive impact of Indian yoga philosophies on Graham’s technique, particularly on her approaches to energy and to female-centric narrative. If what Graham did in no way resembled Indian dance mustn’t we conclude that she used these influences to develop something new? I will now go on to explore the connection between *kundalini* yoga, energy, and the Graham contraction, and how they come together as a liberatory force for Graham’s female characters.

During the 1930s, when Graham is thought to have discarded the exotic trappings of the Denishawn aesthetic, she nevertheless retained yoga in her own teaching and in the development of her training technique.

⁷¹ Reynolds, *Rhythmic Subjects*, 100.

⁷² Amy Koritz, *Culture Makers: Urban Performance and literature in the 1920s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 103.

⁷³ Wheeler, “Surface”, 104.

⁷⁴ Wheeler, “Surface”, 111–112.

⁷⁵ Or, “Body and mind”, 208.

⁷⁶ Miller, “Re-imaging Modern Dance”, 61.

⁷⁷ Aubrecht, “Choreographers and Yogis”, viii.

4. Virility and Kundalini Abstraction

This paper takes things a step further, finding that the virile energy that defines Graham's early technique came from the same Indian philosophies that also informed Indian pioneer dancer Rukmini Devi Arundale in the development of *Bharatanatyam*. According to both Dee Reynolds and Mark Franko, virility is a crucial part of Graham's approach to feminism in dance. Aubrecht counters Franko, writing, "Dance scholar Mark Franko argues that 'Graham's experimental work in the late twenties and early thirties attempted to define human presence in purely bodily terms'"⁷⁸. Aubrecht sees Graham's formalism at this time as a way to mask her indebtedness to Denishawn. However, as it turns out, a focus on bodily movement in and for itself was also one of the primary goals of dance in the Indian classical revival. Graham's development of "Deep Stretches" in the late 1920s "therefore would have allowed Graham to develop her expressivity of her new technique through bodily manipulation"⁷⁹.

Dance scholar Amy Koritz points out that "the decade of the 1920s, sandwiched between the dual traumas of World War I and the Depression, nurtured the emergence of modern dance"⁸⁰. Women's participation in World War I raised new questions about women's social role. Amid optimism among American women about being embraced by society, it is notable that Graham's work began to take virility as a core theme and treat virile gestures as beautiful. In his discussion of Graham's formalism, Franko explains that "Graham was *not* emotivist precisely because she was feminist and purposefully avoided identification with the feminine as powerless"⁸¹. Not only does Graham resist portraying the feminine as weak, she indeed portrays it as powerful, drawing on Indian technique and narrative, including what Reynolds calls her "virile rhythms"⁸².

Reynolds cites a passage from *Blood Memory* in which Graham says she believed "energy is the thing that sustains the world and the universe... begins with breath"⁸³. Reynolds also refers to Or's observation that passive inhale and the active exhale cause a "radiating" of energy to all parts of the body⁸⁴. Graham's contraction and release initiates dramatically from the center, "where the torso 'contracts', tenses and hollows when the dancer exhales, and 'releases' when air returns to the lungs"⁸⁵. The breathing in her contraction and release is both a direct engagement with Indian technique and a use of female physical energy aggressive enough that it would typically be considered masculine. Graham was interested in percussive energies, which she calls "masculinist" and also "nationalist" within her modern framework: "Martha Graham's rhythmic innovations drew on the percussive energies of an aggressively masculinist and Americanist modernism, which she appropriated for the empowerment of the female dancer"⁸⁶. Reynolds discusses Graham's virile rhythms and empowering energies in her early technique up through 1938, after which Graham would grow fascinated with the psychoanalytic theories of Carl Gustav Jung, which were strongly influenced by Indian ideas.

5. The 1930s, Graham's New Technique, and Rukmini Devi Arundale

Beginning in the late 1930s, Graham became friends with Rukmini Devi Arundale, who was developing *Bharatanatyam*, a modern form of Indian classical dance modernity. She was also an ardent follower of theosophy through her husband George Arundale, and mentor Annie Besant, and had been heavily influenced/inspired by Anna Pavlova. Pavlova had asked Rukmini Devi Arundale, and Uday Shankar to work on and develop Indian dance instead of dancing Ballet. Rukmini Devi Arundale and Uday Shankar took major steps in bringing in modernity to the dance scene in

⁷⁸ Franko cited in Aubrecht, "Choreographers and Yogis", 85.

⁷⁹ Aubrecht, "Choreographers and Yogis", 85.

⁸⁰ Koritz, *Culture Makers*, 2.

⁸¹ Franko, *Dancing Modernism*, 44.

⁸² Reynolds, *Rhythmic Subjects*, 91.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

India during the 1930s. While Arundale institutionalized her dance with the name *Bharatanatyam*, effectively *sanskritizing* it, Shankar brought a new perspective through his Indian modern dance⁸⁷. This paper parallels Graham and Devi as contemporaneous creators of dance modernity. Graham held onto her yoga background but transformed Denishawn's exoticized mimicry into a portrayal of inner psychological depth. From the idea of *kundalini* energy, she developed the contraction and other percussive techniques using rising energy and the spine.

Starting in the second half of the twentieth century, modernism also played a vital role in developing Indian national identity in every field, including the cultural domain. Entering a new post-colonial age, India was rediscovering and renegotiating its national identity. Classical Indian dances were being re-constructed and traditional dance forms were going through revivals. In *Art for a Modern India*, art historian Rebecca M. Brown noted that, “this move toward a universal modern is countered by a desire to recover the supposed ‘truth’ of Indian culture”⁸⁸. The truth of Indian culture was lodged in its ancient dance forms. Thus, as Brown asserts, the paradox arose, “How to be simultaneously modern and Indian”⁸⁹.

According to Tejaswini Niranjana, “Nationalism was a marker of the readiness to enter the ‘modern’ age, and the modern person produced as ‘Indian’ was also the free, agentive, romantic subject of liberal humanism”⁹⁰. Indian modernism is understood as that large imagined space that claimed the nomenclature of ‘the new,’ an ideal community freed from colonial domination, inequalities of caste-class, community, and gender⁹¹. Here, we see Enlightenment ideals of freedom and human subjectivity conjoined with the anti-representational goals of aesthetic modernism. Brown defines modern as “a particular approach to the world embodied in an epistemology of progress, a faith in universals, the primacy of the subject, and a turning away from religion toward reason”⁹². On the other hand, Niranjana investigates the significance of the cultural politics of rethinking modernity, modernism, and what the modern meant for India as a nation that was “not rejecting but reappropriating, hoping to engage in a politics that mobilizes alternative histories, other genealogies of the modern”⁹³.

Several decades earlier, Rukmini Devi Arundale had played a foundational role in reconstructing *Bharatanatyam*, bringing together the rhythmic footwork of Sadi dance, which was performed only by male Gurus, and the expressive dance performed by the *devadasis* (temple dancers). This combined dance vocabulary of masculine rhythm and feminine expression dovetails with Graham's ideas of rhythmic virility. Like Graham, Rukmini Devi was also female-centric in the Indian context as she attempted to redeem the besmirched reputation the temple dancers had acquired under British colonialism. Dance scholar Uttara Asha Coorlawala wrote on this context, noting, “Orientalist discourse and Christian dualist concepts of separating sensuality and spirituality, generated the perception of exploited womanhood”⁹⁴.

Graham's friendship with Rukmini Devi Arundale is known to us from an unpublished manuscript of Devi's found in Graham's folders at Library of Congress⁹⁵, and from the chapter “Yoga: Art or Science?” in a book titled *Where Theosophy and Science Meet; A Stimulus to Modern Thought*,

⁸⁷ See Kakali Paramguru, “India's Graham: Martha Graham's Impact on Indian Modern Dance”, *The Journal of Society for Dance Research* 42, no.2 (November, 2024): 164–199; and Paramguru, “Martha Graham and India”, 66–102 and 152–196 https://scholarshare.temple.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12613/8582/PARAMGURU_temple_0225E_15245.pdf?sequence=1 for Graham's connection to Uday Shankar and his grandchildren.

⁸⁸ Rebecca M Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1.

⁸⁹ Brown, *Art*, 2.

⁹⁰ Tejaswini Niranjana, “Introduction: Careers of Modernity”, *Journal of Arts and Ideas* Tulika Print Communication (1993), 1.

⁹¹ Niranjana, “Introduction: Careers of Modernity”, 1.

⁹² Brown, *Art*, 3.

⁹³ Niranjana, “Introduction: Careers of Modernity”, 2.

⁹⁴ Uttara Asha Coorlawala, “The Sanskritized Body”, *Dance Research Journal* 36, no.2 (Winter, 2004): 51.

⁹⁵ The manuscript Rukmini Devi shared with Graham is available at the Library of Congress, Box 225, Folder 4.

Volume II (1951), first published in 1938⁹⁶. Rukmini Devi's involvement with the Theosophical Society had provided her several chances to travel abroad with her husband George Arundale, including to the U.S., where she gave speeches on Theosophy, Indian art, dance and religion in 1938, 1948, and 1952. In her talk on 'The Relationship of India and the West' in 1952, she spoke about *kundalini* yoga:

Imagine the body with all its many *chakras*, with all its many influences. It was said to me at one time by Bishop Leadbeater that India really represented the *kundalini* force of the earth. So think of it that way; the centre from which this vital force throbs, from which that force is distributed, giving out power to the rest of the world, giving that consciousness to the rest of the world... and India itself for thousands of years entirely dedicated to only one thing, the understanding of reality – reality in manifestation, reality unmanifest. So the whole basis of India or Hindustan, as it is called – was the basis of occultism.⁹⁷

This quote contains the idea that *kundalini* theory is closely tied to Indian national identity.

Devi disseminated her manuscript to Graham the year prior. Both dancers' dance modernities view the spine as a crucial "instrument of power", linking the human and divine⁹⁸ through effective posture and breathing techniques. *Kundalini* yoga was just as crucial to Rukmini Devi in bringing out rhythm (*tala*) as it was to Graham in arriving at contraction and release as a percussive phenomenon. Just as Rukmini Devi's use of *kundalini* yoga ties it to Indian identity, Graham tied her own concept of rhythm to American national identity. Rhythm (*tala*) was important to both of them in their notions of virility and dynamic energy⁹⁹.

Dee Reynolds explores how Martha Graham's pursuit of a masculine aesthetic ushered her choreography, marked by strength, power, and explosive energy. This approach offers a contemporary response to traditional notions of "prettiness"¹⁰⁰. As Graham stated, "My first task is to teach them to admire strength – the virile gestures that are evocative of the only true beauty. I try to show them that ugliness may be actually beautiful, if it cries out with the voice of power"¹⁰¹. This dynamic quality is evident in Graham's signature technique of contraction and release of the spine: "you have to let your breath forcibly out through your teeth and feel how the spine pushes outwards and lengthens (contracts) and then breathe in and see what your back does as you stretch your spine upwards (release)"¹⁰².

Rukmini Devi resonates with Graham as she articulates principles concerning *tala*, traditionally imparted by male dance gurus, and *bhava*, which pertains to female temple dancers¹⁰³. She acquired her understanding of *tala* from the distinguished male Guru Shri Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai and learned about *bhava* from Mylapore Gowri Amma. Rukmini Devi emphasizes the significance of integrating *tala* – dance's rhythmic, percussive, and corporeal dimensions – with *bhava*'s emotive and musical qualities. She asserts, "I should wish to learn from two sources of pure tradition as they were complementary, Gowri Amma's guru being Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai"¹⁰⁴. Her conceptualization of beauty and identity is commensurate with Graham's observations

⁹⁶ Rukmini Devi Arundale, "Yoga: Art or Science?", In *Where Theosophy and Science Meet: A Stimulus To Modern Thought*, Volume II, edited by D. D. Kanga, 542-549. (Madras: Adyar Library, 1951).

⁹⁷ Rukmini Devi Arundale, "The Relationship of India and the West: A talk given at the Olcott Summer Session (1952)", *The American Theosophist* 40, no.11 (November, 1952): 203. Her talk is available online at the Charles Library at Temple University.

⁹⁸ Arundale, "Yoga...", 547.

⁹⁹ See Paramguru, "India's Graham", 164-199.

¹⁰⁰ Dee Reynolds, "A Technique for Power: Reconfiguring Economies of Energy in Martha Graham's Early Work", *Dance Research* 20, no.1 (2002): 11.

¹⁰¹ Graham cited in Reynolds, "A Technique for Power", 11.

¹⁰² Jane Dudley's 1997 interview with Henrietta Bannerman, cited in Reynolds, "A Technique for Power", 16.

¹⁰³ Avanti Meduri, *Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904-1986): A Visionary Architect of India Culture and the Performing Arts* (Delhi: Banarsidass, 2005), 201-203.

¹⁰⁴ Meduri, *Rukmini*, 202.

concerning the use of “corporeal experiences” as a means to achieve the “ultimate self”¹⁰⁵. In Rukmini Devi’s perspective:

In the training of the body, in the moulding of its movement into Music made visible with Music’s life-giving gifts of beauty and rhythm, the physical matter which is the body transcends itself... As dance is the conquering of the body, so is music the conquering of the emotions. To transcend both is Yoga, the sound that is physical calling to the eternal self in all. This shows that Art is not a mere expression, or an entertainment, but a Power which can both destroy and build¹⁰⁶.

As Graham was developing her understanding of these breathing and energy principles, she was also gaining familiarity with Jung’s psychoanalytic theories through Erick Hawkins, Jean Erdman, and later on through Joseph Campbell¹⁰⁷. Franko credits Campbell for “establishing the compelling positioning of the dream between the psyche and myth”¹⁰⁸, and Hawkins for deepening “the presence of myth in Graham’s thinking, although she derived the psychoanalytic aspects of it from other sources”¹⁰⁹. Jung derived his psychoanalytic theories from Indian philosophies as part of his other Eastern influences, with which Graham’s own familiarity and facility made Jung highly accessible to her. From the 1930s well into the 1940s, psychoanalysis, and particularly dream, began to feature prominently in her work. Graham embraced Campbell’s notion that dreams lie between psyche and myth, leading to multiple choreographies that use Indian myth to illuminate the female psyche. As de Mille describes it, “Martha had absorbed from Ruth St. Denis a deep respect and sympathy for the ways and point of view of India. But the real Hindu thinking was still unknown to her, until Carl Jung gave her the insight she needed and she was able to seize on its vitalities and use them”¹¹⁰.

The Notebooks of Martha Graham bear out how *kundalini*, the myth of Goddess Kali, and further Indian ideas integrated into her theory and practice¹¹¹. Despite de Mille describing Jung’s Indian ideas as “real Hindu”, Jung scholars acknowledge that he was working with orientalized interpretations. Graham seems to have seen through Jung in her own way, taking liberties with how she employed his theories and remaining open to a wide range of other thinkers from Ananda K. Coomaraswamy to her own friends and collaborators. This would be a long-term, cultivated interest for Graham, both pre- and post-dating her visit to India during her 1955–56 Asian Tour. A letter addressed to her near the end of the tour by L.W. Neustadter M.R.I. from Santa Barbara showed gratitude for “recommending” he read *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art*¹¹².

6. The Notebooks of Martha Graham

This final section examines the works of Indian and Indian-inspired thought that Graham quotes in her *Notebooks* to gain a fuller picture of India as it existed in Graham’s imagination and as it influenced her work in the 1940s through 1960s. The examined texts fall into two categories: Western psychoanalytic studies that reflect orientalist premises and Indian revivalist texts motivated by nationalist objectives. In Graham’s *Notebooks*, these two genres are integrated

¹⁰⁵ Reynolds, “A Technique for Power”, 6.

¹⁰⁶ Arundale, “Yoga...”, 546–547.

¹⁰⁷ Franko, *Martha Graham in Love and War*, 26.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹⁰ De Mille, *Martha*, 251.

¹¹¹ Martha Graham, *The Notebooks of Martha Graham* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973).

¹¹² Library of Congress, Correspondence Dealing with Activities of the Martha Graham Center of Contemporary Dance and the Martha Graham School, Box 230, Folder year 1957, 56, 51, 58. Refers to Heinrich Zimmer, *Myth and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, edited by Joseph Campbell, The Bollingen Series VI (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., 1946).

into a sophisticated theory of India that is both orientalist and insightful¹¹³. Wheeler states that *Notebooks* provides an “index into Graham’s considerable contact with the Orient [...] inspiration Martha Graham drew from the East”¹¹⁴.

Notebooks include references to Indian texts *Rig Veda*, *Upanishads*, *Kundalini Yoga*, and *Tantra* in the context of Jung’s *Psychology of Consciousness*¹¹⁵, and *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*¹¹⁶, Zimmer’s *Philosophies of India*¹¹⁷, ancient Indian dramatic text *Nāṭyaśāstra* from Coomaraswamy’s book *The Mirror of Gesture*¹¹⁸, *The Dance of Shiva*¹¹⁹, and *The Transformation of Nature in Art*¹²⁰, E. B. Havell’s unpublished work “The History of Aryan Rule in India” (referred to by Zimmer and Campbell)¹²¹, *Ideals of Indian Art* by E. B. Havell¹²², Santha Rama Rau’s *Home to India*¹²³, and R. S. Pandit’s *Ritusamhara or the Pageant of the Seasons* translated from the original Sanskrit texts of fourth century Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa¹²⁴.

Coomaraswamy and Havell were interested in demonstrating the existence of an ancient, sophisticated heritage of Indian art based on the philosophies of Vedanta and yoga, which they wished to become the foundation of a proud new Indian identity¹²⁵. This mystical view of India’s past resembles Jung’s orientalism¹²⁶, portraying India as spiritually rich in a way the West does not see itself. Sections of *Notebooks*¹²⁷ on *The Dark Meadow of the Soul* (1946) include nine references to Jung’s Indian ideas. On pages 184 and 197, Graham quotes Jung’s interpretation of *Rig Veda* and *Kundalini Yoga*. This mystical view of India reappears in Heinrich Zimmer’s writing on *Tantra* as well as in Campbell, who Franko describes as a “politically conservative” thinker with enthusiasm for myth, “along with his devotion to Jung”¹²⁸.

This prompts an examination of the multi-layered appropriation of the orientalized interpretations of Indian philosophical aesthetics in Graham’s modern dance. Notably, Coomaraswamy¹²⁹ influenced not only Graham but also figures such as Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis, along with numerous Indian dancers and scholars in the early twentieth century. His essay,

¹¹³ See Paramguru, “India’s Graham”, 164-199; and Paramguru, “Martha Graham and India” https://scholarshare.temple.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12613/8582/PARAMGURU_temple_0225E_15245.pdf?sequence=1.

¹¹⁴ Wheeler, “The Orient”, 41.

¹¹⁵ Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology of Consciousness* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916).

¹¹⁶ Carl Gustav Jung, *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, translated by R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).

¹¹⁷ Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, edited by Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951).

¹¹⁸ Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, and Gopala Kristnaya Duggirala, *The Mirror of Gesture: Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1917).

¹¹⁹ Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Essays* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India Pvt Ltd, (1918) 2013).

¹²⁰ Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935).

¹²¹ Wheeler, “The Orient”, 41-51 and Wheeler, “Surface”, 122.

¹²² E. B. Havell, *Ideals of Indian Art* (London: John Murray, 1911).

¹²³ Santha Rama Rau, *Home to India* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1945).

¹²⁴ R. S. Pandit, *Ritusamhara or the Pageant of the Seasons* (Bombay: The National Information and Publications Ltd., 1947).

¹²⁵ Matthew Harp Allen, “Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance”, *The Drama Review* 41, no.3 (T155) (Fall) (1997): 85.

¹²⁶ Jung, *Psychology*; Carl Gustav Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952); Jung, *Archetypes*; and Carl Gustav Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (Anchor Press, London: Aldus Books, 1964).

¹²⁷ Graham, *The Notebooks*, 167-197.

¹²⁸ Franko, *Martha Graham in Love and War*, 27.

¹²⁹ Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), born in Ceylon to Sir Muttu Coomaraswamy and Elizabeth Beeby, was a noted aesthetician and historian of South Asian art. After his father died in 1879, he grew up in England and earned his doctorate from London University in 1906. In 1917, he donated his art collection to the Boston Museum, creating a dedicated section for Indian art. Allen, “Rewriting”, 84.

The Dance of Shiva, published as a book in 1918, played a pivotal role in popularizing the Nataraj image¹³⁰. In 1926, during Denishawn's Asian tour, Shawn created *Cosmic Dance of Siva* while in India. His 1929 book, *Gods Who Dance*, reflects his deep engagement with Coomaraswamy's ideas¹³¹. Graham, too, incorporated references to Shiva and Kali in her notes¹³². Additionally, Coomaraswamy's essays modernized the Indian public's understanding of devadasis or temple dancers¹³³. In the 1930s, Rukmini Devi Arundale introduced the idea of placing Lord Shiva or Nataraja¹³⁴ on stage to create a temple-like atmosphere and positioning the "New Nayaka" ("new male protagonist") as a central figure in the revival of dance¹³⁵.

Coomaraswamy's *The Mirror of Gesture* remains a key manual on Indian classical dance, emphasizing hand gestures' meanings and applications. Graham references it in her chapter "Later Thoughts on Heloise and Abelard", quoting Natya Sastra on creating the first theatre and noting that "the mirror which reflects this image is gesture"¹³⁶. Coomaraswamy regards this reflection as "the noble artificiality of Indian technique"¹³⁷. Still, it is difficult to prove that Graham's understanding of these concepts extends past citations in her notes, or that her implementation of them in her choreography is more than (co)incidental.

Orientalist thought has dominated both how the West has perceived Indian dance and how Indian dancers themselves have formed their own creative practices. But while orientalist ideas no doubt seeped into Graham's thinking, she also engaged with writers and creators at various points on both nationalist and modernist spectra, who were themselves contending with orientalism and its consequences. Graham's modernity is thus less derivative of orientalist literature than of the confluence between orientalism, nationalism, revivalism, mysticism, classicism, and modernism in Indian art and philosophy.

Graham engaged with various authors, including Indian writers Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, Santha Rama Rau, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, and classicist Richard Broxton Onians¹³⁸, French philosopher Paul Masson-Oursel¹³⁹, and German Indologist Heinrich Robert Zimmer¹⁴⁰. Their work contributed to "textual Orientalism", a term by Priya Srinivasan that describes the interpretation of India for Euro-Americans¹⁴¹. Graham's notes reveal a contradictory collage of textual Orientalism and modern Indian interpretations. While textual Orientalism is seen in American Transcendentalists such as Thoreau and Emerson, the *Bhagavad Gita* has circulated in the U.S. since the early nineteenth century, heavily influenced by Orientalist translations.

St. Denis and her generation indirectly encountered Vedanta philosophy through textual orientalism, such as *Bhagavad Gita* and Jung, who inspired scholars like Masson-Oursel, Campbell, and Zimmer to explore the connections between Eastern philosophy and human psychology¹⁴².

¹³⁰ Allen, "Rewriting", 83.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹³² Graham, *The Notebooks*, 87–221. These pages cover six dances choreographed by Graham: *Alcestis* – first performed April 29, 1960, *Eye of Anguish* – first performed January 22, 1950, *Ardent Song* – first performed March 18, 1954, *Canticle for Innocent Comedians* – first performed April 22, 1952, *Seraphic Dialogue* – first performed May 8, 1955, and *The Triumph of Saint Joan* – first performed December 5, 1951.

¹³³ Daves Soneji, *Bharatanatyam. A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xxvii.

¹³⁴ Lord Shiva is also addressed as "Nataraj", which means 'King of dance.'

¹³⁵ Allen, "Rewriting", 83.

¹³⁶ Graham, *The Notebooks*, 421–422.

¹³⁷ Coomaraswamy cited in Graham, *The Notebooks*, 422.

¹³⁸ Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1951).

¹³⁹ Paul Masson-Oursel, "The Indian Theories of Redemption in the Frame of the Religions of salvation", In *Papers from the Eranos Yearbook, Eranos 2: The Mysteries*, ed. by Joseph Campbell, 3–13 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955).

¹⁴⁰ Zimmer, *Myth*, and Zimmer, *Philosophies*.

¹⁴¹ Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris*, 52.

¹⁴² Starting in 1933, they held annual *Eranos* meetings to share their work on human aspiration and realization. Joseph Campbell, ed. *Papers from the Eranos Yearbook, Eranos 2: The Mysteries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) xiii.

Masson-Oursel noted the unique combination of interest in the Orient and psychology in Jung's work, prompting the need to clarify the links between analytical psychology and Eastern experiences¹⁴³. However, this experience is problematic, as it conflates diverse Indian concepts with those from China, Egypt, Greece, etc. Onians¹⁴⁴ similarly construed "European thought" in such a way that relegates everything out of its bounds to a dichotomous 'non-European' category. Here again we are called upon to assess Graham's orientalism, this time in relation to her readings¹⁴⁵.

Dance scholars Avanthi Meduri and Jeffrey L. Spear argue that Orientalism "resuscitated the romantic mystique of the eastern dancer in the West just as South Indian dancers were being repressed in their homeland by Indian reformers influenced by western mores"¹⁴⁶. Their research emphasizes how late 19th-century events shaped elements of Indian culture, drawing parallels between European classicism and Orientalist mysticism, aiming to extract valuable "principles" from a perceived lost ideal past for modern application. This impulse to 'revive' lost works from textual antiquities such as sacred Vedic literature in Sanskrit is evident in the effort of Orientalist scholars from France, England, and Germany, who aimed to translate the second-century Sanskrit text *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a foundational manual for Indian dance and drama¹⁴⁷.

This began a transnational, textually orientalist project of recovering Indian performing art antiquity, yielding a body of work that would be formative for Martha Graham. Throughout her life, she would return to concepts and characters carried over from these texts, including *karma*, rebirth, liberation, *tantra*, *kundalini*, Goddess Kali/Shakti (power), and Lord Shiva. She availed herself throughout her career of dramatic devices revived for post-colonial Indian audiences, such as metadrama, staging memory, *māyā* (illusion), and psychology of emotion, particularly *rasa*¹⁴⁸. The yoga theories and philosophies of *tantra*, *māyā* (illusion), knowledge, and Goddess Kali also can be studied as non-oriental Indian literature.

7. Conclusion

Martha Graham's early exposure to Indian culture, influenced by her mentor Ruth St. Denis, was a unique blend of yoga and a caricatured view of Indian traditions. After leaving Denishawn, Graham's work, particularly in *The Flute of Krishna* (1926), stood out for its distinct reflection of these influences. A comparative analysis shows that her portrayal of Radha connects more deeply to Indian aesthetics than St. Denis's efforts. Key dramaturgical concepts, notably the branch metaphor, vividly illustrate the evolution of her unique artistic vision in connection with Indian theater.

Graham's interaction with Indian dance underscores distinct modernist trajectories in both cultures. In the 1920s, India's modern dance scene emerged through the revival of classical forms, while Martha Graham transformed exotic mimicry into performances with deep psychological meaning. Rukmini Devi Arundale developed *Bharatanatyam*, merging masculine rhythms with feminine expressions, which aligned with Graham's ideas on rhythmic virility. Both artists were influenced by their understanding of the spine from *kundalini* yoga, as their work encapsulates a complex political context and a theoretical framework that explores movement beyond mere identity and character, highlighting a nuanced relationship between identity, influence, and modernity.

¹⁴³ Masson-Oursel, "The Indian Theories", 3.

¹⁴⁴ Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*.

¹⁴⁵ For an analysis of Orientalism, see Paramguru, "Martha Graham and India", 22–65. https://scholarshare.temple.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12613/8582/PARAMGURU_template_0225E_15245.pdf?sequence=1.

¹⁴⁶ Avanti Meduri, and Jeffrey L. Spear, "Knowing the dancer: East meets West", *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32, no. 2 (2004): 435.

¹⁴⁷ Meduri, and Spear, "Knowing the dancer"; and Soneji, *Bharatanatyam*.

¹⁴⁸ See Paramguru, "Martha Graham and India", 22–65, 103–151. https://scholarshare.temple.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12613/8582/PARAMGURU_template_0225E_15245.pdf?sequence=1

Graham deepened her understanding of Indian aesthetics through the works of Indian, Ceylonese, and Western thinkers, as noted in her *Notebooks*¹⁴⁹. Her artistic journey transitioned from technical innovations influenced by yoga to a dance theater form shaped by Indian theater and philosophy. Her ballet *Clytemnestra* (1958) is a notable example of this synthesis, occurring shortly after her State Department-backed tour of Asia, including India, from 1955 to 1956. This period was marked by significant discussions on universalism and cultural exchange, which influenced the reception of her work in India. Graham's friendship with Indian classical dancers, such as Balasaraswati and Shanta Rao, was crucial in establishing diplomatic bridges during the Cold War, fostering enduring relationships that inspired a generation of Indian dancers to pursue Graham's technique. My Ph.D. dissertation, *Martha Graham and India*, explores the influence of Indian aesthetics on Graham's work from the 1920s to 1958 and her impact on Indian modern dance from 1964 to 2000. It challenges the idea of cultural appropriation, highlighting a reciprocal relationship that enhanced Indo-American relations through cultural exchange. Graham's integration of Indian theories fostered a creative process that allowed Indian dancers to transform these concepts further¹⁵⁰. As an Odissi dancer, I recognize the potential within Indian theories to inspire new dance techniques and promote cross-cultural interactions.

8. Conflict of interests

None

9. References

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¹⁴⁹ Graham, *The Notebooks*.

¹⁵⁰ Paramguru "India's Graham", 164-199; and Paramguru "Martha Graham and India" https://scholarshare.temple.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12613/8582/PARAMGURU_temple_0225E_15245.pdf?sequence=1.

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