



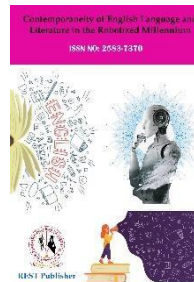
## Contemporaneity of English Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

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# The Mystical Symbolism in Coomaraswamy's The Dance of Shiva

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**Abstract.** In his treatise on "The Dance of Shiva", Ananda Coomaraswamy prefaces his interpretation of the Nataraja idol in Chidambaram with a reference to the origin of Shiva's dance. He speaks of dance as a symbol of primal rhythmic energy. This idea is thousands of years of old. Three significant dance- poses are referred to: The evening dance in the Himalayas, at Kailash. This has been mentioned in the 'Shiva Pradosha Stotra'. The central motif of the dance is Cosmic activity. The dance represents Shiva's five activities performed by the duties. This dance- pose is popular and artistically enchanting. The 'Panchaloha' image of Nataraja is a sculptural wonder. The 'Ananda Thandavam' represents the eternal cycle of creation, preservation and destruction. It merges meta- physics, art and science. 'Unnmai Vilakkam' links Shiva's dance with the Panchakshara 'Shi va ya na mah' which is identified with the mystic syllable 'Om'. The metaphor of the cosmic dance has found its most profound and beautiful expression in Hinduism in the image of Dancing God, Shiva- King of Dancers

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Symbols of Indian Civilization have always been powerful representations of the higher reality. The link between the worlds – the outer and the inner, the higher and the lower- is through the language of symbols. The dance has been one of the most powerful means of such a representation. In his treatise on "The Dance of Shiva", Ananda Coomaraswamy prefaces his interpretation of the Nataraja idol in Chidambaram with a reference to the origin of Shiva's dance. He speaks of dance as a symbol of primal rhythmic energy. This idea is thousands of years of old. Lucian, the great Greek writer, philosopher and rhetorician states that dancing came into existence at the beginning of all things and it was brought to limelight with Eros. This Primal dancing corresponds to the choral dance of the constellations. Coomaraswamy equates Shiva with Eros. As the planets and fixed stars move around in order harmoniously (without collision), they seem to be dancing in a chorus. Shiva has not only created this dance, but also performs it, in the form of constellations. Shiva's dance presents a clear image of the activity of God. It is a unique representation in the history of religion and art of India. After making a brief mention of the three prominent dance- poses of Shiva- namely the Kailas figure. The Tandava and the Nataraja, Coomaraswamy proceeds to dwell at length on the symbolic and mystic aspects of Thillai Nataraja. Coomaraswamy refers to the root idea behind the various dances of Lord Shiva, the Lord of Dancers. It is the manifestation of primal rhythmic energy.

## 2. THE MYSTICAL SYMBOLISM IN COOMARASWAMY'S THE DANCE OF SHIVA

Three significant dance- poses are referred to: The evening dance in the Himalayas, at Kailash. This has been mentioned in the 'Shiva Pradosha Stotra'. It shows Shiva as two- handed, accompanied by divine figures like Saraswathi, Lakshmi, Vishnu, Bhrama and other celestial beings like Gaandharvas, Yakshaas and the like. The Second dance, known as the 'Tandava' depicts Shiva as 'Bhairava' and is portrayed as being performed in the burning grounds. Here, Shiva appears as awe- inspiring lord with ten arms. The awe- inspiring dance is depicted in the ancient: sculpture available at Ellora, Elephanta and Bhubaneswar. This origin of this dance is traced to the pre- Aryan God who is depicted as half- God and half- demon, having his reveals with the other spirits on the burning ground symbolically, the 'Tandava' represents those possessed with wrath and anger. Coomaraswamy

makes special mention of the mystic dance of Shiva performed at Thillai. Chidambaram is also called 'Thillai', after the Thillai trees growing in 'Thillaivanam'. They represent the heart of this universe.

This dance- pose is popular and artistically enchanting. The 'Panchaloha' image of Nataraja is a sculptural wonder. Coomaraswamy cites copious reference to saivite literature to illustrate its symbolic significance. 'Unnmai Vilakam', 'Chidambaram Unnmai' and 'Thirukoothu Dharisanam' give minute details of the dance- image. The Lord has four hands and the lower locks of hair depict a whirling movement. On his head are a writhing cobra, a skull and the Ganga. The Crescent moon rest upon the figure of Ganga. The right ear is adorned with a man's earring. The upper right hand holds drum 'Damaru' and the lower right hand signifies 'Abhaya' (Do not fear). The upper left hand holds a tongue of fire while the lower one points down to the dwarf. Demon under the foot.

Thiruvaasi, the encircling glory that springs from a lotus pedestal borders the ends of the flame from the left hand. Shiva is omnipresent and his dance is being performed in every heart. Those who are enlightened and free from karmas are blessed with a vision of this dance and experience supreme bliss. God dwells within every being and only those who have transcended the Maya can identify himself with the eternal. 'Unnmai Vilakkam', 'the lamp of truth' is a crisp portrayed of saivite principles, written by Manavaasakam Kadanthar, a disciple of Meikandaar. 'Koil Puranam' is written by Mahavidvan Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. Thirumandiram is by Thirumoolar, who asserted 'only one god and one clan'

The central motif of the dance is Cosmic activity. The dance represents Shiva's five activities performed by the duties. They are: 'Shrishti'(creation), 'Sthithi'(preservation), 'Samhara'(destruction), 'Thirobhava'(illusion), 'Anugraha'(Salvation). The 'Damaru'(drum) held in the upper right hand represents 'Nada'(sound) the evolution of the universe. The shape of the drum, with its two conical parts, tells us of nature and energy which combine for all creation.

The tongue of flame in gesture of protection is seen by the right hand held in front. The left foot is raised, telling man that he can raise himself and attain salvation. The right foot, upon which the body of the universe balances, is not on firm ground, but on top of a struggling dwarf- an embodiment of all that veils truth from falsehood. Chidambaram(sabha) symbolizes the universe and the five- fold acts have correspondence with the five elements of Nature (Pancha Bhuta)- Sky, Land, Wind, Water and fire. Shiva, undisturbed by their activity, depicts the Mortal life and the Divine self wonderfully. The image is the combination of God, the solitary one, master of meditation, with the frenzied dance, the yogi and the artist. Ananda Coomaraswamy brings to light the deeper significance of Shiva's dance by referring us to the sacred verses of Thirumoolar and 'Unnmai Vilakkam'. He gives poetic expressions of the self identifying itself with the Lord.

In 'Unnmai Vilakkam', the saint conceives Lord Shiva's dance to be the destruction of the three- fold bond(between the soul and the senses, mind and matter, heaven and earth). Shiva's cosmic function is that of a 'destroyer' and this associates him with the burning ground. It is not just a symbol of death ruling over body and soul. The cremation ground represents the heart of enlightened beings when their ego or self- attachment is destroyed. In this blessed state, they experience 'Ananda'(Supreme bliss) through their vision of Dance.

Lord Shiva is known as 'Sudalaiaandi', the dancer of the 'burning ground', i.e., the purified heart of wordly beings. Coomaraswamy reiterates the role of 'Shakti', an integral part of Shiva. In Bengal, this mother aspect of Shiva is manifested in 'Kali'- the goddess of destruction of evil. References are obtained from Bengali hymns. Ananda(Bliss) is obtained through the scattering away of illusion(Maya), causality(Karma), Evil(Avidya) and thereby, the vision and experience of the cosmic dance in the soul.

The 'Ananda Thandavam' represents the eternal cycle of creation, preservation and destruction. It merges metaphysics, art and science. 'Unnmai Vilakkam' links Shiva's dance with the Panchakshara 'Shi va ya na mah' which is identified with the mystic syllable 'Om'. The 'Thiruvaasi' is itself a visible representation of the book of the letter 'Om'. This arch is 'Omkaara'. The dance of nature is the action of matter representing the rhythm of seasons, light and fire. Chidambaram symbolizes the centre of the Universe and metaphysically, the domain of the heart. 'Koil Puranam' has it that Lord Shiva, along with Vishnu and Adishesha subdued the ferocious heretical Rishis who were out to destroy him. The demonical rishis hurled a fierce tiger at Shiva. The Lord stripped off its skin and wrapped it around Himself. The monstrous serpent sent by them became his garland. A devilish dwarf that threatened to destroy Him was floored and Lord Shiva, pressing His feet on the dwarf, performed the 'Dance of victory over the evil' before the Gods and the Rishis.

At the juncture, Adishesha prayed that he should be blessed with a vision of that cosmic dance. Koil puranam relates that Lord Shiva performed the mystic dance in Thillai (Chidambaram) to please Adishesha.

## 2. CONCLUSION

According to the latest subatomic research the interaction of subatomic particles gives rise to the stable structures, which build- up the material world, which again do not remain static but oscillate in rhythmic movements. Modern

Physics has therefore shown as that the whole three universe is thus engaged in endless motion and activity in a continual cosmic dance of energy. The metaphor of the cosmic dance has found its most profound and beautiful expression in Hinduism in the image of Dancing God, Shiva- King of Dancers.

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