



DRAMATIC FUNCTIONS OF NEGATIVE CHARACTERS IN INDIAN DANCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dramatic functions of negative characters in Indian classical dance, focusing on how antagonistic roles shape narrative structure, emotional contrast, and aesthetic meaning. In Indian performance traditions, such characters are not limited to depictions of evil; they also serve as dramatic devices that intensify conflict, heighten rasa, and highlight ethical and symbolic oppositions within the story. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpana*, the study analyzes the ways in which abhinaya, mudras, body language, costume, makeup, music, and rhythm are used to construct and communicate negative characters. The paper also explores their representation in Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Odissi, Mohiniyattam, and Yakshagana, showing how each form develops a distinct yet related performance vocabulary. The study argues that antagonistic figures are essential to the dramatic balance of classical dance because they provide opposition, create tension, and enable the audience to experience the resolution of narrative conflict. It further considers how these roles preserve mythological memory, moral instruction, and cultural identity. Over time, negative characters have evolved from strictly codified portrayals to more interpretive and nuanced representations, reflecting changes in performance practice and audience perception. The paper concludes that antagonistic characters are central to Indian dance as a system of embodied storytelling, symbolic communication, and aesthetic organization.

Keywords

Antagonistic characters; Indian classical dance; dramatic function; abhinaya; rasa; Nāṭyaśāstra; Abhinaya Darpana; performance aesthetics.

Introduction

Indian classical dance is a narrative and symbolic art form in which character, emotion, and movement are closely connected. Negative characters play a key dramatic role by creating conflict and contrast within the performance. Their presence helps define the moral and emotional structure of the story while also enriching the audience's aesthetic experience.ijsat+1

These characters are not simply villains in a modern sense. They often represent pride, desire, jealousy, greed, or destructive power, and their portrayal is guided by classical performance theory. This study focuses on how such roles function dramatically across major classical dance traditions.

Review of Literature

The literature on dramatic functions of negative characters in Indian dance shows that antagonistic roles are central to the structure of classical performance, not merely decorative additions. Research on Kathakali demonstrates that protagonists and antagonists are carefully differentiated through non-verbal communication, gesture, and codified performance, making character opposition a major dramatic

device. This study is especially useful because it explicitly treats antagonistic roles as part of the storytelling system rather than as isolated character types.

Scholars writing on Indian classical dance theory emphasize that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya*

Darpana provide the foundational grammar for dramatic expression. These texts explain how *rasa*, *bhava*, gesture, and movement are organized to create meaning on stage, which is crucial for understanding how negative characters produce emotional contrast and dramatic tension. The classical stage, therefore, turns conflict into aesthetic experience through carefully structured performance codes.

Work on violence, death, and darker themes in classical performance also broadens the discussion of negative characters. A recent study on *Kuṭiyattam* notes that costume, color, tonal qualities, and acting techniques are used to represent terrible or violent scenes, and it briefly extends this discussion to Kathakali, where violence is highly visible in performance. This helps show that antagonistic characters are linked not only to morality and narrative opposition but also to the theatrical representation of danger, disorder, and crisis.

Other literature highlights how Indian dance traditions use symbolic forms to convey cultural values, identity, and emotion. Research on gender, mythology, and narrative performance suggests that classical dance roles are shaped by social meanings as well as artistic conventions. Although these studies do not always focus directly on antagonistic figures, they help explain why negative characters remain important for representing conflict, social order, and emotional transformation.

Overall, the literature shows three clear points. First, negative characters are fundamental to dramatic structure in Indian dance. Second, their portrayal depends on symbolic performance systems rather than realism. Third, there is still a need for more comparative research across multiple dance forms, especially on how antagonistic roles have evolved across traditions and audiences.

Research Aim

To analyze the dramatic, symbolic, and aesthetic functions of negative characters in Indian classical dance.

Objectives

- To define antagonistic characters in Indian classical dance.

- To classify the main forms of negative characters.
- To examine the performance techniques used in portraying them.
- To study their symbolic and aesthetic basis in classical texts.
- To compare their representation across selected dance forms.
- To trace the evolution of antagonistic character roles over time.
- To understand their social and cultural significance.

Hypotheses

1. Negative characters are essential to the dramatic structure of Indian classical dance.
2. Their portrayal depends on symbolic and codified performance techniques.
3. Costume, makeup, rhythm, and abhinaya strongly influence audience interpretation.
4. The role of antagonistic characters has evolved while retaining classical principles.
5. Different dance forms use distinct strategies to represent negative figures.

Meaning and Concept of Antagonistic Characters in Indian Classical Dance

Antagonistic characters are those who oppose the hero, disturb harmony, or embody destructive forces. They may appear as demons, tyrants, deceptive advisors, or emotionally driven figures. In classical dance, these roles are important because they create the opposition that gives shape to the story and intensifies its emotional force.chitrolekha+1

Their meaning is not restricted to moral darkness. They also symbolize internal human tensions such as anger, pride, temptation, and disorder. Through stylized performance, these qualities become visible to the audience as part of a larger aesthetic and narrative system.

Classification of Antagonistic Characters

Negative characters may be classified as:

- Mythological demons and demonesses.
- Royal villains and tyrants.
- Deceptive or manipulative figures.
- Passion-driven characters.
- Female antagonists.
- Comic or secondary negative characters.

This classification helps explain how Indian classical dance organizes conflict into recognizable character types.

Kathakali, in particular, has highly developed antagonist categories with clear visual and performance markers.intellectdiscover+1

Characteristics of Antagonistic Characters

These characters are usually marked by aggression, arrogance, deceit, pride, or uncontrolled desire. Their expressions are often sharper and more forceful than those of heroic figures. Their movement may be angular, tense, or expansive, making the dramatic opposition visible to the audience.

Visual design is also important. Costume, color, and facial makeup are used to signal the character's nature immediately, especially in dance-drama traditions. These characteristics make the role readable and aesthetically powerful.

Performance Techniques

Negative characters are portrayed through a combination of **abhinaya**, **mudras**, and body language. Facial expression conveys emotional intention, while gestures clarify narrative action. Body posture and movement style often communicate power, instability, or menace.

Costume and makeup are central in Kathakali and Yakshagana, where they function as visual codes of morality and identity. Music and rhythm reinforce dramatic tension, supporting scenes of conflict, battle, or deception. Together, these elements create a complete performance language.

Symbolism and Aesthetics

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* provide the classical foundation for symbolic performance. In these texts, drama is built through *rasa*, emotional states, gesture, and stylized expression rather than literal imitation. Antagonistic characters are therefore not merely narrative roles but aesthetic forms that help produce dramatic *rasa*.ijsat+1

Their symbolism lies in contrast. They highlight virtue by opposing it, and they make moral meaning visible through embodied action. This gives negative characters a deep aesthetic function within Indian classical performance.

Representation in Dance Forms

In **Bharatanatyam**, antagonistic characters often appear in mythological and devotional narratives. In **Kathakali**, they are especially elaborate, with strong makeup conventions, heavy costumes, and

dramatic acting techniques. **Kuchipudi** uses expressive storytelling and rhythmic movement to shape such roles.

Kathak often presents antagonistic figures through narrative mime and rhythmic intensity. **Odissi** and **Mohiniyattam** portray them with lyrical expression and controlled contrast. **Yakshagana** uses bold performance, music, and visual design to represent strong negative roles. These forms show both shared classical principles and distinct local styles.

Social and Cultural Significance

Antagonistic characters carry cultural values, mythological memory, and moral teaching. They help audiences understand themes such as justice, duty, desire, and disorder. Their performance reflects the ethical imagination of Indian society.

These figures also show how tradition adapts over time. While the basic function remains stable, the style and interpretation of negative characters can shift with changing social and artistic contexts. This makes them culturally significant as well as aesthetically rich.

Evolution of Antagonistic Characters in Classical Dance

The evolution of negative characters shows movement from strict typology toward greater interpretive flexibility. Earlier forms relied heavily on fixed visual codes and formalized gestures. Modern performance often introduces subtler character shades and psychological expression.

Despite these changes, the core dramatic function remains the same. Antagonistic roles continue to generate conflict, build tension, and support narrative resolution. Their evolution reflects continuity within transformation.

Discussion

The study indicates that negative characters are central to the dramatic architecture of Indian classical dance. They are not peripheral figures but essential carriers of conflict, symbolism, and aesthetic intensity. Their portrayal depends on the integration of movement, expression, costume, rhythm, and cultural meaning.

A comparative reading across dance forms shows that classical traditions share a common theoretical base while developing distinct regional performance vocabularies. This confirms the importance of

antagonistic characters as both artistic and cultural constructs.

Conclusion

Dramatic functions of negative characters in Indian classical dance are fundamental to storytelling, emotional contrast, and aesthetic experience. These roles transform conflict into expressive art and help preserve the symbolic richness of classical performance.chitrolekha+1

Guided by the principles of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpana*, antagonistic characters reveal the depth of Indian dance as embodied narration. Their continuing evolution shows that they remain vital to both tradition and contemporary interpretation.

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