

Expression of The Self in Mrinalini Sarabhai's "Voice of The Heart"

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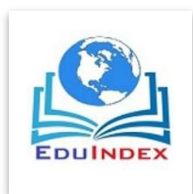
ABSTRACT

This study 'Expression of the Self in Mrinalini Sarabhai's *Voice of the Heart*' is a perfect summary of Mrinalini Sarabhai's life. It was the strong lady Mrinalini Sarabhai who brought the dance form out of the *devdasi* closet and made it not only acceptable but respectable. She was the first classical dancer who became a choreographer. The study talks vividly about the intricacies of Mrinalini's family and relations and simultaneously talks about her passion for dance. The conclusion discusses how autobiographies often tell more than of the self. The book talks about the process of creation of art. Sarabhai's autobiography fills a gaping lacuna in the story of Indian dance during the past seven decades and should be treated as an important filler in that narrative. The career of Mrinalini Sarabhai has made social change, exemplified the development of respectability and helped to create more favourable climate.

KEYWORDS: self, identity, passion, fulfilment, autobiography

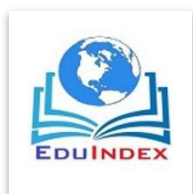
Mrinalini Vikram Sarabhai (11 May 1918 – 21 January 2016) was one of the best known faces of Indian classical dance. Mrinalini was born in Kerala on 11 May 1918, the daughter of social worker and former parliament member Ammu Swaminathan. Mrinalini married the Indian physicist Vikram Sarabhai who is considered to be the Father of the Indian Space Program in 1942. She has a son, Kartikeya and a daughter Mallika who too went on to attain fame in dance and theatre. She was the founder of the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, an institute for imparting training in dance, drama, music and puppetry, in the city of Ahmedabad. She received many awards and citations in recognitions of her contribution to art. She trained over 18,000 students in Bharatnatyam and Kathakali.

She was an expert dancer in Bharatanatyam and Kathakali, and was also a choreographer and a dance instructor. A dynamic personality she believed that new dance forms do evolve over time, but it is also important that they develop from a traditional

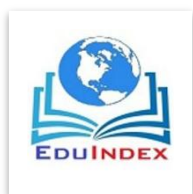


classical foundation. A pioneer in the field of Indian classical dance, she was the first classical dancer who turned to choreography. Mrinalini was among those danseuse who brought the dance form out of the *devdasi* closet and made it not only acceptable but respectable. By the time she gave up regular public performances, almost seven years ago, she had choreographed over 300 dances. Mrinalini was a true pioneer who used the movement vocabulary from several traditional dance idioms to create works that focussed attention on socially relevant topics.

The range of concerns communicated through Darpana's productions also expanded, including issues of women's empowerment, humanism, communalism and intolerance, caste-based discrimination and environmental degradation. Some of Mrinalini's well-known productions are 'Manushya' (1958); 'Shakuntala' (1971), 'Chandalika' (1977), and 'Ganga' (1985). Along the way she established the Centre for Non-Violence through Performing Arts at Darpana in order to creatively reflect on contentious issues of conflict in society. She also started a nature club Prakriti for children, encouraging them to explore ways of coming closer to nature. The other passion in Mrinalini's life was writing. She enjoyed writing on dance and mythology; among her works is a collection of letters exchanged between Sarojini Naidu and Mahatma Gandhi. Mrinalini (2004) writes in her autobiography, "Continuously through the years people ask me, 'What is dance to you?' My reply usually is, 'It is my breath, my passion, myself' (13). She also portrays her life as a girl, her relationship with her parents and with her in-laws, and then how she became a good wife, mother and grandmother and also how she continuously struggled to pursue her career as dancer. Apart from being a loving wife of the renowned personality, Vikram Sarabhai, she has been a responsible mother of two very famous personalities – Mallika Sarabhai and Kartikeya Sarabhai. As soon as she enters the stage, she suddenly finds herself in a place where she has full of liberty to enact bodily postures, expressions and movements, but that too 'within the framework of technique'. She perceives that her inner self fully absorbed in her dance performance communicates with her audience to make them focus on her art.

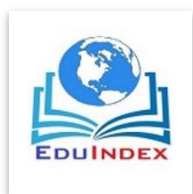


Mrinalini Sarabhai first acquired her fame as a celebrated dancer when she caught attention of the media after her brilliant performance in front of thousands of international audiences in the theatre called the *Palais de Chaillot* in Paris popularly called ‘the Mecca of the Arts’. Mrinalini writes that in Paris, people are more critical, “knowledgeable and powerful, the best in the world” (128) and are more particular about details. The French critics were perceptive and had a taste for the best: “they had watched so many artists and had the power to make or break a career in the west” (128). Performing in front of such audience and critics and winning their hearts and earning their respect and reverence were tough for her but she could succeed. After her performance there, the news in the newspaper read, “Mrinalini Sarabhai has conquered Paris – a great dancer, a great art!” (130). Mrinalini glorifies this moment in her autobiography as things took a turn with this acceptance by Paris critics: “From that moment on, our reviews were ecstatic, contracts poured in, and I became a celebrity in the western world, a ‘professional’ in the toughest profession – show business! (130). It also restored her faith in herself and gave her a better understanding of arts and aesthetics as she writes: When I came to Paris, I was rather worried about how classical South Indian dancing would be received by the audiences. Yet inside me was the great desire to show to the west what to me the most perfect technique was. The manner in which it was appreciated everywhere reaffirmed my belief that art is always able to transcend all barriers of national differences, whether in music, painting or dance, and communicates without words or familiar backgrounds. My belief became a reality on this tour and gave me the courage to work towards a greater artistic understanding between the western and eastern worlds. (131) Mrinalini claims that it was the result of years of hard training. The seed of a bright dancing career was laid in her from the very beginning of her childhood. It was her father who encouraged her to cultivate her art freely. She delves deep into her past and recollects, “MY FATHER SUBBARAMA SWAMINADHAN WAS THE PIVOT OF MY EXISTENCE ... He is as real to me today as then – his smile, his kind, twinkling eyes, and the proud way he steadfastly claimed – ‘This child will be somebody when she grows up . . .’” (15) Her father was a genius and his prediction came to be true. His encouragement and support made her excel as a genuine traditional dancer of Bharatanatyam. As a child, Mrinalini was deeply attached to her



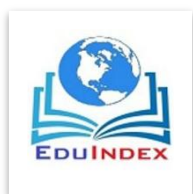
father, who she says, “always called me ‘child’ and that to me is now one of the most evocative terms of endearment in the English language. The only time he was displeased with me was when I would not practice the piano. Somehow I did not like the instrument. Since I loved movement, sitting still was torture” (28-29). She was deeply in love with motion and dynamism. She describes her very first performance on stage as a child at the Museum Theatre in Chennai. She recited the nursery rhyme, ‘To ride a cock horse’ and simultaneously moved around the stage on a wooden horse. Suddenly the head of the horse broke off and it fell on the stage but she hardly cared for it and she went on racing with it round and round as she had never learnt to stop. Mrinalini (2004) writes about this incident: “Perhaps the seeds of professionalism were sown on that day!” (41). Later, at the age of eight, she performed as a serious professional actor in the role of a boy in a play called ‘The Parrot’ at the Museum Theatre in Chennai at the request of her ‘Carb Uncle’, Harindranath. Overwhelmed by her passion for dance, she writes, “For me, too, the stage was magic! . . . and I knew more than ever that I was a dancer, and dance was my life” (73). She was close to her father whose sudden death left her in a state of shock and she bewailed the loss of inspiration. It created a void in her heart. Mrinalini fondly remembers him saying, “My father was my entire life” (30). Talking about her loss, she writes: Only someone who has been through such an experience, who has lost a parent in their childhood, can understand the trauma it produces. I had no one to turn to except my Ayah who understood my sorrow to some extent . . . I learnt that life does not bring happiness alone; that sorrow is a part and parcel of living and that loneliness is something that has to be accepted. (31)

Mrinalini’s self-determination and will-power made her pursue her passion for dance and she says, “Nothing could stop me from dancing” (46). In her childhood, she was sent to Switzerland and there she picked up her first lessons in *Dalcroz*, a Western method of dance. She even enrolled in the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in the United States for a short time. It was at Shantiniketan, Mrinalini bloomed as a dancer and there she realized her dream. She writes that “Shantiniketan was the heart and soul of India’s tradition and progress. For me, at that time, it was the place where I found my own real self and true friends” (61). Talking of Rabindranath Tagore, Mrinalini writes, “He was my guru



in every sense of the word and his dance dramas have been the inspiration for much of my work” (75). Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore once gave her a lead role in his drama *Chandalika* and asked her to choreograph her part on her own; Mrinalini introduced Bharatanatyam in Tagore's dance dramas for the first time gaining much applause and appreciation from him. She was overjoyed with this appreciation of her art: “It was as though something deep within me was liberated and given the authority to be my real self! It was a moment of such intense joy that the radiance, not of his words, but of his acceptance of my individuality, still remains within my heart” (55).

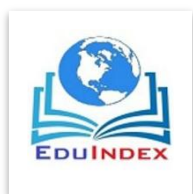
She took Bharathanatyam in the Pandanallur tradition under Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai and in Kathakali under the legendary teacher, Kunju Kurup. She learnt Mohiniattam from Kalyanikuttyamma, the living legend of this ancient tradition. She learnt under such gurus like Muthukumaran Thatha, Chokalingam Pillai and C. R. Acharyalu who left a deep influence on her life. She recalls her rigorous training at Kalakshetra in 1937 under Muthukumara Pillai who initiated her into Bharatanatyam. Mrinalini explains how her teacher was strict with his lessons and how she followed him with full dedication and determination. Pillai realized her hard work and perseverance. He could foresee her talent as Mrinalini says: “We developed a deep attachment for each other, the guru and the student. He told me that he felt that I had a rare gift within me and that he would teach me everything he knew. This was beginning of my real training. Sometimes, if I did something wrong, or was in any way heedless, he would say, ‘I’ll stop the lesson’. the biggest threat of all, for dancing meant everything to me and it was the only discipline I loved. And he knew well how to use that threat! (81) But she would lovingly accept his words and followed him by heart and soul, no matter whether she could hardly walk after her dance classes. Though she got married and delivered a child, she persisted in her practice. Her consistency, integrity and commitment towards her art were appreciated by her guru. Thatha would just drop everything and everyone else and be with me to teach me. He always accepted me as one of his own. He said to me that if anyone could preserve *Bharatanatyam*, I could, and I promised to do my very best always. He often said to the ‘vidwans’ who came to see me practice, ‘Here is somebody with intelligence and



understanding along with dedication, who can really take my kind of dancing everywhere'.
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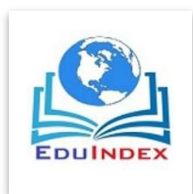
In Bangalore, Mrinalini gave performances with the renowned dancer Ramgopal. But after a certain period of time she realised that Ramgopal never understood the depth of her 'innermost vision' in her dance. To him, continuous appreciation of audience, honours and awards mattered more than the perfection as an artist. Mrinalini left him to carve her own path and grew as a classical as well as creative artist. Mrinalini writes: . . . I began to wonder, when did I grow up? Was it after my father's death? Is there a defining moment of maturity? Yes, there is. The young tearful child, unconsciously realized the new role that had to be played in life, to be a witness of oneself and yet to be immersed deeply in the process of living fully. (31) In common perception, learning music and dance is like following a hobby. A full career on dance was unacceptable in those days when Mrinalini groomed herself up as a dancer. Her family also thought that she would give up dance after marriage. Mrinalini writes, "On the one hand, because I came from what was called a 'respectable and well-known family', the Swaminadhans, people would not take my work seriously. They thought that the minute I got married, like other society girls, I would forget all about dance" (82). She cites many critics of art like G. Venkatachalam who discouraged her. She continued her unconventional career even after her marriage.

Mrinalini achieved public acclamation only after her marriage to Vikram Sarabhai. Vikram supported her whole heartedly. He himself was a renowned scientist and founder of Indian Space Programme and nuclear research. He realised the potential of his wife and helped her pursue her passion. She remembers that when she just began to get fame, many marriage proposals poured in. Mrinalini fell in love with Vikram Sarabhai and was caught in a dilemma about her marriage to him. She knew that marriage might create hurdles. She was apprehensive about her future: ". . . marriage and going away to a strange place frightened me. I was nervous and hesitant because of my dancing" (89). Vikram was different from other men. It was a union of souls where in one enhanced the other's talent. She loved him because he understood her commitment to dance as Mrinalini reflects: "It was some deep yearning within me that found a perfect answer in him" (79). Vikram



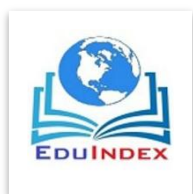
belonged to a reputed family. He had studied abroad but was deeply rooted in his culture. It was due to his support, she continued her career as a dancer. But the family reputation came in her way. People could not understand that dance was not merely a career but her very being was shaped by dance: “. . . when I used to say that ‘Being is what my dancing is’, they hardly understood” (83). When someone commented after her show: “Well, she can dance, after all she is a Sarabhai!” (123), he was undermining her talent. One does not become a great artist by being born in a great family. One had to earn one’s fame through perseverance and hard way of living. Mrinalini writes in her autobiography that she could get success because of Vikram’s support. He accompanied her for most of her performances, whether in India or abroad; many a time, he would stay and manage the household and look after their children when Mrinalini went abroad with her troupe. It was mutual as she also helped him attain eminence as a scientist. Their love and respect for each other counters the notion that the world of science and the world of arts always stand apart. Mrinalini writes, “A scientist speaks about the spaces beyond our planet and its mysteries. A dancer searches spaces within for meaning. Vikram as a scientist, and I as a dancer, shared a togetherness that was hard to define” (80) Marriage alone, however, did not bring fulfillment as she had to face several restrictions because of belonging to a reputed family. Her autobiography depicts the journey of a girl born and brought up in a Kerala *tharavad* to become a daughter-in-law of a reputed Gujarati family. To adjust in an inter-caste and inter-culture marriage is always difficult. She felt very lonely and alienated by the whole family. She could not comprehend Gujarati. Nobody had any time for her. Lack of love and affection accompanied by negligence of her mother-in-law upset her. She felt as if she was an outsider. People do not realize the trauma a girl goes through when she marries into an alien background. Perhaps that is why marriages in India are still arranged by the families, whenever possible . . . Here I felt starved but was too shy to ask for things that I liked. It was as though I did not exist except when we met at lunch or dinner time. It was all so overwhelming. Small happenings, but they left deep scars! (98)

In her autobiography, Mrinalini describes the turmoil, the country was undergoing during freedom struggle when she grew up. Though she herself did not actively take part in the movements, but her own family as well as her in-laws actively participated in it.



However, she faced the worst trauma of her life during one such turmoil. A shell shot from the gun of a policeman exploded in her face, her eyelid was ripped open and her entire face was badly damaged. Doctor insisted on removing one of her eyes as it was badly infected but her father-in-law objected to the decision saying that it would ruin her career as a dancer. Mrinalini (2004) writes: Then began my long ordeal to recovery. For many days I lay dazed, not knowing if I would ever see or dance again. I was not allowed to cry any more. I felt terrified in the complete darkness. I would have given up but for my belief in God, prayer and Vikram. 'I have been born to dance,' I consoled myself. 'This is a passing phase, a deep suffering in order to test me'. . . .The nights were difficult, the feeling of isolation more profound even though I tried to pray. There was no way that the mind with its fears could be silenced. Every minute became more precious, every loved one more dearly. Life becomes valuable only after such harrowing experiences. It is a process of growing up inwardly. (99-100)

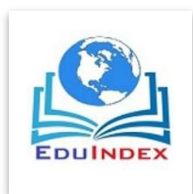
Behind each movement was an inner energy, the result of years of training. It took hundreds of performances and relentless work to establish a reputation of classicism, only then did I present my own perspectives. Sometimes in a composition there is no need for words for they have different meanings. But often words and shapes are born together within my mind. . . .In dance, the body speaks with the power of the mind behind it. In our country, words and music are important in the great oral tradition, but often silence seems more meaningful to me than the totality of universal sound. (11) Mrinalini's creativity attained its fulfillment after *Darpana* achieved international fame. She not only achieved success as a famous dancer but also succeeded in training her own daughter, Mallika and her dancer-daughters at *Darpana*. In an interview with Anjana Rajan, Mallika Sarabhai replied that *Darpana* is described today as a "crucible for the arts across the world". Rajan writes, "Thus Mallika decided that for *Darpana* – which means mirror, in the sense that art is a mirror of society – to remain true to its name, it would have to change so that it reflected the present reality". *Darpana* remained committed to its basic art forms – the Indian classical dances, but it has undergone a huge metamorphosis and changed in keeping with the need of the time, using art in the service of the society as Mrinalini writes: In spite of many hard knocks over the years, I still have faith in the



innate goodness of human beings. There have been many instances of loving relationships with my students and teachers, who left for personal reasons of their own. . . .I feel that the dream Vikram and I shared of having a real Academy for Gujarat has come true. After all, to make a 'state' dance was not a small task! (303)

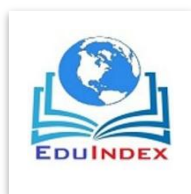
This paper explores the construction of the various aspects of self in the autobiography of a public woman – Mrinalini Sarabhai, writes in her autobiography, the development of her 'self' as a renowned public figure and how she fulfils her role as a daughter, as a wife, and as a mother. An exploration of the self of the author brings out how she fulfilled her domestic roles, people who encouraged and motivated her to pursue her education and subsequently her career, her experiences in acquiring the status of a celebrity, and how the private self and the public self of a celebrity woman exist without clashing with each other. The autobiography demonstrates how Mrinalini has established herself as a dancer, how she has worked to spread *Bharatanatyam* beyond the border of India, how she has used the art of dance and its appeal to audience to eradicate evils of our society. Her autobiography reveals that throughout her life, she has identified her inner self with the art of dance. When she dances, she seems to enact it as divine art. Mrinalini (2004) writes, "When I dance there is a spiritual energy that emanates from the inner depths of my being. Time and again critics have written and people have spoken about this quality" (219). Describing what dance is, Mrinalini explains that the outer expression of face and body involved in dance is the index of the inner sense of the dancer and her inner self are inseparable; both aspire to rise to the same domain – divinity. A well-trained dancer succeeds when she communicates with her surroundings using the art of dance as a language.

The exploration of her 'self' in Mrinalini's autobiography is a testimony to the fact that she has shown the modern India women how to rise and reach their goal in life, how to fulfil their long cherished dream, how to carve a name in the public world, and simultaneously run a home, rear and gear up the career of the children. Her autobiography is a valuable source of inspiration for those women who cherish a dream of setting up their career in the field of dance. 'Oneness', 'wholeness'; 'unity', 'integration' these are the key words in Mrinalini's narrative and the inclusiveness of her self-narration has a visionary,



mystic quality about it. Mrinalini has survived her art through her daughter, Mallika and even her granddaughter, Anahita and grandson, Revanta. She will also live through thousands of her students whom she has trained herself for half a century. In these long years of her devotion to dance, Mrinalini has proved her versatility by engaging in such activities like authoring books and novels, writing poems, cultivating children's literature. She was the chairperson of the Gujarat State Handicrafts and Handloom Development Corporation Ltd. She was one of the trustees of the Sarvodaya International Trust, and was also the chairperson of the Nehru Foundation for Development. The last few lines of her autobiography are the most self-revelatory, she writes when people ask her why she goes on straining herself though she has achieved her fame and is called the Goddess of dance, Mrinalini (2004) answers them in the concluding part of her autobiography: How can I tell them that I am only I when I dance. I am only that 'I AM' when I dance. I am only Eternity when I dance. Silence is my response, movement my answer. What am I but an abstract form in time, born into a land of deepest symbolism, containing within my work the past, the present and the future of a conscious force beyond time, beyond space, the echoes of which may be heard and seen in later vision. . . .Can anyone ever understand these words? There is no separateness in dance and my entire being. It is the radiance of my spirit that makes for the movements of my limbs. (304)

After achieving national and international fame, Mrinalini turned towards reformation of society through dance. She believed that social evils can be eradicated using the art of dance. She felt a responsibility towards society especially to work for the upliftment of the women who are the marginalized in our society. Mrinalini has grown up in matriarchal society in Kerala. It was only in Ahmedabad she observed very closely how women are subjugated under patriarchal system of our society. She felt the need to bring about a public awareness about gender discrimination and domestic violence that women of every class daily endure. Both Mrinalini and her daughter, Mallika, through their creative dance sought justice and freedom from subjugation and violence for women. For decades, both of them singly or jointly performed to spread this social message through their dance: But I felt the need to express my own thoughts in dance dramas, not only for a freedom of form but also to make the performances more varied and creative. I felt that



dance had a social role to play and could speak powerfully through traditional techniques. .
. Dance is an inward journey, a deep personal equation which unfolds before the audience.
It is the self, speaking. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 113)

The most striking part of the book is that it talks about the process of creation of art. Creativity descends from a higher plane and an artist is merely a tool, using which, the Divine communicates with the mundane through art. This idea resonated throughout the book reminding how the divinity in a mortal human existence can only be cultured through disciplined and passionate involvement in excellence, be it in art or science. “All creative work is a mystical experience”, she calmly declares. Inspiration in art is “the spring board for the final work”, she pronounces, and quickly adds: “Inspiration is itself the result of many years of study, of deep knowledge and of hard work”. Her autobiography offers spectacular illustration of this observation. The book opens to the essential understanding that human life cannot be isolated from an engagement of the spirit in a constant search for inclusion and love. The human need to probe, question and find answers is evident in both Science and Art, though is considered ‘rational’ and ‘abstract’.

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