The Undoing Dance

Praise for the Book

'An ace storyteller, Srividya Natarajan is a vastly gifted dancer who learnt from the legendary bharatanatyam guru Kittappa Pillai and trained under the musician T. Brinda. *The Undoing Dance* is an unputdownable saga of devadasis, written in a language that has the fragrance of jasmine garlands and incense, and the light of oil lamps in temples. And the reader will marvel at Natarajan's razor-sharp critique of the world of bharatanatyam dance, its politics and its social milieu' **Sunil Kothari**

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'A slice of cultural history that has remained shrouded in innuendo has been skilfully woven into an unputdownable novel. That the author has first-hand knowledge of the dance style and its nuances is apparent on every page' **Mallika Sarabhai**

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'One of the finest fictional critiques of caste society' ***Outlook***

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The Undoing Dance

Srividya Natarajan

juggernaut

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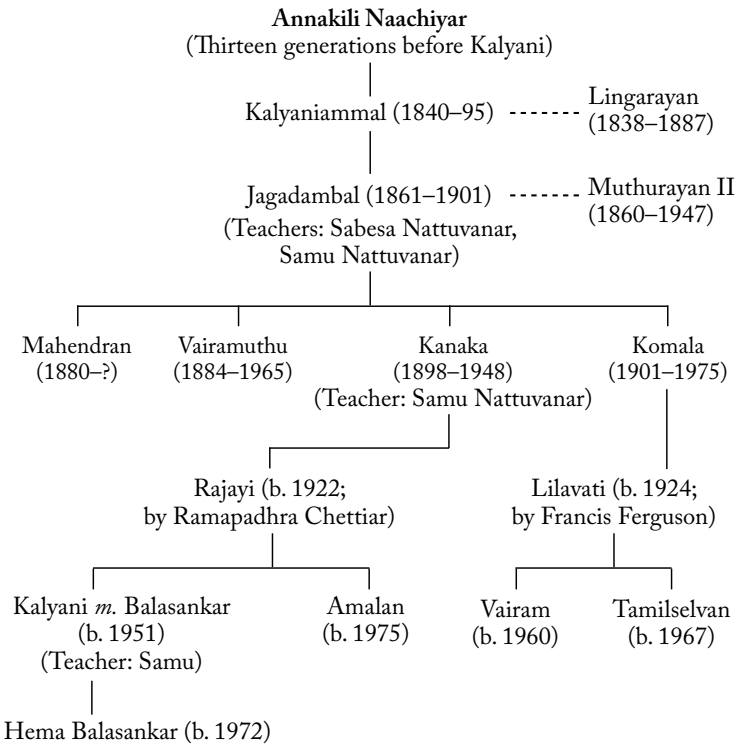
To Nigel and Richard

The Wedding Ring Dance

I dance in circles holding
the moth of the marriage,
thin, sticky, fluttering
its skirts, its webs.
. . .
Underneath the soil lies the violence,
the shift, the crack of continents,
the anger,
and above only a cut,
a half-inch space to stick a pencil in.
. . .
And I keep dancing . . .
and the same radio plays its songs
and I make a small path through them
with my bare finger and my funny feet,
doing the undoing dance,
. . .
letting my history rip itself off me
and stepping into
something unknown
and transparent,
but all ten fingers stretched outward,
flesh extended as metal
waiting for a magnet.

Anne Sexton

LINEAGE


Annakili Naachiyar
(Thirteen generations before Kalyani)
Kalyaniammal (1840–95)
Lingarayan
(1838–1887)
Jagadambal (1861–1901)
(Teachers: Sabesa Nattuvanar,
Samu Nattuvanar)
Muthurayan II
(1860–1947)
Mahendran
(1880–?)
Vairamuthu
(1884–1965)
Kanaka
(1898–1948)
(Teacher: Samu Nattuvanar)
Komala
(1901–1975)
Rajayi (b. 1922;
by Ramapadhra Chettiar)
Lilavati (b. 1924;
by Francis Ferguson)
Kalyani *m.* Balasankar
(b. 1951)
(Teacher: Samu)
Amalan
(b. 1975)
Vairam
(b. 1960)
Tamilselvan
(b. 1967)
Hema Balasankar (b. 1972)

1

Hema

Madras, May 1992

Before Kalyani, who moved like light on the river, there was Rajayi, who could improvise like a poet full of drink. Before Rajayi there was Kanaka, who played male roles better than any man, who danced like thatch on fire, leaping across the temple's flagstones and landing with luminous accuracy on the last beat of a seven-beat cycle.

Before Kanaka was her mother Jagadambal, the king's mistress, who rode with the Raja to the boarhunt, straddling her Kathiawari mare in her dancing woman's flared trousers. Before Jagadambal was Kalyaniammal, whose way with the veenai's strings made war-hardened soldiers cry, for which skill her lover Lingarayan III honoured her by placing her in one pan of a scale and heaping the other pan with gold for her.

Thirteen generations of singers and dancers, dasi women, all the way back to Annakili Naachiyar

at the beginning of the eighteenth century. All that skill, all that craft, wrapped in Kalyani's skin, and I never thinking of her as anything but 'mother' until her fortieth year.

In the Madras Literary Society's dusty stacks I found 'Callianicarah: A Brief Historical Account', by Colonel Dufferin. 'In 1864,' Colonel Dufferin writes:

> In 1864, Lingaroyan III, the twelfth Rajah of Callianicarah, decided that it was impossible to hold out against the British army. His neighbour to the North, Tanjore, had been absorbed into the Empire for want of a natural heir; his neighbour to the west, Poodoocottah, had acknowledged the suzerainty of the government of Madras, and of HM the Queen.
>
> Lingaroyan disbanded his standing army the following year. That included the two hundred militiamen who lived in the vast compound of his mistress Callianiammal, the chief dancing girl of the temple. After these retainers were dispersed, her family was housed in a smaller building on Musicians' Street, and the lands she owned returned, in large part, to the Rajah.

Lingarayan's treasury was gradually drained by tax and tribute to the British Raj. When he admitted that he could not keep his promise to gild the finials over the southern gateway of the Kalyanikkarai temple, Kalyaniammal gave back the gold he had packed on the scale against her weight.

'Lingaroyan educated his son Mootooroyan in British ways,' wrote Colonel Dufferin, who styled himself 'An Examiner of Antiquities'. 'Mootoorayan ascended the Callianicarah throne in 1887, after twelve years under the tutelage of a wonderfully expensive Cambridge man. The thirteenth Rajah wrote poetry in Tamil, Telegoo and English, travelled all over Europe, and has collected the most extensive archaeological library in all of South India.'

In Muthurayan's time, the cantonment at Kalyanikkarai grew big enough to have a church, a mission house, a police station, and a press. And a Lock Hospital, for the 11th Madras Infantry was bringing syphilis and vexation to the bazaar prostitutes on the edge of the cantonment.

'Round up the clapped-out whores,' Colonel Dufferin growled, one day in the summer of 1897, tired of having his men in the sick bay. The doctors in the Lock Hospital poked and prodded the privates of the bazaar women; they quarantined the infected ones. But Colonel Dufferin – a man of the world, a man who dined with Augustus Harris at his club, and hoped to hear Nellie Melba during his next furlough – would not have dreamt of arresting the dasi courtesans who were under the protection of king and temple. In fact, he found the self-righteousness of the anti-dance campaigners repugnant. He freely admitted that the nautch parties were fascinating.

When the new District Collector made his first visit to the Kalyanikkarai court, in 1900, Colonel Dufferin sat

beside him at the nautch party given in his honour.

'I say, there's a fiddler,' the Collector said. 'The fiddle isn't native to these parts, surely?'

'An import. A court musician in Tuticorin adapted the instrument to native music. This Rajah's father borrowed the 11th Madras's bandmaster – a Belfast man, a civilian – about thirty years ago. Beastly uncomfortable chairs, what?'

The young violinist, grandson of the musician who had been apprenticed to the Irishman, was a master now. His bow slid over the strings like a foot over oil. Listen, the musical cognoscenti at Muthurayan's court exclaimed, the *ni*-note in this scale is altogether novel. It is a new mode, they said, created by the Raja himself.

'Never have quite learned to like these melodies, Dufferin,' the Collector mused. 'The tunes the native bands play during the processions sound more pleasing.'

'At the procession yesterday, they were playing "The Galway Piper". Part of the bandmaster's legacy, my dear fellow.'

'"The Galway–"! Why, of course. To think I didn't recognize it!'

'Well, the rendering does transform it. The Rajah's dance master set steps to the song, so that Collectors could be entertained with it. Ah, here's the delectable Jagadambal. The most celebrated of the nautch dancers in these parts. The Rajah's mistress.'

Jagadambal stepped out from behind one of the gilded rococo pillars into the sudden hush that had fallen over the assembly. She touched her dance master's feet and took her position on the floor while the musicians set

the mood: neutral, relaxed, waiting, right hand on hip. If the audience had been challenged to break her aura down into its elements, they might have mentioned the shimmering Banaras silk she wore, or the impudent angle of her shoulders, or the poise of her neck, or her level gaze, or her detached focus on the music rather than on the effect of her beauty. No matter; her presence vibrated in their nerve endings.

When Jagadambal began to dance, the court's dignitaries and the visiting princelings watched her interpretation of the poetry with scholarly attentiveness. The white men, riveted despite their suspicion that they were somehow being implicated in some heathen ritual, understood nothing of the shapes her bejewelled hands hung in space. Through the intricate lattice-work of the screens on the balcony, the Raja's wives and their women friends kept the beat, and studied the cut of her blouse, and wondered which goldsmith had made the unusual mango-pattern girdle she was wearing.

In the middle of the recital, the doorkeeper scuttled into the durbar hall and sank to his knees before the Raja, his head hanging in helpless mortification. Keen though his ceremonial spear was, he couldn't very well have run three British ladies through their middles with it.

The women swept into the assembly. They held up placards: *Stop the Traffic in Temple Children! Save the Innocent Babes!*

Muthurayan had heard of these women. Arriving in his town in the wake of the white officers, these prune-faced daughters of pastors stood up in the bazaar on stages made of tables tied together, and fulminated about the

sinfulness of Hindu customs. They had bought a printing press. They published the *Callianicarah Herald*, full of articles about how the voluptuous sighs and languishing glances of the dancing women were corrupting the morals of young men.

'Mr Collector, do you know that this dancer is a lewd woman, a woman without a husband?' one of the women cried.

The court dignitaries stared at the intruders as they might have stared at some strange growth or affliction that disfigured a beggar. Should they explain that the dasi women had divine husbands better than any mortal ones? Were not they themselves, the men in the assembly that had been so rudely disrupted, the men chosen by dasis here on earth: zamindars who owned great swaths of paddy field, and merchants, and lawyers, and princes like Muthurayan? What could these women who looked like shrivelled saltfish know of the unimaginable exchanges of pleasure between a dasi dancer and her patron?

Since neither the Raja nor her dance master had signalled for her to stop, Jagadambal went on dancing. The mirrored walls splintered and amplified her reflection. Her master sang louder, and the women singers, Jagadambal's dasi sisters, took their cue from him. Suddenly the durbar was ringing, booming, reverberating with music and dance.

'We are here to save our fallen sisters, imprisoned from childhood in the darkness of the jungle temples!' the boldest of the interlopers shouted, struggling to be heard. The Collector raised an eyebrow; Colonel Dufferin muttered something about 'the hysterical crusade'.

'Go back to the door,' Muthurayan said to the despondent guard. He rose courteously. 'Welcome to our durbar,' he said, shaking hands, in the European manner, with the bold one. 'The ladies of the court will make you comfortable.'

The women hadn't expected an antagonist as tall or as imposing as this. He walked them towards the curving stairs, and they went up meekly enough, a little intimidated by the large turban he wore on special occasions, and by the fierce moustache that hid his smile.

Behind the lattice, the boldest one began again, in halting Telugu. 'Surely you ladies must understand that we must at least save the innocent babes!'

'Shush!' said the Raja's oldest wife. 'Be quiet, watch. In this part of the song, the singers will repeat a single line thirty, forty times. Each time they sing the line, it must sound a little different from the last time. And Jagadambal must go on improvising until they change the line. They have to be infinitely resourceful, you know; they are turning different facets of that line to the light.'

On the polished oxide floor of the Raja's durbar, Jagadambal's footwork inscribed a stylized map of the Raja's authority. Here, in the east, in the west, in the north, in the south, and everywhere in-between (her gestures proclaimed, with bitter formality) were the Raja's fifty-four kingdoms; and here was the Raja himself, whose sexual potency filled the granaries with rice and brought beautiful women to his bed.

A woman came up the stairs to talk to the white women. She tripped over one of the placards, sat down on the other.

'Listen,' she hissed. 'You people are making great nuisances of yourselves. We dasi women are married to the god of the big temple in this town that was built before your ancestors knew how to cook meat. We are fertility walking on two legs; we can never be widowed. The brides bring us their wedding beads to string. We bring good luck to each naming ceremony in this town. We broker bargains with the ferocious goddesses who send epidemics. Ask the Raja's wives. If we stopped dancing, disease would consume the town, the harvest would wither on the stalk!'

'It is true, what she says,' the oldest Rani said.

'Can you not reason with your husbands, you poor, wronged wives?' the white woman said. 'Do you feel no anger at all? '

'My husband,' the royal goldsmith's wife retorted, 'keeps a small house with the most talented singer in all of Kalyanikkarai.'

'Anger?' said the youngest Rani's cousin. 'You mean because he lies down with her? Goodness me. It's a mercy he gets *that* from his dasi mistress. Better her than me. With the eight children and the paddy fields and the house and the elders to look after, I don't have time for *that*.'

In the durbar below, Muthurayan slumped down in his chair. 'Jagadambal,' he was thinking, 'is no longer a hummingbird of affirmation, sipping from the cup of royal favour. She is a nightingale, singing with her breast against a thorn. This is a dying culture; these white buzzards will strip it clean.' He rubbed his tired eyes as Jagadambal concluded her recital with 'God Save

the Queen' – that Irish bandmaster's legacy, now a part of her repertoire – and meditated on the vicissitudes of patronage in English because he knew no other language so adapted to the expression of irony.

By the 1920s, most of Kalyanikkarai's dasi dancers had lost or had squandered away their protection. Some of them ended up in the bazaar, and into their houses too, as into the houses of the bazaar prostitutes, the police burst, covering up embarrassment (for they knew these women, after all, they used their services too) with innuendo and harsh laughter.

'Serves them right,' the respectable wives said. They were beginning to see it all differently. 'Serves the whores right for thinking they could take our husbands from us.'

Then the policemen began to raid the houses of the courtesans on Musicians' Street. They came at last to the house that was Lingarayan's gift to Kalyaniammal.

'It is a fact,' a missionary called Rachel Carstairs wrote, 'that numbers even of moral and religious people have permitted themselves to accept and condone in Man what is fiercely condemned in Woman. This double standard punishes our fallen sisters for their sins, but turns a blind eye to the wrongdoing of the men who are surely equally to be blamed, men who are public figures, generals, officials, district collectors, even kings.'

'It's not the men's fault,' said the good wives, the brahmin ladies who, by that point, had started their own Save the Dasi Child organizations. 'How can they resist the seductions of these loose women? How silly

and accepting we were, once, even feeling proud that our men had mistresses. Well, we're glad someone is doing something about it.'

By the 1950s, there was nothing but shame and disgrace in the name of dasi. After Kalyani exchanged the dancer's life for the life of a brahmin wife, she never spoke of the family she had been part of before she married my father, not even to me. And my father never once mentioned that my mother had an extraordinary gift.

When I was a child, I once cycled along a lake, with the sun low in the sky, and a runner of light came straight towards me on the water, no matter how much my path on the bund twisted. The first time I saw Kalyani dance reminded me of that sight. I waited for the symmetry to be lost, for the pattern to dissolve, for the ordinary chaos of human flesh, but Kalyani seemed to move, always, with the bright flawless geometry of light. It took my breath away.

2

Kalyani

Madras, 8 April 1990

'Have the papers come?' Balan said.

'I'll have a look.'

I put his tumbler of coffee down on the bedside table and went to the window with mine. Beyond the balcony, the gravelled drive curved towards the wrought-iron gates. The sun cleared the rooftops beyond the gates as I scanned the road.

The paper-man sailed up on his Atlas every morning. Through the window I would watch the arabesque of right leg over the saddle, the stand kicked smoothly under the rear wheel, the papers thrust between the bars of the gate, the leg as it drew the arc in the air again. But there was no paper-man today. Only Vijaya was there, her shadow pointing towards me on the drive, a grim iron spike. She was nipping the thick, pink blooms from the arali shrubs and dropping them in her basket. The

flowers were for her gods. They had to be picked before the milk-man, the spinach-woman, the knife-sharpener, and the paper-man, plying their several trades, brushed against them and contaminated them with their flesh.

To the right of the arali trees, the vivid bougainvillea, unfit for the gods, curled over the whitewashed compound wall. The magpies darted through the thin haze, waiting for Vijaya to go. In the middle of March they had come, the black-and-white magpies, to the mailbox that hung from one of the gateposts. They flew in and out of the mail slot carrying oddments of twig and leaf and hair and cotton wool. The nest began on a Saturday. Hema had sat with her back to the wall, following its progress. She had taken a book because she was preparing for her final examinations, but it lay in her lap, face down. The shadows of bare branches fell across her face. The summer-flowering trees had shed their leaves; the afternoon was saturated with the scent of leaf meal; the gravel was sending up plumes of heat. Everything was still, somnolent, suspended. Only the magpies laboured.

'Amma,' Hema called to me, holding the mailbox door open. Another Saturday, a week after the birds had begun the nest. The gul mohar tree had burst into red flame. 'Amma, come down and look!'

Hema at six years, playing with the children next door, had called up to the balcony in the same imperious voice – Amma, come down, look, look at us! – the youngest of the group, the unchallenged leader, running like an acrobat on the mossy compound wall, arms flung out for balance. I was always there to be summoned: a woman

who had nothing to do. I might have been leaning with my elbows on the balustrade (always, in the bathroom mirror, my elbows were white from the whitewash of the balcony), listening to the children hiding among the shrubs, watching them vault over the wall and scamper away to the back of the neighbour's house. I might have been daydreaming, floating away from the hum of the traffic and the shrill protest of the neighbour's toddler, who had been left out of the game; hearing, threaded into the laughter and quarrels of these children, the voice of a child far away, calling: Look, look at me!

'Amma, come down and look!' Hema had called. I went down into the garden. Four verdigris eggs lay among the feathers and hair in the bowl of the magpies' nest. I wrapped an arm around Hema's shoulders – she was as tall as me now – grateful that she still shared her pleasures with me, wanting to mark the moment with some bodily gesture.

Three of the four eggs hatched some days later, and the fourth lay in the nest, a speckled blue failure. When the magpies were away foraging, Hema and I opened the mailbox door and watched the chicks. They were scraps of muddy-pink flesh, their eyes unseeing. Dowdy feathers sprouted along their backs. When they sensed movement, their beaks opened like cavernous clutch purses. They were delicate, touching, comical; I had to resist the urge to let them nestle in the palm of my hand, to stroke them.

'It's a myth that birds will reject their chicks if they smell of humans,' Hema said. But I didn't believe her.

The house to which Balan had brought me after we were married was on a quiet side street near College Road. It was full of patterns for the eye to rest on. When I looked down, the black and ivory tile squares were comforting and reposeful. Outside the bedroom window was a balcony that ran the length of the house's facade. Tall fluted white pillars rose at intervals at the end of the balcony and held up the roof. When I leaned back in the wicker chair that had been set on the balcony for my use, I could see the roof beams, mahogany against white plaster, geometrical.

An Irish bishop had lived in this house once, and had suffered from tropical fatigue, and had had improvements made. Blinds of woven vetiver hung between each pair of pillars on the balcony. In the evenings, when they were rolled up, the fragrance of arali and magnolia drifted up to the balcony, and the brainfever bird's slow, melancholy ascent through the chromatic scale. In the afternoons I let the blinds down and watered them, cooling the house.

Balan used to sit with me on the balcony once. Sometimes, when we sat together, I would slip my hand into his and exclaim: 'This house is so beautiful, Balan.' Later, his matching wicker chair was put away because he had no time. I had too much. It ballooned out around me, empty, full of meaningless tasks. While Balan travelled, I sat on the balcony, waiting for him or for Hema to come back, from the airport or from college. When Hema was a child I had more to do. Now she was finishing her third year of college; she was independent – far more independent than I ever remember having been – clever, secretive, lost in her books. I missed the feel of her hair

drifting through my fingers as I combed it, of her chin cutting into my breast as we read a book together.

'Kalyani,' Balan said. He pushed the sheet off his legs and sipped from his tumbler. 'The papers?'

When we were younger and more egotistical, he took offence if I ignored a question he had put to me, and I was hurt if his mind wandered away from me in mid-conversation. But after sixteen years of marriage, there was room for parallel streams of thought that never intersected.

'Not yet,' I said. 'It's too early. Your mother's still down there, picking flowers.'

I had asked the paper-man not to push the papers into the mailbox because of the nest. He had shrugged. 'Easier for me. But you watch for the papers and take them in, or some porukki boy will swipe them and sell them back to you.'

'Kalyani.' Now there was a faint edge to Balan's voice. 'Your coffee's getting cold.'

I half turned away from the window.

'Balan,' I said, 'did you call Padmasini?'

'About what?'

'The recital – that New Jersey student. She insisted particularly that you call today. If you can't be chief guest, she said, she needs to find someone else.'

'Well, she's already got my name on the invitation card. Seems a bit redundant asking me after the fact, hmm?'

'Oh, Balan. I remember telling you that Padmasini had asked, and I remember you calling her to say you were

available. Two months ago.' He probably remembered too; this was his way of rebelling against duty.

'I suppose I must go.' Balan yawned, blew out his breath, flexed his neck this way and that. On the wall behind him, the Graces danced, their torsos twisting elegantly. The Botticelli print had grown dingy over the years. A film of dust was trapped inside the frame, and the flowers and fruit and figures no longer stood out from the dark leafy landscape. 'But I'm dreading it. I'm going to have to tell Padmasini I'm bumping her from the festival in the US.'

'*Again*?' A knot of fear formed in my chest. I touched my coffee to my lips. Too sweet. Balan's mother Vijaya made the coffee the way Balan liked it, sweet, bitter, thick as marsh-mud. I asked her once if I could make my own coffee; she said I could, after she was dead. I didn't bring the subject up again. I suppose I could buy one of these new electric kettles and plug it into a socket in this room.

'She'll probably make a worse stink than she made last year,' Balan said.

'Has NATAC Delhi cleared it? Dropping her, I mean?' Perhaps they would stop Balan, perhaps that man he was always talking to, Akhil, would overrule Balan.

'Akhil is pretty sick of Padmasini. I've simply *got* to ease her out. I don't suppose you have any ideas about how I might do this tactfully.'

NATAC was the National Academy of Traditional Arts and Culture. It was part of the Indian government's effort, the brochure said, to preserve cultural heritage and to promote new artistic work. Dancers and artists and singers thought of NATAC as their passport to foreign

lands. They forgot the expansion and remembered only the acronym.

In south India, my husband *was* NATAC. A man so powerful it was unsettling. Casually, carelessly, he picked up a promising singer and elevated him to fame; without a thought, smiling pleasantly all the while, he dropped a dancer who had outlived her attractiveness. He sent government cheques to this one, cut off food and drink to that one. The honours and awards the government had instituted, the money that went with them, the chance to be seen, the applause of critics, the tours abroad: all these were his to hand out or snatch away. In his palms were flashing currency signs from every corner of the world. All the strings were looped around his fingers; the puppets danced when he chose, and flopped on their sides when he was done.

It was not an easy job, Balan said. Dancers and musicians were such tiresome, such fragile people.

Balan rubbed his face, making his day-old beard rasp. 'Janaki should go to the US this year. Her presentation values are much better than Padmasini's.'

They were arch-rivals, Padmasini and Janaki. Padmasini was about Balan's age – fifty-one – and ageing rapidly. Janaki was younger, better-preserved, slick and opportunistic.

'It's about time Padmasini retired from the stage,' Balan said.

Even as recently as two years ago, Balan would not have used this dismissive tone. He would have said, in the wry voice of a man acknowledging a woman's success, 'What a woman. You should watch her.' That was what he

said to me the day he suggested that I send a book I had written to a publisher. 'If you want to learn how to make contacts, watch Padmasini,' he said. 'She knows how to work the system, the government, the public, the press.'

To make his point, he bought me a large shiny book called *Bharata Natyam: The Soul of India*. Padmasini had written it. It was full of pictures of Padmasini.

'Look at her book,' Balan said, 'how she calls it a history of dance in India, and uses it for personal publicity. Brilliant.' Balan was mentioned on the Acknowledgements page.

Now Balan was saying, 'She is past her expiry date. NATAC Delhi – Akhil, at any rate – says she runs a bharatanatyam factory, and it manufactures substandard goods.'

'She still has the older audiences eating out of her hands,' I said. 'And she has this new following among young Hindutva hotheads.'

'But her students, Kalyani! All of them undifferentiated *clones*!'

What did he expect, now that dance was no longer craft but pure vanity? The older dancers battened on the desires of the young ones. The young ones wanted to be seen, to be ornamental. There were no stars among them. The older ones, having tasted stardom and wanting to keep its benefits for as long as possible, taught the young ones their steps, and as they taught them, they stamped out all signs of succession. When death harvests the older ones, there will be nothing left but burnt stubble.

'She should make room for the next generation,' Balan said. 'For her own students at least.'

'I don't think she's ready to make room for anyone,' I said. 'Maybe – Balan, maybe you should let her go on the US tour. Just one more year.'

Last year, when Balan had dropped Padmasini from the Festival of India in Paris, he had pretended that NATAC had made the decision behind his back. Padmasini had known better. She had gone to the press; she had pestered Balan until he said, 'Padma, I can't back down now. I'd look a fool. I never cave in to public pressure. But next year, it will be your turn to go to the US I promise.'

But here was Balan saying, 'Padmasini's approach has gone stale. Janaki, now *she's* really got an eye for what will sell.'

'Yes, she has.'

Janaki's work appealed to America-born-and-bred Indian-Americans who had grown up on those glossy posters of India where the sea is an improbable ultramarine, where the beach is clean, where the women are tribal beauties. It appealed to white people who wanted to celebrate the emancipation of Third World women.

'Her female power angle will go down well with the next generation.' Balan laced his hands behind his head. 'You could learn from the way she works that line.'

I wondered sometimes if Balan remembered how, when he and I were newly married, we lay tangled in damp sheets, thighs still locked together, and talked of Art and Nation.

'What kind of society is this?' he burst out one night. 'It seems to recognize almost no deep compulsions except procreation and the making of money.'

Balan's own compulsion was to open the world's eyes to the unsuspected riches of traditional art. He was going to rescue folk arts from neglect. He was going to search the small towns and villages for the unsung, the unassuming, the forgotten masters. When he found them, he would bring them to the cities, and help them earn a living. When Hema was older, if she showed a talent for singing or dancing, he said, we would take her to a teacher from one of the old towns.

By the time Hema was ten years old, Balan was saying, 'Dancers need an *angle*, you know. Dance, these days, is like politics. You can't get anywhere without a platform. You can go the social work route – work with slum children or cripples or the blind and get into the papers that way. You can go the innovative route – you know, do bharatanatyam to Tchaikovsky or stir some aikido or Martha Graham into the usual stew. Or you can take the spiritual line – do mythological dance dramas, like Padmasini, get a godman or two to bless your work in public. Well, Padmasini's angle works.'

How had the Balan I married become this purveyor of cynical practicalities? From the way he cheerfully deflected any suggestion that he had changed, I understood that, of all the questions in the world, this was the one question I must not ask.

When Hema was eleven, she began lessons in Padmasini's dance school. 'At least she'll get somewhere,' Balan said.

But she got nowhere. Eight years later, she was still Padmasini's student, not learning much, fretting, hating her classes. She was the ugly duckling that had grown into an ugly duck, or at any rate a plain one; why would she want to keep learning, when she knew Padmasini would never put her on stage? But Balan would not hear of letting her stop her lessons.

'Balan,' I said, 'if Padmasini doesn't get a Festival slot this year, do you think she'll let Hema stay on in her school?'

Balan struck his forehead. 'I hadn't thought of that–'

'It will be awkward. Maybe this year Padmasini could be on your US list. Maybe next year you could move Hema to another teacher, and it won't be so embarrassing.'

'Yes.' Balan frowned. 'Or maybe it's time to arrange a new teacher for Hema.'

A sudden pincer of heat stabbed my forehead. What had Padmasini said? 'So you never got around to telling Balan about your mother?' I felt sweat pooling under my breasts. The ceiling fan over the bed, whining monstrously, slashed the light from the window into long spathes of bright and dark.

'Now, Balan? Just like that?'

'If necessary. I'm sure I can come up with some little sop to keep Padma happy. There's that lifetime achievement award–'

'NATAC's new award? I thought that was for someone from a hereditary dance-teaching family. Padmasini is hardly that.'

'We could ask Padma to – wait, I've got it – to film or

interview the person. Maybe make a documentary, for national TV.'

'She'd never want to do that. It would mean sharing the limelight.' I looked out of the window again. The paper-man was late. Dust rose in eddies on the road.

'She'll do it if the money is good enough,' Balan said. The bed creaked as he swung his legs off it. 'The show – the one Padma wants me to be chief guest at – is next Saturday. I'd like you to come along, Kalyani. It will be terribly boring without you. One of those spavined NRI girls who don't know the meaning of the songs they're dancing to – Kalyani, you're miles away. What are you thinking about?'

'Oh, the magpies.'

The magpies, wonderfully busy, flying away from the mailbox urgently, and returning with beakfuls of food.

'What?'

'The birds, Balan – they've made a nest in the mailbox. I showed you last week.'

'Yes, of course, the birds. By the way, how's the new book coming along? Madhu and um–'

'Mohan and Mala.' I groped for a lie, then thought of Enid Blyton, and went on fluently. 'They've fallen into a cave with an underground stream. I'm going to have to get them out somehow. I'm so tired of them both. Mohan is so bossy and so – so unpleasantly knowledgeable, Mala is just so permanently panic-stricken.'

Balan laughed. 'You've been listening to Hema too much.' He reached for his shirt. 'You sound like her when she is in one of her feminist rages.'

There was no Mohan and Mala book this year. But

Balan wouldn't know that; he never read anything I wrote, though he often expressed polite curiosity. I was writing something new. My notebook was full of fragments of my family's history. It was not yet a coherent story. What would I do if it took shape, how would I publish it? I put off thinking about that for the moment. I kept my notebook hidden.

Joseph the driver had been with our family for twelve years, but Balan's mother held that you could not trust any man with a nineteen-year-old virgin. Perhaps she was right – what do I know? When Hema was driven to dance school twice a week, or when she was driven to the shops, I sat in the back of the van with her. She resented it.

'Oh, *hell*!' she said, 'Do I look like I need a chaperone? Amma, can't you tell Vijaya Paati to mind her own business?'

Hema wondered why I couldn't change the world. Why, she said, reading my last book, why couldn't poor incompetent Mala find a way out of the ruined temple? Why did Mohan have all the bright ideas? Why was Mala afraid of heights and spiders when Mohan was afraid of nothing? Why didn't I just go out and get a job? Why didn't I simply defy Vijaya's edict that I never cook in her house and – well, make dinner one evening?

'Amma,' she said, rolling her eyes. 'So *what* if you're not brahmin? Who believes in all that pollution shit? Why should stuff like that matter in this day and age? Amma, *how* can you be so passive?'

When I went shopping, I lingered outside bookstores, drawn by the pseudo-optimism of the self-help shelves: *Cycling Your Way to a New You*, *How to Think Better of Yourself.* I wondered if I should buy a bicycle. What could I do to give my life some shape or meaning? If I Learned Estonian in Thirty Days, would I be a different woman? I saw Hema, striding to college in her jeans, saying casually, 'My generation, liberated.' I saw Vijaya, a tear in the canthus of each flinty eye, saying, 'You've killed him, you bitch. When you stole our son from us, you broke our hearts. You killed my husband. I hope you are happy now.' And my mother, Rajayi, saying, 'You don't worry your head about me. I will survive.' How was I to explain to Hema that I was trapped in the amber of transition, and had neither my mother's strength nor my daughter's? Oh, what was the use of appealing to habit, to helpless femininity, I thought, each Thursday evening and Saturday morning, as I sat in the back of the van on the way to Padmasini's dance school, and noticed the grey hairs multiplying on Joseph's head.

Padmasini performed archetypal femininity on the stage, but refused to admit its burdens into her life. I met Padmasini's mother and her aunt – twin sisters – soon after Hema began her lessons. Padmasini was in her early forties then, looking at the end of her childbearing years. Misreading the degree of our intimacy, the twins recruited me to persuade Padmasini to marry.

'Ask her why she won't marry, Kalyani. Talk some sense into her head. You are her friend, her little sister.'