



**Queering Masculinity: Engaging the performance and meaning
among Nagara Dancers in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal.**

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
MTH Masters of Theology – Gender, Religion and Health**

In the

DISCIPLINE OF THEOLOGY

**School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics, College of Humanities, University
of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.**

July 2025

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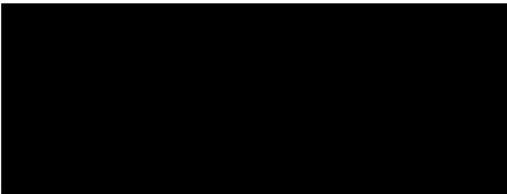
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DECLARATION

I, Nicoshe Bob Ramdhani, declare that this dissertation titled **Queering Masculinity: Engaging Performance and Meaning among Nagara Dancers in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal**, unless specifically indicated to the contrary in the text, is the result of my research and that all sources used have been acknowledged using complete references.

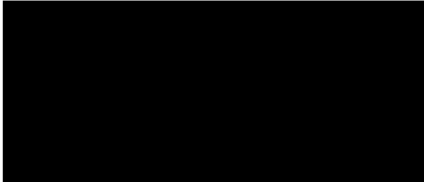
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17 July 2025

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis was not the product of solitary labour, but the result of sustained support, relentless nudging, and quiet grace from a constellation of individuals who stood beside me, both in scholarship and spirit.

To *Subashen Naidu*, my unwavering sounding board and logistical lifeline, thank you for being the go-to person every time I found myself buried under academic clutter or existential dread. Whether it was sourcing materials, organising interviews, or simply listening, your consistency made the impossible feel manageable.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisors. *Dr Cherry Muslim*, your directness was the ignition I didn't know I needed. Your timely challenges jolted me out of inertia and back into purpose. Without those pointed interventions, this thesis might still be a pile of unshaped thoughts. *Professor Charlene van der Walt*, your steady wisdom and quiet compassion created the space where ideas could breathe. After every tough-love nudge from Cherry, your kindness reminded me that scholarship is not just rigorous, it can be gentle.

To my family, for being both the grounding and the gust. *Mom*, your persistent reminders (read: productive nagging) kept this project alive one deadline at a time. *Dad*, your peaceful silence and refusal to ask about my progress provided strange but beautiful comfort; it was the mental quiet I didn't know I needed. *Dhiya*, my sister, thank you for being the cliffside companion, talking me down, lifting me up, and reminding me that one panicked WhatsApp message does not define a researcher's worth.

To my dear *Aunt Urmilla Bob*, thank you for the editing assistance and for being a pillar of calm amidst the whirlwind of this journey. You've never hesitated to drop everything when I needed help, from last-minute errands to emotional check-ins that arrived at just the right time. Your selflessness and quiet strength were a kind of support I leaned on more than I could ever say out loud. This thesis carries the imprint of your kindness. I am endlessly grateful.

To *Nehaal Productions*, my dance family, your belief in me as a director and scholar gave this project rhythm. Your encouragement at every rehearsal, your questions about this project, and your fierce commitment to excellence pushed me to choreograph this work with authenticity and pride.

This thesis may carry my name, but it bears all your footprints.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all the dancers of South Africa, those who rehearse in garages, temple courtyards, and community halls, who carry choreography in their bones and rhythm in their breath. You dance with history, with grit, with the sacred encoded in each step. This work exists because of you.

Whether you move for ritual, for resistance, or for release, may your art continue to be a pillar of strength. May it be the place you go when the world quiets and the body begins to speak. May you honour your ancestors with every performance, disrupt norms with your fluidity, and find refuge in the expressive freedom your movement holds.

Keep dancing! Not just for stages, but for stories, for softness, and for the ones yet to find themselves through your motion. Your devotion is your strength. Your strength is your legacy. And your legacy is still being choreographed.

Abstract

This thesis explores Nagara dancing as a site of ritual embodiment, gender negotiation, and spiritual expression within the South African Indian Hindu diaspora. Grounded in lived experience and guided by phenomenology, interpretative analysis, and reflexive thematic analysis, the research interrogates how male dancers perform and reconfigure masculinity through devotional enactments of the Hindu Goddess *Saraswati*. Drawing from focus groups and interviews with four experienced Nagara dancers, the study reveals that ritual choreography challenges binary gender norms, allowing for a fluid interplay between masculine and feminine expression. The findings present Nagara as a queer form of dance, where the performance of sacred femininity becomes a pathway to masculine expansion rather than contradiction. Within this ritual framework, dancers experience emotional safety, relational care, and generational mentorship, positioning the temple stage as a sacred refuge for contested identities. Ultimately, the study affirms that Nagara is not simply inherited; it is reimagined through embodied labour, aesthetic translation, and spiritual resilience. Masculinity, here, is not static; it moves.

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1. Chapter 1 – Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Nagara dancing is more than a religious performance. It is a deeply felt practice that extends beyond the art of performance. It creates a sacred space where men embody the divine, giving sight to a fluid, challenged, and redefined reality of masculinity. This study examines how masculinity is formed, expressed, and experienced through Nagara dancing, as well as its role within the context of diasporic cultural identity. Beyond its religious roots, this research examines how gender fluidity intersects with social perspectives, shedding light on the complexities of identity between masculinity and ritual performance.

Traditionally, Nagara dancers are men who embody the feminine qualities of the Goddess *Saraswati* in their sacred role. Through dance, they temporarily rise above and transform traditional masculinity, taking on a form of gender fluidity that is spiritually significant in Hindu traditions. While they are respected in religious contexts, these dancers often confront misunderstandings about their identities. Some observers link them to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community, while others interpret their femininity as solely religious, confined to the performance. This study aims to analyse how Nagara dancers navigate these experiences and how they navigate their masculinity in their daily lives.

The research engages with existing literature on Hindu dance traditions, gender fluidity, ritual embodiment, and masculinity in religious performance. It situates Nagara within the context of *Bhakti* traditions, highlighting how dance serves as both a spiritual practice and an artistic form. The study examines masculinity in dance, exploring how gendered spaces influence perceptions of male performers. As such, the central focus is on men who express divinity through dance, highlighting how religious contexts can shape identity and challenge traditional notions of gender. Through discussions on masculinity and Hindu masculinities, I demonstrate how Nagara dancing challenges conventional notions of hegemonic masculinity.

The theoretical framework is interdisciplinary, positioning dance as a site rich in religious, cultural, and performance meanings. Nagara is rooted in the principles of the *Natyashastra*, *Bhakti* traditions, and ritual embodiment. Moreover, key concepts that entail gender performance and South African diasporic identities offer insight into how masculinity and femininity intersect within sacred performance.

The research methods utilised were essential for capturing the lived experiences of dancers. Using qualitative approaches, including the interpretative phenomenology approach (IPA) and phenomenology, the study explores the subjective realities of Nagara performers. Participants are

intentionally chosen to ensure they have strong ties to Nagara traditions. Through focus group discussions and individual interviews, the study gathers personal stories, offering a detailed perspective on masculinity in religious dance. Reflexive thematic analysis guides the researcher in interpreting these narratives while maintaining academic rigour and ethical respect.

A demographic and contextual analysis provides additional details about the dancers' backgrounds, their locations, and shared histories. By examining the participants' knowledge of Nagara's history, the study investigates the migration of Nagara into South African Hindu communities through the lens of memory, religious tradition, and oral storytelling. The changing nature of Nagara, both as a sacred and artistic activity, is emphasised. A gender analysis follows, examining how masculinity is both challenged and reclaimed through performance. Key topics include the exclusion of women from Nagara dances, misunderstandings about queer spaces, and how dance acts as a safe area for gender expression. Bollywood's influence and shifts between generations further shape modern views of Nagara within a transforming cultural landscape.

Finally, the study summarises its main findings, showing how Nagara dancing is not just an art form but also a means for building identity, resistance, and cultural heritage. The conclusion reflects on the intersections of masculinity, ritual embodiment, and gender performance in sacred spaces, contributing to broader discussions about religious performance and gender fluidity within diasporic Hindu communities. With this foundation laid, the study proceeds to its literature review, critically engaging with historical perspectives and contemporary discussions on ritual dance, gender embodiment, and cultural identity. Through this process, the research positions itself within broader academic contexts, identifying key contributions and areas for further investigation.

1.2. Background of the Study

The motivation behind this study stems from the complex ways in which masculinity is constructed, particularly in my own experience, as I navigate the performed and the temporal aspects within the art of contemporary dance. My focus was drawn to Nagara as I have always found the performer's confidence motivating, which in turn created confidence within myself to pursue the art of dance. As both a dancer and researcher, my engagement with this tradition is not merely academic; it is embodied, experiential, and deeply personal. The fusion of my scholarly commitment to deconstructing normative gender frameworks with the visceral knowledge gained through performance allows this study to be shaped by both intellectual rigour and artistic devotion. Navigating between these worlds, I am drawn to how acts of ritual dance, particularly those invoking the Goddess *Saraswati*, momentarily suspend and reconfigure dominant gender ideologies. Through this embodied lens, Nagara dancing emerges as more than an object of analysis; it becomes a living

archive through which I reflect on performativity, identity, and the sacred. This convergence of passion and study motivates a narrative that is both analytically critical and intimately meaningful, allowing for deeper resonance with the complexities of gender, religious dance, and masculinity.

Nagara dancing has been an integral part of South African Indian communities since the arrival of indentured labourers between 1860 and 1911 (Sharma, 2013; Singh, 2016). The practice itself, however, predates colonial influence and is rooted in the *Vedic* traditions (Sahgal, 2018). This historical trajectory raises intriguing questions about continuity, transformation, and the evolving perceptions of masculinity within religious contexts. The male performers, adorned in feminine attire, invoke the presence of the Goddess *Saraswati*, embodying her attributes while momentarily setting aside conventional masculine expressions. King (1999:118) notes that ritual performances have long existed as sacred practices, offering individuals a transcendental engagement with the divine, which is specifically evident in the case of Nagara performances.

The historical framing of Nagara dancing further reveals complex gendered narratives. Sen (2022) highlights that in medieval Rajasthan, societal constraints prevented women from participating in evening dance rituals, leading men to assume the role of the Goddess. Over time, this gender-fluid embodiment became deeply embedded within temple practices and was transported across regions through migration. Within contemporary South African Indian communities, Nagara dancing remains a revered practice, yet misconceptions regarding gender and sexuality persist (Krishnan, 2009). Singh (2016:NP) observes that many spectators associate Nagara dancers with the LGBTQ community, even though the majority of performers are heterosexual, cisgender, married men. This prevailing assumption reveals the tensions between religious embodiment and public perceptions of masculinity.

It is these tensions that motivate the study of how Nagara dancers experience and understand masculinity within and beyond the ritual space. What inspires their participation in Nagara dancing, and how do they reconcile their engagement with femininity within a broader social framework? Nagara dancing, like many ritualistic expressions, does not exist in isolation; somewhat, it is shaped by cultural discourses, spiritual devotion, and the performative act itself.

The dance groups are structured into two distinct performative categories: the dancers who embody *Saraswati* and the musicians who play the Nagara drum (Krishnan, 2009; Sahgal, 2018). While dancers engage in visual and embodied representations of the Goddess, musicians contribute through sound, a vital element of *Saraswati's* creative and spiritual symbolism. Together, these elements form a cohesive ritual performance, reinforcing the sanctity of the practice (King, 1999).

This study aims to critically examine the concept of masculinity within sacred spaces, with a particular focus on the notion of 'queering.' Sen (2022) asserts that queering, in this context, does not imply that Nagara dancers identify as queer but rather speaks to how their performances disrupt normative constructions of masculinity. Their embodiment of feminine attributes during ritual dance challenges fixed gender binaries and provides a nuanced understanding of masculinity as fluid rather than rigid. This exploration extends beyond performance, examining how masculinity is understood and negotiated by dancers outside of the ritual setting.

Despite the widespread respect Nagara dancers receive within religious circles, their performances are often misconstrued outside of the sacred space. This study aims to unpack the complex perceptions of masculinity and gender fluidity within this ritual practice by drawing on theories of masculinity and ritual dance (Sharma, 2013; Singh, 2016). Given the rich artistic and embodied traditions associated with Indian religious practices, the research will examine how men, both heterosexual and homosexual, navigate gender embodiment through sacred performances.

Ultimately, this study is driven by a curiosity about masculinity as an evolving and multifaceted experience. By engaging with the lived realities of Nagara dancers, the study aims to contribute to broader discussions on gender, ritual, and sacred embodiment, offering fresh perspectives on how masculinity is performed, understood, and continually reshaped in ritual contexts.

1.3. Nagara in South Africa

Nagara dancing, one of the oldest sacred dance traditions, originates from Rajasthan, India, with its historical roots extending over a century in South Africa (Singh, 2016:NP). However, the practice is deeply embedded in ritualistic traditions that predate colonial categorisations and can be traced back to the Vedic period. Sahgal (2018:25) situates the *Vedic* period, or the *Vedas*, between 1500 and 500 BCE, positioning Nagara dancing within a broader framework of sacred rituals and devotional practices that evolved during this era. As an integral component of temple worship and festival celebrations (Sahgal, 2018; Krishnan, 2009), the dance form embodies religious devotion, where movement functions as both an artistic expression and a spiritual offering.

The rich historical legacy of Nagara dancing is deeply entwined with both Indian and South African cultural traditions, where its rhythmic movements, accompanied by the distinct beats of the nagara drum, serve as a medium for invoking divine presence and fostering communal devotion (Sahgal, 2018). The historical trajectory of Nagara dancing thus reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition,

migration, and embodied spiritual practice, reinforcing its significance as both a devotional and performative art form.

The performance of Nagara in South Africa cannot be separated from the historical forces of colonialism and apartheid, both of which shaped diasporic religious and cultural expression. The arrival of indentured Indian labourers in Natal between 1860 and 1911 placed Hindu ritual life in a context of racial subjugation and economic exploitation (Bhana and Brain, 1990). Despite colonial restrictions on religious gatherings and the denigration of Indian cultural practices as ‘heathen’ or ‘primitive,’ indentured communities reconstituted ritual spaces such as temples, wedding halls, and later community organisations, where music and dance could flourish. Nagara emerged in this environment not only as a devotional performance but also as a cultural strategy of survival—an embodied practice through which diasporic Hindus preserved continuity, affirmed identity, and resisted the erasures of colonial modernity. Importantly, dance functioned as a counter-hegemonic practice. By invoking Hindu deities in public and collective ritual, Indian communities resisted assimilationist pressures and the racial hierarchies that sought to delimit their expressive life (Hansen, 2012).

Under apartheid, Nagara was shaped further by policies of racial segregation, spatial restriction, and cultural marginalisation. Indian cultural events, including temple-based performances, were often confined to racially demarcated spaces, such as townships and temple courtyards, in Durban and its surrounding areas (Desai and Vahed, 2010). While such restrictions reinforced marginalisation, they also inadvertently created insulated cultural zones in which ritual performance, including Nagara, could be nurtured and transmitted across generations. These practices took on political meaning in a context where bodily expression was surveilled and racialised. The enactment of Goddess *Saraswati* by Hindi-speaking male dancers during apartheid years, for example, can be read as an act of quiet subversion: at once sustaining diasporic Hindu religiosity and unsettling dominant state narratives that sought to control and ‘fix’ racial and gendered identities. Oral histories from dancers suggest that temple rituals often doubled as community refuges, offering emotional and spiritual safety amidst political turbulence.

Generational shifts further illustrate how Nagara has responded dynamically to political change. Early performances under indenture emphasised continuity with India, foregrounding ritual accuracy and transmission of traditional repertoires. By the mid-20th century, however, younger dancers began experimenting with stylistic innovation, adjusting Nagara with influences from local South African musical and performative forms (Hansen, 2012). Post-apartheid, Nagara has been increasingly

reinterpreted in terms of diasporic identity politics, gender negotiation, and global discourses of queerness, as your study highlights. These shifts demonstrate how Nagara is not a static inheritance but a practice continually reshaped by political conditions, intergenerational dialogue, and the lived realities of its performers.

Thus, by situating Nagara within the control of colonial and apartheid histories, contemporary configurations of gender and spiritual embodiment are inseparable from broader struggles over race, belonging, and self-representation. The temple stage becomes a script, not only as a sacred site of devotion, but also as a political archive: one where diasporic communities have historically contested erasure, preserved memory, and enacted alternative visions of selfhood through dance.

Over time, Nagara dancing transcended geographical boundaries, reaching South Africa through Indian indentured labourers in the 19th century (Singh, 2016:NP). Within the South African context, the dance evolved as a symbol of cultural resilience, preserving Hindu religious identity amidst displacement and migration. Singh (2016:NP) highlights how Nagara dancing became a vital expression of faith and heritage, adapting to new environments while maintaining its sacred essence.

The migration of Indian indentured labourers to South Africa in 1860 facilitated the transmission of various cultural and religious traditions (Vahed, 2024). Vahed (2024) explains that during the indentured labourer movement of 1860, Indians came to South Africa with a variety of traditional Hindu practices and art forms, including Nagara dancing. As part of the broader Hindu cultural repertoire, Nagara dancing was introduced to South Africa through the indentured labour system, which, according to Vahed (2024), saw thousands of Indian labourers arriving in Natal to work on sugar plantations. Such dance and cultural forms, deeply rooted in Hindu ritual practices, became an essential means of preserving religious identity and fostering communal worship among displaced Indian communities (Vahed, 2024).

Over time, Nagara dancing adapted to the South African socio-cultural landscape, maintaining its sacred significance while evolving within new environments. The continued practice of Nagara dancing among South African Hindus underscores Vahed's (2024) study on the resilience of cultural traditions in diasporic settings, illustrating how embodied devotional practices serve as a conduit for spiritual continuity and the formation of collective identity.

The practice, initially rooted in Hindu devotional expression, was preserved through migration but underwent significant transformations due to the influence of colonialism and apartheid-era policies. Vahed (2024) highlights how Hindu traditional practices in South Africa were reshaped by the necessity of establishing sacred spaces in a foreign land, conforming to colonial regulations, and

adapting to socio-political constraints imposed by apartheid. These factors contributed to the evolution of Nagara dancing, shifting its function from a purely ritualistic act to a hybridised form that incorporates elements of entertainment while retaining its devotional essence.

Despite these adaptations, the religious performance of Nagara, particularly *Kirtan*, remained a central aspect of Goddess worship, demonstrating the resilience of embodied devotional practices within diasporic communities and their ability to maintain spiritual continuity despite historical disruptions. Nagara, within the South African context, can be categorised into two main types: ritual and entertainment. Singh (2016:NP) notes that whether performed for a ritual or entertainment, a short prayer to venerate the Goddess *Saraswati* for guidance and blessings is always performed before the Nagara dancers are brought out to dance. This prayer is mandatory for all Nagara-based performances, whether in a religious or entertainment setting. It is generally performed by the most experienced (or eldest) Nagara dancer of the group.

This deeply ingrained ritual accentuates the profound spiritual significance of Nagara dancing, where devotion and tradition merge to create a sacred performance space. With this understanding of the religious and cultural foundations of the practice, the study seeks to explore key research questions that will guide its investigation.

1.4. Research Questions

The key research question: How is masculinity performed, understood, and navigated by Nagara dancers when practising ritual performances within and beyond the performance context?

The following subquestions will assist in answering the key research question:

1. How is gender portrayed within the performances of Nagara dances?
2. How do Nagara dancers define and navigate masculinity through ritual dance?
3. How, and in what ways, does Hindu ritual dance open a more nuanced and embodied conception of masculinity among Nagara dancers?

1.5. Research Objectives

1. To explore the concept of Nagara dancing and how gender is portrayed within the performances of Nagara dancers.
2. To understand how men who participate in Nagara dancing understand and navigate their masculinities within and beyond the performances.
3. To explicate the portrayal of Nagara dancers and their conception of masculinity through more nuanced and embodied Hindu ritual performances.

1.6. Multidisciplinary Theoretical Perspectives

This study employs a multidisciplinary theoretical framework to investigate dance as a site of religious, cultural, and performative significance. At its core, dance operates not merely as an aesthetic form but as a powerful conduit for devotion and spiritual engagement. Religious dance theory posits that movement serves as a medium through which practitioners connect with the divine, express reverence, and enact sacred traditions. Through this lens, Nagara dancing is situated within a broader framework of Hindu ritual, where bodily gestures and rhythmic expressions serve as acts of worship, facilitating a transcendental experience.

Building upon this, performance theory interrogates the role of dance within ritual spaces and artistic contexts. It considers how movement functions as both a performative act and a deeply symbolic tradition, examining its fluid boundaries between sacred ritual and cultural spectacle. In the context of Hindu dance traditions, performance theory highlights how Nagara dancing reinforces spiritual narratives while simultaneously engaging in broader discussions of gender and embodiment.

The study then explores Hindu dance theory through key concepts, including the foundational *Natyashastra*, a classical Sanskrit text outlining the principles of dramaturgy and embodied expression. This framework provides a structural approach to understanding Hindu dance as both an art form and a devotional practice within *Bhakti* traditions, where movement fosters personal and communal spiritual engagement. Gender embodiment in ritual emerges as a crucial aspect, revealing the fluid and performative nature of identity within sacred spaces. Embodiment theory further deepens this analysis by linking physical movement to religious identity, employing phenomenological approaches to examine how dancers experience and enact spirituality through movement.

Expanding on gender discourse by engaging with queer-ing gender performativity in dance, exploring how non-normative expressions of masculinity and femininity manifest within global and Asian contexts. Masculinity theories contribute to this exploration, questioning rigid gender constructs and challenging traditional norms through practices such as men wearing *Saris*. These perspectives reveal the fluidity of gender within ritual performance, illustrating how dance destabilises fixed notions of identity while fostering alternative expressions of selfhood.

1.7. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, immersing itself in the lived experiences of Nagara dancers to explore how they navigate masculinity within ritual performance spaces. Using IPA, the research delves into how dancers construct meaning within their cultural and religious contexts (Smith et al.,

2015). To deepen this exploration, the study also incorporates phenomenology, capturing the embodied aspects of their performance while acknowledging both personal narratives and broader societal influences (Van Manen, 2016). This dual approach ensures a balance between firsthand accounts and the analytical depth required to engage critically with gender performativity.

To ensure meaningful insights, purposive sampling is employed, selecting participants based on their expertise and connection to Nagara traditions (Campbell, 2020). By prioritising dancers with substantial experience in ritual performance, the study aims to explore their engagement with identity and masculinity in depth. A combination of focus group discussions and individual interviews enables a thick description of the collected data. Focus groups facilitate collective reflection, while individual follow-up interviews offer a more intimate space for discussing personal interpretations (Morgan, 1997; Kvale, 2007).

The study employs a reflexive thematic analysis, enabling an interpretative engagement with the data to generate themes as patterns of shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept, while maintaining methodological rigour (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This process is structured across distinct phases: data familiarisation, coding, theme development, refinement, and reporting (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Reflexivity ensures that the researcher's bias is acknowledged and accounted for, thereby reinforcing ethical integrity and credibility throughout the study.

Ultimately, this methodological framework is designed to capture the complexity of masculinity within Nagara dancing, bridging performance, identity, and religious embodiment. By integrating IPA, phenomenology, and reflexive thematic analysis, the study not only provides analytical depth but also honours the lived realities of Nagara dancers within South Africa's diasporic Hindu communities.

1.8. Chapter Outline

CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

This chapter establishes the foundation of the study by outlining its scope, objectives, and research questions. It provides essential background information, contextualising the significance of Nagara dancing within Hindu ritual practices and gender expression. By framing the study's purpose, this chapter sets the stage for the subsequent exploration of masculinity, embodiment, and religious performance.

CHAPTER 2 – Literature Review

It presents a critical review of existing scholarship, tracing the historical development of Hindu dance traditions and the emergence of the Nagara style of dancing. It examines key academic perspectives

on ritual performance, gender embodiment, and religious significance, situating the study within broader conversations on masculinity and cultural expression. Through an engagement with relevant literature, this chapter highlights gaps in existing research and positions the study within its intellectual landscape.

CHAPTER 3 – Theoretical Framework

This chapter explores the conceptual frameworks that underpin the study, offering an analysis of queer theory, masculinity theories, ritual dance theories, and the religious contexts of Nagara dancing. By engaging with these perspectives, the chapter provides a lens through which to examine how masculinity is performed, negotiated, and understood within ritual spaces. The theoretical discussion serves as a foundation for interpreting the lived experiences of Nagara dancers and their engagement with gender fluidity in religious practice.

CHAPTER 4 – Research Methodology

Outlines the methodological approach adopted in the study, detailing the research design, data collection methods, and analytical strategies. The study employs focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews to capture the voices and experiences of Nagara dancers. Additionally, reflexive thematic analysis is used to interpret the narratives within their respective cultural and religious contexts. This chapter also reflects on ethical considerations and the researcher's positionality in engaging with the participants.

CHAPTER 5 – Presentation of Data

This chapter presents the study's findings, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis and rooted in focus group and individual interviews with Nagara dancers. It outlines the context of data collection, participant profiles, and the interpretive process used to construct ten key themes that reflect how gender, masculinity, and cultural identity are embodied and negotiated through ritual performance. The chapter weaves participant narratives with theoretical reflection to explore the intersections of tradition, spirituality, performance, and social perception. These themes set the foundation for the theoretical discussion that follows in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6 – Discussion of Themes

Chapter 6 critically engages with the key themes emerging from participants' narratives to explore how masculinity is performed, negotiated, and reimagined within the sacred practice of Nagara dancing. Drawing on key theoretical frameworks, the chapter examines how dancers construct masculine identity through devotion, aesthetic labour, and spiritual discipline. It interrogates the

tensions between tradition and transformation, particularly in relation to gender fluidity and the interplay between sacred performance and spectacle. By situating these insights within broader academic discourse, the chapter positions Nagara as a powerful site for rethinking masculinity in diasporic and sacred contexts.

CHAPTER 7 – Conclusion

The final chapter synthesises the key insights from the study, reflecting on whether the research objectives were met. It considers the broader implications of the findings, particularly in relation to gender expression, religious identity, and cultural continuity. Additionally, the chapter offers closing remarks on the significance of Nagara dancing in contemporary Hindu communities, suggesting potential directions for future research and engagement with masculinity in ritual performance.

1.9. Conclusion

This chapter has established the groundwork for the study, situating Nagara dancing within a broader framework of religious, cultural, and gendered expression. Beginning with an introduction to the topic, the research has been contextualised through an exploration of historical background, motivation, and conceptual frameworks. The discussion highlighted how Nagara dancing operates both as a sacred ritual and a performative practice deeply embedded within South African Indian communities. The examination of Nagara's presence in South Africa illustrated its evolution within diasporic contexts, reinforcing its significance in contemporary cultural narratives.

The study's research questions and objectives were clearly outlined, providing a roadmap for investigating how masculinity is performed, negotiated, and understood within ritual spaces. By integrating qualitative methodologies, including IPA, phenomenology, and reflexive thematic analysis, the research design was structured to capture the complexities of embodied gender expression in Hindu ritual dance. This approach ensures a deep engagement with the lived experiences of Nagara dancers, exploring their navigation of masculinity both within and beyond the performance setting.

The theoretical framework positioned dance as a site of religious, cultural, and performative meaning, engaging with Hindu dance theory, embodiment theory, gender performativity, masculinity studies, and postcolonial perspectives. These interdisciplinary approaches enhance the study's capacity to examine identity formation, resistance, and the fluidity of gender expression within sacred spaces. The chapter outline further structured the research, ensuring a logical progression through the investigation. With this foundation in place, the next chapter delves into the literature review, critically examining historical, theoretical, and scholarly perspectives surrounding Nagara dancing, Hindu ritual

performance, and gender embodiment. By engaging with existing scholarship, the study seeks to position itself within broader academic discussions, identifying gaps in research and establishing connections between historical traditions, contemporary practices, and evolving discourses on gender and identity.

2. CHAPTER 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW CHAPTER

2.1. Introduction

The previous chapter examined the background and objectives of this study, establishing the foundational context for exploring masculinity, ritual embodiment, queer dance, and religious performance. This chapter presents a literature review, engaging with key scholarly contributions that have shaped discussions surrounding these themes, critically examining the intersections of dance, gender, and spirituality, emphasising the performative nature of identity and devotion. Beginning with dance as a form of worship, it explores how movement functions as a sacred act, facilitating divine connection and communal reverence. Within this framework, Hindu dance forms establish the stylistic and theological foundation for ritual performance, while Hindu religious dance rituals highlight embodied devotion, reinforcing spiritual narratives through choreographed expression.

The discussion then shifts to men who dance, addressing the complexities of male participation in an art form often associated with femininity. The section on masculinity in dance examines how male dancers navigate societal perceptions within the gendered dance space and considers how movement challenges traditional gender boundaries.

Further, men who embody the divine through dance examine the transformative nature of male religious performance, particularly in its disruption of binary constructs. Queer-ing religious spaces through dance and queer-ing embodiment within religious dance explores how sacred movement serves as a medium for challenging normative identities, situating the dancer as an intermediary between earthly and divine realms.

The final section explores performative masculinities, examining the evolving constructs of masculinity. The examination of hegemonic masculinity contextualises dominant gender ideologies within dance scholarship. At the same time, Hindu masculinities in ritual spaces consider the ways male dancers enact spiritual authority and devotion through bodily expression. Through these discussions, this literature review frames dance as both a site of worship and a contested space for gender negotiation, demonstrating its role in shaping religious, cultural, and gendered identities.

2.2. Dance as a Form of Religious Worship

Dance has long been an integral part of religious and spiritual practices across cultures, serving as a profound expression of devotion, reverence, and connection to the divine. As a form of worship, dance transcends mere movement, embodying theological, ritualistic, and communal significance. Scholars such as Zaluchu (2021) and Hellsten (2024) have examined the theological foundations of dance in worship, emphasising its role in liturgical practices and its capacity to convey spiritual truths.

Historically, dance has been employed in various religious traditions, from the sacred dances of indigenous cultures to the choreographed movements in Christian liturgy. Zaluchu (2021) argues that bodily movement in worship is biblically substantiated and serves as a means of communication with God. Similarly, Hellsten (2024) examines the intersection of dance, ritual, and liturgy, emphasising the need for a laborious understanding of practice in theological discussions. These perspectives reinforce the idea that dance is not merely an aesthetic performance but a profoundly spiritual act that fosters a connection between worshippers and the divine. In Christian traditions, dance has been both embraced and contested. Some theologians, such as Manring (2006), contend that dance was an element of Old Testament worship that expired with the sacrificial system. However, contemporary scholars advocate for its inclusion, arguing that dance enhances worship by engaging the body, mind, and spirit in a holistic expression of faith.

Dance as worship continues to evolve, reflecting shifts in both cultural and theological perspectives. Whether in structured liturgical settings or spontaneous expressions of praise, dance remains a powerful medium through which believers experience and communicate their spirituality. Rooted in sacred tradition, dance serves as an expression of divine connection, transforming performers into vessels of worship (Durkheim, 1996). In Hinduism, religious dance is an essential form of devotion, embodying spiritual narratives through movement. These embodied practices reinforce cultural identity, ritual purity, and the cyclical interplay between the human and the divine (Holdrege, 1998). Shils (1971) suggests that within Hindu traditions, dance functions not only as an aesthetic art but as an act of religious veneration, where movement symbolises cosmic harmony and spiritual transcendence. This intricate relationship between body, ritual, and worship underscores the multifaceted significance of Hindu dance as both a performance and a sacred offering.

2.2.1. Hindu Dance Forms

Hinduism is rich in artistic expressions and ritual practices. These creative expressions encompass a wide range, from architecture and music to fine art and dance. Ritual dance has evolved from classical Indian dance over 2,500 years, becoming a nuanced form of traditional Hindu expression of worship and religious supplication to the divine (Mickeviciene, 2004). Within Hinduism, ritual dance functions as a sacred act of devotion, bridging the human and the divine through embodied movement. Classical

Indian dance forms, such as *Bharatanatyam*¹, *Kathakali*², and *Odissi*³, have long been intertwined with temple rituals, serving as offerings to deities through disciplined and symbolic choreography (Kersenboom, 1987). *Bharatanatyam*, for instance, was historically performed by *Devadasis*⁴, women dedicated to temple service, who conveyed mythological narratives and cosmic principles through intricate footwork and expressive gestures (Bhuyan et al., 2022).

Through performativity, the body becomes a vessel for the divine presence, invoking spiritual power and reinforcing religious hierarchies and cosmological beliefs (Holdrege, 1998). The sacred nature of dance is not merely performative but a transformative experience, where bodily expressions affirm ritual purity and divine connection. The embodiment of the sacred in Hindu dance underscores performativity as an act of devotion, positioning the human form as a site for transcendence (Banerji, 2010). Through physical movement, dancers invoke, embody, and enact divinity, solidifying ritual dance as an integral part of Hindu worship.

As a result, the body becomes the focal point of ritual dance, where the body is referred to as sacred. Holdrege (1998:341) describes the Brahmanical Hindu tradition as an embodied community, where identity is deeply rooted in ethnic and cultural structures, specifically among *Brahmins*, through the sacred language of Sanskrit and a defined geographic space. Central to this tradition is the body, which serves as a conduit for maintaining social, cosmic, and divine order. This emphasis on embodiment aligns with the origins of Hindu dance, where movement is not merely an artistic act but a sacred one that reinforces spiritual and societal structures. Classical dance forms such as *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi*, influenced by texts like the *Natyashastra*, embody this philosophy through the use of gestures (*mudras*) and expressions to convey cosmic narratives and devotional themes. Through dance, the Brahmanical tradition integrates ritual, hierarchy, and spirituality, demonstrating how bodily movement sustains religious and cultural identity.

Dance is an example of how worship can be expressed through the body. Armstrong (1978:298) suggests that cultural forms resulting from the creative use of human bodies in time and space are

¹ *Bharatanatyam* is a classical Indian dance form characterized by expressive storytelling, intricate footwork, and symbolic gestures (Bhuyan et al., 2022).

² *Kathakali* is a classical North Indian dance form, known for its intricate footwork, rhythmic spins, and expressive storytelling through gestures (Walker, 2016).

³ *Odissi* is a classical Indian dance form originating from *Odisha*, characterised by fluid movements, sculptural poses, and intricate expressions, embodying spiritual devotion and narrative storytelling (Banerji, 2010).

⁴ *Devadasis* were female temple dancers in Hindu tradition, dedicated to serving deities through ritual performances, music, and dance, historically associated with spiritual devotion and religious ceremonies (Kersenboom, 1987).

often overlooked as 'Dance'. However, Hindu worshippers who participate in ritual dance are spiritually aligned with their physical bodies as they are considered sacred vessels of/for worship; in this sense, the body becomes sacred. Moreover, Armstrong (1978) extends his argument by noting that ritual dance evolved to bring people good fortune and health. In other words, religious dances played a performative role in ensuring that notable necessities, such as food, shelter, and safety, fulfilled special wishes or prayers, while simultaneously averting natural evils, including droughts, floods, and diseases. Bose (2022) supports Armstrong's (1978) position, arguing that ritual dance and performances entailed a deep philosophical significance.

Bose (2022:26) further notes that:

Hindu Dance forms were viewed as a cosmic activity of the God *Siva*, who created the art form as an eternal flow of motion whereby he would cyclically destroy and recreate the universe. As an imitation of that divine action, dance was seen as a path to the soul's liberation.

As the transmitters of myth, folklore, and religious tales, these dances represent the essence of Hindu mythology and serve as a timeless testament to India's profound love for art, spirituality, and the divine. In modern rehearsals of religious dance, Zubko (2019:NP) describes ritual dance as a central practice in Hinduism across various contexts, mythological narratives, and historical periods. Gods such as *Shiva* and *Krishna*, who are divine beings, were known to be dancers. People then adapted this art form and began to dance, often embodying these gods as part of *Bhakti*⁵, or devotion. Pillai (2022) describes *Bhakti* as a movement in two distinct positions: on the one hand, *Bhakti* forms a social movement, and on the other, it is an act of personal devotion.

Bhakti, a profoundly personal and devotional form of worship in Hinduism, serves as a means of supplication through unwavering love and surrender to the divine. Rooted in emotional and spiritual connection, *Bhakti* transcends ritualistic practices, allowing devotees to express their reverence through prayer, song, and dance. As Pillai (2022) notes, the *Bhakti* movement played a transformative role in shaping Hindu religious expression, emphasising devotion over hierarchical structures. *Bharatanatyam* and other classical Indian dance forms embody *Bhakti* through intricate gestures (*Mudras*) and expressive storytelling (*Abhinaya*), channelling devotion into movement. The dancer becomes both worshipper and medium, invoking divine presence through rhythmic precision and emotive depth. This fusion of *Bhakti* and dance fosters a spiritual experience, reinforcing the idea that devotion is not confined to temples but can be embodied in artistic expression. Thus, devotional dance

⁵ devotional worship directed to one supreme deity, usually Vishnu (especially in his incarnations as Rama and Krishna) or Shiva, by whose grace salvation may be attained by all regardless of sex, caste, or class.

serves as a sacred conduit, deepening the worshipper's connection to the divine through embodied prayer.

Aligning with ritual dance, Nagara dancing, as a ritual and performative practice, undergoes a significant transformation when situated within diasporic contexts. In these spaces, the dance is not merely preserved as cultural heritage but becomes a dynamic site of identity negotiation, spiritual continuity, and gendered expression. Diaspora, as both a geographical and affective condition, reshapes the meaning and function of Nagara performance, allowing it to serve as a conduit for cultural memory and embodied resistance.

Putcha (2022) frames dance in diasporic settings as a "sonic and embodied archive," through which performers articulate their belonging, displacement, and agency. Putcha emphasises how diasporic dancers utilise voice, movement, and ritual to reclaim space and assert their identity in environments that often marginalise non-Western cultural expressions. In the case of Nagara, the drumbeat and choreography become more than aesthetic; they are acts of cultural survival and spiritual invocation, especially for communities navigating racialised and gendered exclusions.

Similarly, Jackson and Baumann (2022) in *Deities and Divas*, explore how diasporic religious performances, particularly those involving gender-fluid or non-normative embodiments, challenge hegemonic structures and reconfigure sacred space. Their analysis of Southeast Asian ritual dance in diasporic queer communities reveals how performance can simultaneously affirm tradition and subvert dominant norms of gender and spirituality. This duality resonates with Nagara dancing, where male performers in diasporic Pentecostal communities may embody spiritual authority while also navigating tensions around masculinity, embodiment, and religious orthodoxy.

In diasporic spaces, Nagara dancing often becomes a site of gender negotiation, especially as performers grapple with the expectations of hegemonic masculinity. As Putcha (2022) notes, diasporic performance allows for "gendered improvisations" that resist rigid binaries and open up possibilities for alternative masculinities. This is particularly relevant in contexts where expressive movement is feminised or deemed incompatible with dominant religious masculinities. The diasporic Nagara dancer, therefore, performs not only for the divine but also for the community, negotiating visibility, respectability, and spiritual legitimacy.

Moreover, diasporic Nagara performances are shaped by transnational flows of media, theology, and cultural aesthetics. Jackson and Baumann (2022) highlight how diasporic rituals are often hybridised, incorporating global influences while maintaining local specificity. This hybridity allows Nagara

dancers to adapt their performances to new audiences and spiritual landscapes, creating a layered expression of faith, identity, and resistance.

In summary, Nagara dancing in diasporic spaces is not a static reproduction of tradition but a living, adaptive practice. It embodies the tensions and possibilities of diasporic life where memory, movement, and masculinity converge in ritual performance. Through the lens of Putcha's and Jackson & Baumann's scholarship, we see how Nagara becomes a powerful medium for reimagining gender, spirituality, and cultural belonging across borders.

2.2.2. Veneration Through Religious Dance

The concept of devotional dance and ritual performances evolved from a rich history that branched into various facets of devotional performances, including *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathak*, *Odissi*, and folk dances.

Zubko (2019:NP) states:

Such as popular *Garba* and *Raas* dancing. Other ritual dances invite a god to be embodied in the devotee through possession or depicted theatrically in solos and dance dramas. The emphasis of most of the scholarship is weighted toward the formation and practice of the eight classical dance forms.

Folk dance serves as the foundation for stylised classical forms, where performers embody divine attributes, attitudes, and movements to create a theatrical experience within the eight classical dance traditions. The eight classical dance forms of India - *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathak*, *Kathakali*⁶, *Kuchipudi*⁷, *Odissi*, *Sattriya*⁸, *Mohiniyattam*⁹, and *Manipuri*¹⁰ - are deeply rooted in Hindu traditions and serve as expressions of devotion through movement (Sukhatankar, 2016). These dance forms, originating from different regions, share a common foundation in the *Natyashastra*, emphasising storytelling, rhythm, and spiritual symbolism (Vatsyayan, 2022). Devotional dance, particularly in *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi*, embodies *Bhakti* (devotion) by narrating mythological tales and invoking divine presence through intricate gestures and expressions (Gaston, 2012:93). The dancer becomes both worshipper and medium, channelling sacred energy through movement, reinforcing the idea that dance is not

⁶ *Kathakali* is a classical Indian dance-drama known for elaborate costumes, expressive gestures, and mythological storytelling through intricate movements and facial expressions (Sukhatankar, 2016).

⁷ *Kuchipudi* is a classical Indian dance form from Andhra Pradesh, blending fluid movements, dramatic storytelling, and rhythmic footwork with devotional themes (Sukhatankar, 2016).

⁸ *Sattriya* is a classical Indian dance form from Assam, rooted in Vaishnavism, combining rhythmic movements, storytelling, and devotion through expressive hand gestures (Sukhatankar, 2016).

⁹ *Mohiniyattam* is a classical Indian dance form from Kerala, characterized by graceful hand movements, expressive storytelling, and devotion, often performed by women (Sukhatankar, 2016).

¹⁰ *Manipuri* is a classical Indian dance form from Manipur, known for its fluid movements, devotional themes, and graceful storytelling through dance and music (Sukhatankar, 2016).

merely an art form but a spiritual offering. Through *Abhinaya* (expressive storytelling) and *Nritta* (pure dance), these classical forms transcend entertainment, serving as a conduit for divine connection and religious experience. Thus, Hindu classical dance remains an integral part of devotional practice, merging artistic excellence with spiritual devotion.

Zubko (2019:NP) asserts that Sanskrit ritual dance forms are deeply embedded with a specialised technical vocabulary in music and a structured movement grammar, exemplified in *Bharatanatyam* and *Kathakali*. These traditions are further enriched by a sacred origin narrative rooted in Hindu literature and doctrine, alongside the aesthetic concept of *Rasa*, which shapes the emotive and experiential dimensions of performance. With these concepts, the audience becomes receptive to the aesthetic mood and the experience of the audience members is sharpened as the dancers guide them through a journey using their physical expressions, or *Bhavas*¹¹.

The concept of *Rasa*, as outlined in the *Natyashastra*¹², serves as the foundation for emotional engagement, allowing performers to evoke distinct aesthetic moods that resonate with the audience (Gaston, 2012). *Bhavas*, or expressive states, function as the medium through which dancers convey devotion, mythology, and philosophical themes, reinforcing the spiritual depth of these classical forms (Vatsyayan, 2022). The interplay between *Rasa* and *bhavas* ensures that the audience does not merely observe but actively experiences the performance, fostering a heightened sense of immersion (Sukhatankar, 2016). This dynamic interaction between performer and spectator accentuates the transformative power of Hindu classical dance, where movement transcends physicality to become a conduit for divine storytelling and emotional transcendence.

Mickeviciene (2004) provides a deeper exploration of how ritual dance and temple architecture are rooted in the fundamental ideas of Hindu thought and practice, where all are considered sacred and rich in history. In this instance, the performative art within Hinduism is grounded in a foundation deeply embedded in Hindu history and traditions. This is evident when Mickeviciene (2004) describes *Kathakali* and *Bharatanatyam* as dance styles that depict the narratives of the divine using the body.

Through highlighting the intrinsic connection between Hindu ritual dance and temple architecture, where vivid portrayals of dance are captured in intricate sculptures of dancers in dynamic poses, often reflecting classical traditions like *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi*, this symbolises the sacred link between movement, devotion, and cosmic harmony. Mickeviciene (2004) emphasises their shared foundation

¹¹ Sanskrit word meaning “being/worldly existence”

¹² *Natya Shastra* is an ancient Sanskrit text on performing arts, detailing principles of drama, dance, music, and aesthetic theory in Hindu traditions (Gaston, 2012).

in sacred Hindu thought and practice. The embodiment of the divine through dance is particularly evident in *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi*, where performers use intricate gestures (*Mudras*) and expressive storytelling (*Abhinaya*) to invoke the presence of deities. This aligns with the concept of *Rasa*, as outlined in the *Natyashastra*, which enables dancers to transcend mere performance and create a spiritual experience for both themselves and the audience (Gaston, 2012). Through rhythmic movement and symbolic representation, these dance forms transform the human body into a vessel for divine energy, reinforcing the sacred nature of Hindu performative traditions. This embodiment of divine energy through dance not only preserves sacred traditions but also invites critical discourse on gendered participation, highlighting the unique role of men in these performative expressions.

2.3 Men Who Dance

The representation of men in dance has been a subject of scholarly inquiry, particularly concerning masculinity, gender norms, and societal perceptions of men. Fisher and Shay (2009) provide a comprehensive analysis of how male dancers navigate cultural expectations, arguing that dance serves as a site for both reinforcing and challenging traditional notions of masculinity. Their work highlights how male dancers negotiate identity across different dance forms and geographical contexts.

Risner (2009) expands on this discourse by examining the experiences of boys and young men in dance education. He identifies systemic biases that discourage male participation in dance, emphasising the need for pedagogical approaches that foster inclusivity. His research underscores the impact of societal attitudes on male dancers, particularly in Western contexts where dance is often feminised.

Christofidou (2021:85) further explores the intersection of masculinity and sexuality in dance, analysing how male dancers contend with homophobic stereotypes and gendered expectations. Her study reveals the complexities of male identity within professional dance settings, illustrating how dancers challenge and redefine traditional gender roles through performance.

Collectively, these scholars contribute to a nuanced understanding of men in dance, demonstrating that male dancers occupy a unique space where artistic expression intersects with broader cultural and gender discourses. Their research underscores the importance of dismantling stereotypes and fostering a more inclusive dance environment.

The arts and dance offer a compelling lens through which hegemonic masculinity can be interrogated, embodied, and reimagined. Connell's (1995) concept of *hegemonic masculinity* describes the culturally dominant form of masculinity that legitimises male power and subordinates alternative

masculinities. Within this framework, traits such as emotional restraint, physical dominance, and heterosexuality are valorised, while expressive, vulnerable, or non-normative masculinities are marginalised. Dance, as an embodied and expressive art form, often stands in tension with these hegemonic ideals.

In many cultural contexts, dance has historically been feminised, rendering male participation in dance as suspect or deviant within patriarchal norms. Yet, dance also provides a space for resistance and transformation. As Roebuck (2021) argues, contemporary male dancers increasingly perform “against the grain,” disrupting essentialist gender binaries and offering pluralistic visions of masculinity. This is particularly evident in ritual and community-based performances, where dance becomes a site of spiritual and social negotiation.

Cox’s (2015) study of dramatic arts learners in KwaZulu-Natal demonstrates how boys use dance to transition from boyhood to manhood. Her research indicates that dance serves as a pedagogical and performative tool through which young men engage with and contest hegemonic masculinity. By embodying movement, rhythm, and vulnerability, these learners challenge dominant gender scripts and explore alternative masculine identities. Cox’s work is especially relevant in the South African context, where intersecting forces of race, religion, and postcolonial history shape masculinity.

Similarly, Spiller’s (2010) ethnographic study of Sundanese dance in West Java reveals how male dancers negotiate masculinity through ritualised performance. Spiller introduces the concept of the “erotic triangle”—a relational dynamic between the female entertainer, the drummer, and the male dancer—through which masculinity is both reinforced and destabilised. He argues that dance provides a liminal space where men can express desire, improvisation, and spiritual authority, often in ways that contradict hegemonic norms. This triangulation model offers a valuable comparative framework for analysing Nagara performance, where male dancers similarly navigate spiritual embodiment, communal expectation, and gendered power.

Messerschmidt’s (2019) notion of *protest masculinities* further expands this analysis, describing hyper-masculine performances that emerge in response to marginalisation. In dance contexts, such performances may reflect exaggerated strength or dominance, yet they also reveal the fragility and constructed nature of masculine identity. When situated within religious frameworks—such as Pentecostalism—these performances become even more layered, as men negotiate spiritual purity, bodily discipline, and communal leadership.

Ultimately, the intersection of hegemonic masculinity and dance reveals a dynamic field of tension and possibility. Dance challenges the rigidity of dominant masculine norms by foregrounding the body, emotion, and relationality. It allows men to perform, resist, and reconfigure masculinity in ways that are culturally specific and historically grounded. For Nagara dancers, this means embodying spiritual authority while simultaneously navigating the pressures of heteropatriarchal expectation, religious doctrine, and communal visibility. In doing so, they offer a living archive of masculinity in motion, which is ritualised, contested, and deeply felt.

2.3.1. Masculinity in Dance

The presence of male dancers in both classical and contemporary dance settings promotes a compelling dialogue about the nature of masculinity and its cultural representation. Traditionally, dance, especially in many Western contexts, has been coded as a feminised space, often placing male dancers at the intersection of admiration and stigma. As such, their participation challenges hegemonic constructs of masculinity while also providing alternative frameworks for understanding male embodiment and performance.

Burt (2007) critically explores how the male dancing body is positioned within theatrical contexts, emphasising how spectacle and the gaze complicate perceptions of male dancers. He argues that male dancers are often subject to a paradox: admired for their physicality and athleticism, yet simultaneously marginalised due to societal associations between dance and femininity. This tension is echoed in Gard's (2006) investigation, which situates dance within a broader negotiation of aesthetic and athletic ideals. He further highlights how male dancers simultaneously subvert and uphold masculine stereotypes, using the language of physical prowess to gain legitimacy in a discipline historically perceived as unrelated to traditional masculinity.

The theme of stigma is further explored by Risner (2009), who documents the lived experiences of boys who dance and the psychological resilience required to navigate a cultural landscape burdened with gender bias. His findings suggest that perseverance in dance often requires a continual confirmation of identity, challenging not only gender norms but also broader cultural narratives that police male expression. Similarly, Nair (2014) identifies the use of bodily descriptors, such as strength, stoicism, or discipline, as strategic tools male dancers use to 'normalise' their presence and realign themselves with societal expectations of masculinity.

From a broader sociological perspective, Thomas (1996) and Anderson and McCormack (2015) provide insights into how dance intersects with shifting notions of masculinity. The concept of 'inclusive

masculinity,' as outlined by Anderson and McCormack (2015), is particularly relevant, offering a theoretical framework through which male dancers can express emotionality, vulnerability, and artistry without being limited by traditional gender norms. These shifts indicate a reconfiguration of masculinity in performative spaces, where dance serves not only as an art form but also as a site of resistance, negotiation, and redefinition. Collectively, these studies reveal the dynamic interplay between dance and gender, illustrating how male dancers actively reconstruct the meaning of masculinity through embodied practice. Building on this discussion of masculinity in dance, it is crucial to examine how gender shapes the broader dance space, influencing participation, representation, and the performative dynamics within various traditions.

2.3.2. Gendering the Dance Space

For many centuries, dance was primarily a religious function as a temple ritual in India. When performed at royal courts, it was presented either as the offering of a beautiful object to a deity or as an illustration and affirmation of a divine being's power, as well as for personal liberation. The idea of ritual dance is to bring about spiritual fulfilment and to allow the performers to use their bodies as a medium of worship. By emphasising the physical body, embodiment creates the possibility for the body to function as both the object and subject, as well as the material and source of symbolic construction, as well as the product of cultural inscription (Parker-Starbuck, 2011). When referring to religious embodiment.

Holdrege (1998:345) suggests that:

In addition to categories such as the medical body and the gendered body, other forms of embodiment that are of particular significance to religious traditions, such as the divine body and the ritual body, need to be more fully explored from the methodological perspective of the history of religions.

Here, Holdrege (1998) argues that the divine and ritual body shape spiritual experience, serving as a form of embodied worship. Discussions surrounding the gendered body within ritual practices and embodiment have been prevalent for many centuries. Holdrege (1998) frames embodiment as central to the *Brahmanical order*, but recent critiques highlight its limitations. Sumati (2020) argues that Bhakti traditions offer a more fluid approach to corporeal spirituality, challenging Holdrege's hierarchical emphasis. Kaikini (2022) questions whether her framework fully accounts for ethical and transformative experiences in education, while Dalal (2021) critiques its applicability to *Advaita*

*Vedanta Eco-Theology*¹³, noting its neglect of ecological dimensions. These perspectives call for a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of embodiment in Hindu traditions.

According to Moorthy (1986), the worship of *Amma* (Mother) as *Shakthi* (divine female power), and her appearance is threefold: through the statues of *Shakthi* in the temple; through the intermediary of a male figure, referred to as *Guruji*, or sometimes as God; and through his words. The centrality of the male figure in the worship of the Goddess presents a complex discourse, particularly in relation to inclusivity within Hindu ritual practices. As David (2009:341) asserts, Goddess worship transcends social barriers, allowing individuals of all castes, genders, and ages, including widows, menstruating women, and lower-caste devotees, to participate in the sacred rites without restriction. This contrasts with the exclusionary practices observed in certain Hindu temples, where social hierarchies often limit participation in rituals.

The classless nature of Goddess worship challenges traditional norms, reinforcing the notion that divine reverence is not contingent upon societal classifications but rather upon spiritual devotion and personal connection to the sacred (David, 2009). This perspective opens critical inquiries into how gender and caste dynamics shape religious experiences, positioning Goddess worship as a domain that both reflects and disrupts historical structures of inclusion and exclusion within Hinduism. However, Moorthy (1986) further asserts that the centring of a man around the worship of the Goddess is an act of embodiment, as this man will go into a trance and become the vessel of the Goddess, speaking in a divine vocabulary. This transformation of the male body into a vessel for the Goddess not only exemplifies divine embodiment but also intersects with broader discussions on gender performativity and the fluidity of identity within religious dance traditions, particularly men who embody the divine.

2.4. Men Embodying the Divine Through Dance

Throughout various Hindu traditions, men often assume the embodiment of the Goddess as an act of devotional worship, with Nagara dancing serving as a prominent example. In this practice, the male dancer internalises and manifests the divine essence of Goddess *Saraswati*, channelling her presence through precise movements and sacred gestures which align with Mickeviciene's (2004) theory on movement. This act of embodiment functions as both a supplication and a means of spiritual fulfilment, allowing the performer to transcend personal identity and invoke the Goddess's blessings (Gaston, 2012). The ritualised performance aligns with the concept of *Rasa*, as outlined in the *Natyashastra*, which enables dancers to create a spiritual experience for both themselves and the

¹³ *Advaita Vedanta eco-theology* integrates non-dualistic philosophy with environmental ethics, emphasizing interconnectedness and ecological responsibility (Dalal, 2021)

audience (Vatsyayan, 2022). Through rhythmic movement and symbolic representation, these dance forms transform the human body into a vessel for divine energy, reinforcing the sacred nature of Hindu performative traditions (Sukhatankar, 2016). The connection between the Goddess *Saraswati* and artistic expression further solidifies the role of dance as an extension of devotion, where the dancer becomes a conduit for divine presence (Zubko, 2019).

Moorthy (1986) defines the idealised depiction of a religious figure or saint as one that highlights their virtues, miraculous deeds, and spiritual significance. He further elaborates that doctrine describes transformative experiences, stating that “from the moment of the Mother entering his body, he walks like a woman and talks in dignified rhythmic languages.” This characterisation underscores the profound embodiment of divine influence within hagiographic narratives, where physical and linguistic expressions are perceived as manifestations of spiritual transcendence.

The framework of embodiment and gendered expression extends beyond comparative musicology and folkloristics to encompass the corporeal enactment of sacred narratives (Ganser, 2022). The performative space is not merely aesthetic but is shaped by religious ideologies that dictate the dancer’s physical engagement with sacred energy (Mickeviciene, 2004). Through gestural precision and rhythmic invocation, performers construct a gendered embodiment of devotion, wherein the dancer channels the essence of the Goddess, reinforcing Gaston’s (2012) study on the intersection of ritual and corporeality. This embodied practice transcends individual identity, allowing the dancer to merge with the divine, thereby solidifying the ritualistic function of dance as a medium for spiritual transcendence and communal reverence (Vatsyayan, 2022). By dissolving personal identity into divine embodiment, ritual dance not only reinforces spiritual transcendence but also serves as a crucial site for exploring gender fluidity and challenging conventional norms through performative expression.

Gender performativity and queer dance intersect as dynamic sites for challenging traditional gender norms and expressing fluid identities through movement. Butler (1990) argues that gender is not an inherent trait but rather a performative act, continuously reinforced through repetition and social expectations. Dance, as a performative medium, provides a space where gender can be reimagined, subverted, and embodied beyond binary constructs (Hollond, 2019). Queer dance, in particular, disrupts hegemonic masculinity and femininity by embracing non-normative expressions of identity, allowing performers to resist societal constraints and redefine gender through artistic interpretation (Wong, 2023).

Meyerhoff (2015) expands on Butler’s (1990) theory, emphasising that gender performativity is deeply rooted in linguistic and cultural practices, shaping identity through social interactions. Halberstam and Persard (2018) further argue that queer dance functions as a site of resistance, where performers

challenge heteronormative frameworks and create alternative gender narratives. Within Hindu ritual spaces, gender performativity manifests through embodied devotion, where dancers engage in movements that transcend rigid gender binaries, reinforcing spiritual and cultural narratives (Koutsougera, 2018:22). By examining these intersections, scholars have explored how dance functions as a medium for gender fluidity, reinforcing the idea that identity is not fixed but somewhat shaped through performative acts and cultural discourse (Hollond, 2019). Building on this perspective, the concept of '*queer-ing divinity through dance*' emerges as a vital discourse, illustrating how performative movement challenges predictable boundaries of gender and religious dance.

2.4.1. Queer-ing Religious Spaces through Dance

The relevance of queer literature highlights the essential theme that the term 'queer' is increasingly employed as a verb (queering as a deviating from the norm) rather than merely an adjective to describe something unusual or unconventional. Clark (2021) posits that space is a crucial factor in transitioning from disorder to order.

Clark (2021:169) indicates:

Queering space is a spatial performance, which makes a range of non-normative enactments, rhythms, movements, and embodiments intelligible by disrupting assumptions that discipline space as binaristic, static, and normative.

Clark (2021) asserts that the factors mentioned above (non-normative enactments, rhythms, movements, and embodiments) that influence the isolation around those who fall outside of heteronormative ideals are as nuanced, numerous, and diverse as the range of sexualities and gender identities that exist, thus giving meaning to queered spaces and performances. Fikes (2021:NP) affirms the notion of queering space, as it creates conditions for transgressing what is seen as fixed categories, such as gender and sexuality, or in some cases, intersections of racial and ethnic identities. He further states that queered spaces do not necessarily focus much on the dominant culture.

The fact that men are dressed as the embodiment of the Goddess (Singh, 2016:NP) speaks to the notion of gender performativity and how gender then becomes disrupted or queered in a sacred space. Butler (1990) theorises that gender performativity is constituted through repeated acts that signify an individual's identification as either 'man' or 'woman,' including dress, mannerisms, and social behaviours. These performative acts, continuously reinforced within cultural and institutional frameworks, construct the perception of a stable gender identity. However, Butler (1990) argues that this stability is illusory, as gender is not an inherent or fixed trait but rather a socially produced phenomenon sustained through iterative performances. By engaging in these repeated enactments,

individuals conform to societal expectations, thereby legitimising and naturalising gender norms. This perspective challenges essentialist notions of gender, emphasising its fluid and constructed nature.

Hindu ritual spaces challenge fixed gender binaries, allowing for fluid expressions of identity. Butler (1990) theorises gender as performative, shaped through repeated acts rather than inherent traits. Halberstam and Persard (2018) further argue that queered spaces disrupt normative gender constructs, fostering alternative identities. Such fluidity is demonstrated by David (2009:338):

Devotees worship the man as Amma or as Adhiparasakthi and use the feminine pronoun when speaking of him. One website devoted to the worship of the goddess notes, 'He becomes Her,... She is in Him'. He has been 'receiving' the Goddess since 1970. Nowadays, he is described as embodying Sakthi constantly, rather than intermittently as in the past, and therefore is seen as the Goddess.

David (2009) explains that within such sacred traditions, men temporarily adopt feminine attributes, including altered appearance and pronouns, to engage in devotional performances that transcend conventional gender binaries (Hollond, 2019). Their transformation is not an expression of personal identity but a demonstration of religious commitment, reinforcing the fluidity of gender roles within Hindu ritual spaces. This aligns with the phenomenon of gender performativity, which is prominently illustrated in the practice of Goddess worship, where the male body functions as a vessel to receive and embody divine femininity. This ritualistic performance aligns with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not an innate identity but rather a series of socially constructed acts.

This practice challenges hegemonic masculinity by queering traditional gender norms, illustrating how masculinity can be reconfigured through embodied devotion (Halberstam, 2012; Persard, 2018). The disruption of gender is highlighted by Wong (2023), where he explains how institutional fragility and social stigma can fracture the continuity of gender expression, revealing the vulnerability of gender as a socially constructed and mediated category. However, the act of embodying the Goddess disrupts rigid gender dichotomies, allowing for a broader and more inclusive understanding of masculinity within religious frameworks. Furthermore, such performances highlight the intersectionality of gender, religion, and culture, demonstrating how ritualistic dance serves as a site for alternative expressions of identity that resist societal constraints (Koutsougera, 2018:22). By engaging in such rituals, participants contribute to the evolving discourse on gender fluidity and performativity, supporting the transformative potential of traditional practices in reshaping contemporary gender constructs.

2.4.2. Queer-ing Embodiment within Religious Dance

David's (2009) depiction of dance as a form of communication with the divine; therefore, the performer is given freedom in embodiment and in taking on any persona of the sacred. Reasonably, Sax (1990) asserts that both men and women can perform ritual dance, as these acts manifest the divine (both gods and goddesses). According to Butler (1990), the distinction between sex and gender supports the argument that whatever biological sex an individual appears to have, gender is culturally constructed, allowing for gender to be portrayed without the influence of biological sex. Therefore, the dominant argument is that sex cannot define the gender of a person, as gender becomes a performance that any individual can embody. Butler (1990) argues that being born male or female does not determine behaviour. She further states that people learn to behave in particular ways to fit into society. In this case, men who perform acts that embody the Goddess have adapted their masculinities and femininities to the practice of embodiment.

Performances, as described by Butler (1988), indicate that gender reality is known as performative. Butler (1988) theorises gender as being performative. This theory is translated as an internal performance that shifts to an external one. The thoughts that may arise from discussions around where gender is constructed are deeply rooted in the performative nature of the individual.

Butler (1988:527) notes:

Gender does not come from a rooted identity somewhere inside us, but it only exists through our actions and the actions of others in society toward us. 'Gender reality is performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed'.

Azzarelli (2015:NP) affirms the notion above, as she also considers gender as a cultural performance that is 'grounded on the stylised repetition of acts through time,' a repetition that gradually turns into the norm. However, a disconnect arises when this theory is situated within the context of dance and theatre. Azzarelli (2015:NP) further argues that showing unconsidered possibilities that go beyond normative systems could have the power to 'destabilise received and rehearsed categories.' In other words, what is known as normal can become disrupted and create disorder in people's basic understanding of gender. She states that dancers are expected to enact both male and female roles, using a codified series of bodily attitudes and gestures when performing *Bharatanatyam*. This statement exemplifies the notion of how the normal order of gender is obsolete from the normative perspective and is more inclusive of gender-bending.

Gender performativity is central to the construction of gendered discourse within ritual dance, as specific roles are typically assigned to men and women based on cultural and religious traditions. In the context of Nagara dance, male performers often assume dominant roles, reinforcing gender

hierarchies within performative spaces. Butler (1988:520) conceptualises gender as a series of enacted behaviours rather than an inherent identity, emphasising its performative nature. However, Hollywood (2002) critiques this framework, arguing that gender performativity does not fully account for the complexities of embodied experience and the socio-cultural constraints that shape gender expression within ritualistic performances.

Hollywood (2002:94) explains that one of the issues with the term 'performativity,' as discussed by Butler (1997), is that it can misleadingly suggest that individuals deliberately perform their identities, especially when the term's theatrical origins are emphasised. Hollywood (2002:94) distinguishes between gender performativity and theatrical performativity, asserting that the former is an intentional process of identity construction, whereas the latter is an unintentional enactment within performance contexts. Gender performativity, as theorised by Butler (1990), actively facilitates individual transformation through repeated acts that reinforce or subvert societal gender norms. In contrast, theatrical performativity involves performers adopting gendered roles to embody characters, without necessarily engaging in broader identity negotiations (Hollywood, 2002).

Such distinctions are particularly evident in Hindu religious performances, which, through observation, inadvertently destabilise heteronormative and cisnormative constructs. Through this process, masculinity is queered within a sacred space, challenging traditional gender binaries and reinforcing the fluidity of gender expression. Signifying the disruption of normative gender perceptions within performative traditions. Such ritual enactments highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of gender, fostering a more inclusive interpretation of identity beyond rigid binary classifications (Xie, 2014). By engaging in these performances, participants contribute to the broader discourse on gender fluidity, demonstrating how religious and theatrical spaces serve as sites for negotiating and reimagining gender roles.

The concept of 'queer' encapsulates a profoundly personal and nuanced understanding of gender fluidity. In Hinduism, gender roles are intricately described, highlighting the predominance of male presence and their management of temple society. According to David (2010:337), only male priests serve as intermediaries between deities and worshippers. This role is not limited to interactions with male gods but also includes goddesses. Hess (2009) emphasises that the ritualistic aspects of religious settings, or 'lived Hinduism,' shape gender roles in Hindu society, rather than the spiritual and mythological depictions of the gods themselves being the primary source of these roles. Thus, men and women are expected to perform conventionally modern social roles beyond the perceived social roles depicted through the divine.

The articulation of identity is complex, particularly in a religious setting where gender performativity is highly nuanced. In this context, the framework of ritual practice often depicts a male priest as both the embodiment and intermediary of the Goddess. Kornak (2015) posits that the term 'queer' has become a powerful tool to identify the disruption of normative functions in politics, gender, and religion.

Moreover, Hindu gender roles extend beyond the temple into broader societal expectations. Hindu men and women are expected to fulfil roles as protectors, providers, and leaders, reinforcing traditional hegemonic masculinity and femininity. However, the act of male priests embodying goddesses during rituals queers these traditional gender roles, challenging the conventional binary understanding of gender. This fluidity of gender performativity within Hindu rituals highlights the intricate interplay between religious practices and gender identities.

Queer theory's relevance is evident as it provides a framework for understanding how gender fluidity can manifest within rigidly structured religious contexts. By embracing the performative nature of gender, as argued by Butler (1990), Hindu rituals exemplify how traditional practices can subvert and reimagine contemporary understandings of gender. These rituals underscore the potential for religious practices to create spaces for alternative expressions of identity that transcend societal constraints.

According to Kamath (2019), several similarities unite these dance forms, including their shared historical origins and the use of complex gestures, facial expressions, and rhythmic movements to convey stories. These similarities highlight the fluidity of gender roles within the dance forms, as both men and women can assume roles traditionally associated with the opposite gender. This fluidity highlights the performative nature of gender, aligning with Butler's (1990) theory that gender is not an inherent identity, but rather a series of acts and performances.

Moreover, queer performances in these dance forms create a space for exploring and expressing a wide range of gender identities and sexualities. This disruption of the normative order encourages a more inclusive understanding of gender and challenges the conventional binary distinctions. It also provides a platform for performers to explore and express their identities in ways that transcend traditional societal expectations, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on gender and sexuality. According to Kamath (2019:35), many similarities link all the dance forms:

Kathakali, similar in many ways to *Kuchipudi*, is an exclusively male dance form from the South Indian state of Kerala that combines dramatic enactments and elaborate guises of both male and female characters.

The male and female characters mentioned above are derived from the gods and goddesses within Hindu doctrine. The focal point of Kamath's argument is the term impersonation. The intersection between impersonation, embodiment, and gender performativity stems from the interrelation between taking on a new persona (impersonation) derived from the divine, adapting the gender as constructed by visual representations of the gods and goddesses, and then embodying the attributes of these deities. Kamath (2019) wrote a special piece within the book, 'Impersonations,' that speaks to how receptive the changes in gender roles are to the audience. These changes shift the boundaries of expectations to the unexpected.

Kamath (2019:111) defines the response of these changes within the theatre setting, indicating:

If a woman does a female character, there's nothing there . . . There's no greatness there. A man doing a female role is great. Like that, a female doing a male role is great . . . It's good if a man does a female role or if a woman does a male role. That's because there's a difference there.

The culture of viewing queered or gender-disrupted performances appears to captivate audiences, presenting something unique, novel, and intriguing. This illustrates how skewed the value system can be, as if a woman's own identity somehow isn't enough. But in the sacred dance spaces, power doesn't come from novelty or gender inversion. It comes from presence, from devotion. Whether a man or a woman performs, what matters is how the divine moves through them.

Butler (2006:187) makes a relevant distinction between three contingent dimensions of gender realities: sex, gender identity, and gender performance. Butler (2006:187) further elaborates on the significance of gender identity and gender performance as contingent dimensions, as they are performatively construed through 'corporeal style' rather than reflective of an internal gender essence. Historical dance performances offer nuanced insights into how historical narratives can be depicted and portrayed in a queer context. Thus, the notion of queer performances aligns with the practice of ritual dancing, which encapsulates gender-bending and disrupts the ideals of heteronormativity within Hindu ritual practices and the portrayal of historic narratives.

Chatterjee (2017:45-66) states that queer performances facilitate fluidity and diverse possibilities for performing gender and promoting cultural belonging within South Asian aesthetic contexts. Chatterjee (2017) further describes queer performativity within Hinduism as producing an ethnic mismatch, where originality is altered to include the embodiment of characters from different genders, newer forms of hybrid movement vocabulary, and gender nonconformity across cultural differences. Analysing how gender, cultural belonging, and ritual performances are conceptualised within a Hindu context enables a deeper understanding of the multilayered, intersectional form of dance practice that challenges the notion of normality.

The term third gender is used to identify transgender people who live in communities that follow a kinship system known as the *guru-chela*¹⁴ system (Hossain, 2017). *Saria* (2020:70) discusses the positionality of the third gender in ritual practices that seek to queer the very existence of gender. *Saria* (2020) and Khan (2020) further indicate that *Hijras*¹⁵ served as the epicentre of queer anthropological studies. This exemplifies the notion of the positionality of those who participate in ritual performances, creating a queer space. Pattanaik (2020) suggests that various ritual practices in Hinduism foster a sense of gender fluidity, where men can assume feminine roles to embody the Goddess, and women can adopt masculine roles to embody the Gods. One of the notable rituals, known as *Kirtan* (also a religious form of Nagara dancing), is performed during Navaratri to venerate all the Mother Goddesses, including *Saraswati*.

There is a sense of uncertainty in the portrayal of the binary within Hinduism. Walters (2019) indicates discrepancies in how the gods and goddesses are portrayed in Hindu doctrine. Ogles (2016) complements this notion by stating that Hindu literature and mythology have long taught of figures who defied the binary. The visual depictions of the gods and goddesses also confirm the dismantling of the binary gendered body as shown in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: The visual representation of the God Shiva and his consort Parvati coming together as one that depicts the idea that men and women can cohabit in the same body at the same time.

<https://www.pxfuel.com/en/desktop-wallpaper-zfbrg> (Accessed: 10 November 2023)

¹⁴ *Guru Chelas* has a specific meaning within hijra communities as being about cultural learning. Hijra chelas are taught about hijra customs by their guru. (Saad, 2020)

¹⁵ *Hijras* are also known as eunuchs, intersex people, or transgender people who live in communities that follow a kinship system known as *guru-chela* system. (Hossain, 2017)

The concept of *Shiv-Shakti* centres on the inseparable bond between *Shiva*, representing pure consciousness, and *Shakti*, the dynamic force of energy. Together, they represent a unified cosmic principle that dissolves binary understandings of gender (Rashinkar, 2024:NP). This integration creates a sacred, liminal space where masculine and feminine elements merge, allowing for fluid articulations of identity. Within ritual and spiritual contexts, their union becomes a potent symbol of balance, transformation, and the reimagining of gender norms.

Ogles (2016:NP) confirms the above notions by stating:

The supreme God of Shaivism, *Shiva*, has often been held as the ultimate embodiment of masculinity, but as far back as the *Kushan* era, there have also been depictions of *Shiva* in the *Ardhanarishvara* form, an androgynous composite of *Shiva* and his wife, *Parvati*. The form originated when *Parvati*, desiring to share *Shiva's* experiences, asked for their forms to be joined. "What is being said is that if the inner masculine and feminine meet, you are in a perpetual state of ecstasy."

The depiction of both *Shiva* and *Parvati* together, known as *Shiv-Shakti*, significantly influences the perception of gender within Hinduism. This form of the divine embodies the cohabitation of both masculinity and femininity within a single entity. Such a representation can potentially transform the epistemology and practices of Hinduism, leading to a more queer interpretation through ritual dance, embodiment, and performativity. *Shiv-Shakti* exemplifies the fluidity and interdependence of gender roles, challenging traditional binary distinctions between genders. By embracing this divine form, Hindu ritual practices can foster a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of gender, allowing for greater flexibility and diversity in expressions of identity. This shift can enhance the cultural and religious significance of performances, promoting a broader acceptance of gender fluidity and performative acts within Hinduism. Ultimately, *Shiv-Shakti's* depiction highlights the potential for religious narratives to evolve, reflecting contemporary discussions on masculinity, femininity and inclusivity

2.5 Performative Masculinities

Masculinity, traditionally linked to dominance and physical strength, is redefined in ritual dance, where male performers embody divine femininity through movement and expression (Christofidou, 2021:78). This embodiment challenges binary gender constructs, presenting masculinity as fluid and performative rather than rigidly fixed. Fisher and Shay (2010:112) argue that male dancers navigate a complex interplay between societal expectations and artistic expression, often confronting stereotypes that associate dance with femininity. Within Hindu ritual contexts, however, masculinity is not diminished but transformed, enabling male dancers to channel spiritual energy and engage in devotional practices that transcend gender binaries (Fisher and Shay, 2010:134). The negotiation of masculinity in dance aligns with broader discussions on gender performativity, where bodily

movements serve as a medium for religious storytelling and divine invocation (Christofidou, 2021:92). Examining masculinity through the lens of ritual performance allows scholars to explore how dance functions as a site of gender fluidity, reinforcing the idea that masculinity is not a fixed identity but a dynamic construct shaped by cultural, religious, and performative influences.

2.5.1. Hegemonic Masculinity

Masculinity and femininity are expressed within religious performances, creating a transformation that reflects a visible departure from traditional gender expectations. These expressions reshape how a dancer portrays gender while performing. Connell (1995) describes the term masculinity as a set of attributes, roles, and behaviours associated with men. Bell et al. (2004) affirm the idea that masculinity is a social construct and that men are expected to subscribe to these roles and attributes. Given that there are many concepts of masculinities, Donaldson (1993) describes masculinity as “values such as courage, inner direction, certain for autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure, and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body.”

In contrast, Connell (1995) argues that there are four distinct categories of masculinity, namely, hegemonic, subordinate, marginalised, and complicit. She further states that the understanding of masculinity varies across time and socio-cultural contexts, as well as within groups and networks. After further elaborate studies, it has been evident that men tend to ‘perform’ their masculinity differently and inconsistently. In a later essay outlining the state of the field of scholarship on hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005:832) put forth the following definition:

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.

These attributes are found worldwide. Additionally, Donaldson (1993) confirms the notion of ‘hegemonic masculinity,’ which was established to maintain the central focus in the critique of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, as conceptualised by Connell (1995), remains a dominant framework for understanding gender hierarchies and power relations. It operates as a normative ideal that dictates the most socially esteemed form of masculinity, compelling other masculinities to position themselves in relation to it (Messerschmidt, 2018). This construct legitimises male dominance by reinforcing patriarchal structures, ensuring that masculinity is not merely an individual identity but a systemic force that sustains gender inequality (Hearn et al., 2012).

The socio-political legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity is evident in recognised settings, where leadership, authority, and economic control are disproportionately held by men who embody its traits

(Demetriou, 2001). Furthermore, its influence extends beyond individual portrayal, shaping cultural narratives that marginalise subordinated masculinities, such as those associated with non-heteronormative identities (Schippers, 2007). The persistence of hegemonic masculinity emphasises its role in maintaining global gender hierarchies, reinforcing the subordination of women through social, economic, and political mechanisms (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). By examining its structural impact, scholars affirm that hegemonic masculinity is not merely a personal expression but a deeply entrenched system that perpetuates gendered power dynamics across societies.

Morrell et al. (2012) use the descriptions of masculinities and hegemony by Donaldson (1993) and Connell (2005) to formulate:

Hegemonic masculinity silences or subordinates other masculinities, positioning these concerning itself such that the values expressed by these other masculinities are not those that have currency or legitimacy. In turn, it presents its version of masculinity, of how men should behave and how putative 'real men' do behave, as the cultural ideal.

The exploration of hegemonic masculinity has transformed over time, with definitions evolving to accommodate varied contexts that reflect men's socially constructed behaviours. Oliffe (2017:890) offers a modern interpretation of hegemonic masculinity known as 'emphasised femininity' to highlight the unequal status of masculinities and femininities within a patriarchal gender hierarchy. Although there is some parallelism between masculinities and femininities, the patriarchal gender order clarifies the subtle distinction between the two. Consequently, hegemonic masculinity represents and exerts dominance over other masculine identities and women. McVittie et al. (2017) argue that hegemonic masculinity represents the most esteemed form of masculinity that individual men can strive for, even though it may not accurately depict the lived experiences of many, if any, men.

Focusing on the strengths of masculinity might prove more beneficial than emphasising its problematic aspects. Neibergall (2020) suggested that examining male 'strengths' would enhance the understanding of masculinity. Neibergall (2020:3) further outlined six strengths, specifically related to interpersonal dynamics:

Male relational style focused on shared activities, and male ways of caring, including the use of empathy, generative fatherhood, a group orientation toward a common purpose, and the larger societal impact of fraternal organisations.

Hegemonic masculinity, as theorised by Connell (1995), extends beyond dominance and subordination to encompass relational dynamics that reinforce male authority within social structures. Neibergall (2020:3) highlights key aspects of the male relational style, including shared activities, generative fatherhood, and fraternal organisations, which collectively sustain hegemonic masculinity by fostering male solidarity and reinforcing gendered hierarchies. These relational practices align with

Messerschmidt's (2018) assertion that hegemonic masculinity is maintained through social interactions that privilege male leadership and collective identity. The emphasis on empathy and caregiving within male networks does not dismantle hegemonic masculinity but rather reconfigures it to accommodate socially acceptable forms of male dominance (Hearn et al., 2012). Fraternal organisations, in particular, serve as institutional mechanisms that perpetuate male authority, legitimising gendered power structures through shared purpose and collective influence (Demetriou, 2001). By positioning masculinity within relational frameworks, hegemonic masculinity remains a pervasive force that shapes societal norms, reinforcing male privilege while adapting to contemporary expectations of masculinity. This dynamic highlights the resilience of hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating its ability to evolve while maintaining its ideological legitimacy within patriarchal systems (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Masculinity, as constructed within cultural and performative spaces like Nagara dance, is multifaceted, which is rooted in embodiment, shaped through temporality, and negotiated within both cultural and social frameworks. Embodied masculinity reflects the corporeal enactment of gendered norms, where physical performance, gesture, and affect mediate masculine expression (Messerschmidt, 2012; McVittie et al., 2017; Alterio, 2022). Such embodiment is not static, but temporally situated: shaped by historical discourses, generational memory, and the shifting sociopolitical landscapes of postcolonial spaces (Jeffrey, 2011; Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018).

Cultural expressions of masculinity emerge through religious dance, ritual, and storytelling, often intersecting with caste, race, and diasporic identity (Basu and Banerjee, 2006; Golwakar, 2005; Lorea, 2018). These performances reflect Butler et al.'s (2000) concept of performativity, where masculinity is repeatedly enacted and solidified through stylised acts. Importantly, masculinity is also socially relational: defined not in isolation but through interaction with other men, women, and minoritised identities (Edwards, 2004; Pitt and Fox, 2012; Williams, 2011). Whittaker (2013) highlights how masculine identity is shaped by both hegemonic pressures and resistive practices, allowing for plural, contested masculinities within ritual contexts. Together, these perspectives provide a nuanced framework for analysing how masculinity is embodied, historicised, culturally embedded, and socially constructed within Nagara dance.

The transition from hegemonic masculinity to a more nurturing and adaptive form accentuates the fluidity of gender constructs within different socio-cultural contexts. Morrell et al. (2012) and Connell (1995) argue that masculinity is not a fixed identity but rather a dynamic construct shaped by environmental and institutional influences. Messerschmidt (2018) further emphasises that

masculinity is continuously negotiated within performance spaces, where traditional notions of male dominance are reconfigured through embodied practices. Within Hindu ritual spaces, masculinity is expressed through devotional performances that challenge rigid gender binaries, offering a unique perspective on how hegemonic masculinity is transformed in religious contexts.

2.5.2. Masculinity in Hindu Ritual Spaces

Hindu doctrine vividly portrays epic narratives of warriors in battle and deities with unique powers triumphing over forces of evil. According to Kanjilal (2018), men have been accustomed to the Hindu doctrine of emulating masculine behaviour portrayed by the divine within the *Mahabharata*¹⁶. Contemporary depictions of Hindu doctrine broaden the reach of Hindu culture; however, masculine energy and power are still very evident. Despite evolving cultural interpretations, Hindu doctrine continues to uphold masculinity as a central force, shaping religious, social, and philosophical frameworks that influence contemporary Hindu identity and gender dynamics (Kanjilal, 2018).

Warrior narratives in Hindu epic texts, such as the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*¹⁷, construct masculinity through ideals of strength, duty, and sacrifice, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity within Hindu nationalism (Vijayan, 2012). These narratives shape Hindu values by glorifying warrior figures like *Arjuna* and *Rama*, positioning them as embodiments of righteous masculinity (Golwalkar, 2005). However, this emphasis on martial masculinity marginalises alternative gender identities and religious affiliations, reinforcing exclusionary frameworks (Biernacki, 2012:50). Anand (2007:259) argues that such depictions contribute to anxieties surrounding masculinity, linking it to nationalism and violence. Basu and Banerjee (2006:480) further highlight how Hindu masculinity is constructed through historical and political discourse.

Hindu mythology forms the origins and becomes a common influence that shapes the landscape for masculinity studies within Hinduism. Gupta (1998:729) further denotes that myths, especially of brave and strong *Rajputs*, are appropriated for the creation of a narrative that describes the hegemonic masculinity of Hindu men. Traditionally, Indian classical dance draws its themes and narratives extensively from a vast body of texts and heroic epics that comprise the mythology of Hinduism (Thiagarajan, 2017:111). The popular notions that shape the behaviour of Hindu men are prevalent through philosophy and narratives that distinctly sanction the roles of men and women.

¹⁶ The Mahabharata is an ancient Indian epic narrating a dynastic struggle, moral dilemmas, through myth and history.

¹⁷ The *Ramayana* is an ancient Sanskrit epic by Valmiki, narrating Prince Rama's journey, exile, and battle against Ravana (Goldman, 2012).

Chowdhry (2015:30) argues that the public display of masculine dominance not only reinforces gender hierarchies but also dictates and constrains male behaviour within social and familial structures. He further details that this dynamic is illustrated in instances where a husband who supports his wife in a dispute against his mother is labelled as ‘henpecked,’ signifying a deviation from traditional masculine authority. Furthermore, Chowdhry (2015:30) highlights that women, particularly in their roles as wives, are expected to engage with their husbands in a manner that upholds male dominance. Their submission is essential in affirming their husbands’ masculinity, thereby perpetuating patriarchal norms and reinforcing gendered power relations within domestic spaces. The very notion of how closely the act of masculinity is viewed and maintained by society genuinely shapes the behaviour of Hindu men that aligns with dominance over women.

Sahgal (2018:24) affirms the notion of hegemonic masculinity, which speaks to the types of early Indian masculinities constructed within the *Vedic* texts, and questions whether Connell’s categorisation is valid within early Indian contexts. The concept of masculinity is widely disseminated through *Vedic* Hindu practices. Sahgal (2018) further elaborates:

Vedic texts deal largely with mantras and rituals to fortify the mundane idea of ‘*Kshatriya* masculinity’ or what may be construed as ‘*Brahmin* masculinity’. Within these texts, however, we also discern a subtle tension over the issue of accommodating a new representation of masculinity.

Brahmin masculinity refers to the intersection of caste and gender, where *Brahmin* men embody ritual authority, purity, and dominance (Brodbeck, 2016). *Brahmin* masculinity stems from *Vedic* texts, which illustrate a range of Gods that indoctrinate the behaviour of men through the symbolism they hold, for example, *Indra*¹⁸, *Agni*¹⁹, and *Rudra*²⁰ (Sahgal, 2018). These deities feature in the *Rigveda*²¹, where specific rituals are offered that affirm the masculinity of all the men who participate in them. Mainly, men of the appropriate caste and stature are permitted to perform these rituals. Given that the *Brahmin* male body becomes the centre of focus when engaged in ritual performances, however, Kamath (2019) queries, “the lack of scholarship on the construction of *Brahmin* masculinity as a performative gender and caste category is remarkable” (Kamath, 2019:10).

Therefore, the engagement of *Brahmin* masculinity is mainly derived from Connell’s theories regarding hegemonic masculinity. When the lens is placed on the *Vedic* era, it is worth noting that the entire

¹⁸ Indra is the most masculine and regal of all deities that leads to kingship and leadership (Sahgal, 2018:28)

¹⁹ Agni is the Fire God is often invoked conjointly with other divinities but unlike other deities he was regarded as being more ‘earthly’ than ‘heavenly’ (Sahgal, 2018:30)

²⁰ Rudra in the Vedas is a minor deity, what stands out is his dual nature both as a fierce and benign god. (Sahgal, 2018:32)

²¹ The *Rigveda* is the oldest of the four Vedas. It contains hymns praising deities and exploring cosmology, forming the foundation of early Hindu thought.

exercise is not limited to recreating a masculine image of the God. Sahgal (2018:33) states that the self, as the victor, should also simultaneously enhance his own male identity and financial well-being through his performative role when embodying the Vedic gods. In a similar vein, Patel (1994:76) notes that men also participate in the worship and embodiment of the great Goddess (*Mahadevi*), who is present in all her manifestations, both in the animate and inanimate worlds, seen and unseen. This statement gives rise to the argument of masculine performativity.

Masculine performativity on stage refers to the enactment of gendered behaviours through theatrical representation, where masculinity is constructed, reinforced, and sometimes subverted through performance (Peberdy, 2011). This dynamic process highlights how cultural narratives, audience reception, and the embodied actions of performers within theatrical spaces collectively shape the concept of masculinity. Sax (2004:116) notes that the performances of the *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas*, in which weapons were used from the Goddess's temple. These props enhance the embodiment of the Gods, and permission is taken from the Goddess in the form of ritual to use the weapons as props. Sax (2004:97) further states that:

Accomplished local dancers often fall into a trance when they seize these weapons: they tremble violently, their eyes roll back into their heads, and they appear to be taken over by an outside force.

The trance forms the external *Shakti* (power) that enforces the significance of embodiment. There is a fine line between Hindu masculinity and the performative role that men embody when engaging in ritual worship (for both gods and goddesses), and this stems from the concept of embodiment. Hindu men are depicted as protectors, leaders, and providers in ancient texts and epic stories. Given the brief history of Nagara dancing, men performed to protect women from dishonour by being seen as 'women of the night.' This initiates a discussion on men assuming a specific gendered role for particular reasons. The quote below highlights the need for men to step up and take on both male and female roles in portraying Hindu religious narratives. Kamath (2019:56) states:

Due to an originary prohibition against female performers in early forms of *Kuchipudi* dance, *Brahmin* dancers from the village would don elaborate costumes and makeup to enact both male and female roles from Hindu religious narratives.

However, in light of the quote above, Ferris (2002:168) argues that "women, as represented by the male actor, is extremely problematic, as such a representation may destabilise the man or may even— heaven forbid—turn him into a woman!" While Ferris (2002:168) critiques the anxiety around male actors portraying women, the traditions themselves often rely on these performances to convey sacred narratives, challenging rigid gender roles through ritual expression. Such expectations highlight the tension between societal discomfort with men embodying femininity and the cultural necessity of such embodiments, which can create a misconception of men who portray women in Hindu folklore.

These common misrepresentations of men who embody feminine characteristics are especially prevalent in Hindu folklore performances.

Kamath (2019:56) elaborates that hereditary *Brahmin* men hold power as bearers of tradition, both in the domains of performance and everyday life, which negates the common misconceptions of men who perform as women, as they are known to undertake these roles. The notions above can guide the question that examines the reasons why men participate in Nagara dancing. Similarly, Hansen (1999:140) argues that through the institution of female impersonation, a publicly visible, respectable image of 'woman' was constructed, one that was beneficial to both men and women. This was a representation that, even while being attached to the male body, created the landscape of modernity.

Jackson (2006) argues that social interpretations of masculinity are shaped mainly by notions of difference and devaluation, with the body often conceptualised as a physical vessel that connects individuals to broader social structures. Banerjee (2005) highlights the significant influence of Hindu doctrine on masculinity, noting that Hindu men and women refer to India as '*Bharat Mata*' (*Mother India*), thereby reinforcing the normative masculine traits of protection, leadership, and provision. Furthermore, Banerjee (2005) asserts that masculinity within Hinduism plays a crucial role in shaping social behaviour among Hindu men. The reverence for the Goddess, however, introduces a dynamic contrast, as her divine power compels men to engage in acts of devotion, exemplified by Nagara dancing. This ritual practice underscores the intersection of masculinity and religious expression, demonstrating how spiritual reverence can coexist with hegemonic masculine ideals. Chakraborty (2013) further contends that masculinity is deeply intertwined with political structures, shaped by historical narratives that embed specific gender expectations within Indian society. Through these perspectives, masculinity within Hinduism emerges as a complex construct, influenced by religious doctrine, sociopolitical frameworks, and ritualistic expressions.

Hindu doctrine plays a fundamental role in shaping masculine identity, establishing a framework that defines gender roles within religious and social contexts. However, certain traditional practices challenge the rigid subscription to hegemonic masculinity, introducing fluidity into gender expression. Nagara dancing exemplifies this dynamic, as it operates within a religious setting while simultaneously queering conventional notions of masculinity. David's (2009) distinction between the performer and the divine emphasises that embodiment is central to ritual performance. Through this process, the performer assumes the divine presence, which may manifest as either masculine or feminine, thereby disrupting traditional gender binaries. Butler (1990) further argues that gender is not an inherent essence but rather a performative construct, reinforcing the idea that masculinity and femininity are enacted rather than biologically determined. This interplay between religious embodiment and

gender performativity highlights how Hindu ritual spaces serve as sites for negotiating and reinterpreting masculinity beyond hegemonic norms.

2.6. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the intricate relationship between dance, gender, and spirituality, framing movement as both a sacred act and a site for identity negotiation. Beginning with dance as a form of worship, the discussion established its religious significance, emphasising Hindu dance forms and rituals that reinforce devotion. The examination of men who dance, as highlighted by Gard (2006), reveals how masculinity is performed and contested within the dance space, with male dancers engaging in fluid expressions of identity. The exploration of men embodying the divine showcased how religious dance transcends gender binaries, particularly through the queer-ing of sacred spaces. Finally, the chapter addressed performative masculinities, examining hegemonic masculinity and the unique roles male dancers assume within Hindu ritual contexts.

By tracing these intersections, the chapter underscores the complex ways in which dance functions as both an artistic and spiritual practice, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by gender constructs. The analysis demonstrates that movement serves not only as a devotional act but also as a medium for social transformation, challenging traditional notions of masculinity and femininity within sacred spaces. The interplay between embodiment, performance, and spirituality presents an evolving framework through which identity is negotiated in ritualistic settings. The literature review directly supports the study's focus by establishing a multifaceted understanding of masculinity as it emerges through ritual embodiment in Nagara dance. By engaging with scholarship on religious dance, embodying the divine, gender performativity, and masculinity, the review builds a framework for analysing how masculinity is experienced, enacted, and negotiated in Nagara dance.

The next chapter will introduce the theoretical framework underpinning this study, focusing on key concepts that shape the analysis of dance and gender. It will examine theories of performativity, embodiment, and masculinity to provide a structured lens through which these dynamics are understood. Additionally, it will engage with scholarship on gender fluidity and ritual performance, offering insights into how theoretical perspectives inform the study of religious dance traditions.

3. CHAPTER 3 - THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter examined existing scholarship on Nagara dancing, focusing on scholarship that analyses religious dance and ritual significance, embodiment and gender performativity, and masculinity. These discussions highlighted key theoretical perspectives and scholarly contributions while also identifying gaps that this study aims to address. Transitioning into the theoretical framework, this chapter builds upon multi-disciplinary insights, synthesising key concepts that will serve as the conceptual foundation for the study. Lewis (1998) argues that diverse theoretical frameworks can intersect within phenomena like Nagara dance, offering varied interpretations that deepen discussions of masculinity and performativity.

The theoretical framework provides a multi-disciplinary understanding of dance as a site of religious, cultural, and performative meaning. It begins with an exploration of religious dance theory, positioning movement as a conduit for devotion and spiritual engagement to understand the nature of *Kirtan* within the Nagara framework. This is followed by a discussion of performance theory, examining how dance operates within ritual spaces and artistic contexts, setting the stage for the study of Hindu dance traditions. By understanding Hindu dance traditions, this will position Nagara dancing within the broader framework of Hindu religious dance.

Hindu dance theory is analysed through key concepts, including the foundational principles of the *Natyashastra*, devotional practices within *Bhakti* traditions, and gender embodiment in ritual. Such theories are essential to understanding the notion of devotion through dance. These perspectives frame dance as both a structured art form and a profoundly personal spiritual expression. Embodiment theory then provides insight into the relationship between physical movement and religious identity, linking phenomenological approaches with ritual enactment in Hinduism. These theories will foster an understanding of how men who dance as the embodiment of the Goddesses navigate their identity through religious performative acts.

Expanding on notions of gender and identity, the chapter examines the queer-ing of gender performativity in dance, situating non-normative expressions within global and Asian contexts. By foregrounding gender performativity and queer identity, these theories offer critical lenses through which to interpret Nagara dancers' embodied expressions as culturally resonant yet subversive acts within diasporic spaces. Masculinity theories further contribute to this dialogue, interrogating Hindu masculine identities and challenging traditional gender norms through practices such as men wearing a *Sari*. The masculinity theories within this study guide the main research question as to how men who

participate in Nagara performances navigate their masculinity. These discussions explore the fluidity of gender within performative spaces.

The final section examines explicitly the South African Indian diaspora and its negotiation of cultural identity within historical and contemporary frameworks. By understanding the South African Indian diaspora, the study can then position Nagara within the South African context and explain how the land has influenced changes that have impacted Nagara dancing over the years. This leads to an exploration of multi-disciplinary theories, synthesising perspectives from religious studies, gender theory, and post-colonial thought. The chapter concludes by reinforcing the interconnectedness of these frameworks, highlighting how dance serves as a powerful medium for identity construction and cultural transmission.

3.2. Dance and Ritual Subjectivity

This section foregrounds the conceptual intersection between dance and ritual as generative sites of subjectivity, where identity is shaped not through static categories but through embodied, performative experience. Grouping these theories enables a cohesive exploration of how ritual dance practices, such as Nagara, serve as mechanisms through which individuals negotiate their gendered, cultural, and spiritual belonging. Aditi et al. (2024) emphasise the dialogical relationship between movement and meaning-making, framing dance as a conduit for articulating lived experience within ritual settings. Filippidou (2023) extends this by highlighting the affective and temporal dimensions of sacred performance, asserting that ritual intensifies subject formation through its cyclical, emotive rhythm. Meanwhile, Krishnan (2009:382) critically situates South Asian dance traditions within broader discourses of embodiment and religious identity, reminding us that subjectivity in these contexts is not merely performed but continuously re-inscribed through cultural memory and social contexts. Together, these perspectives provide a scaffold for analysing how Nagara dancers embody and transform within ritual spaces.

3.2.1. Religious Dance Theory

Religious dance serves as a fundamental component of spiritual traditions, offering a lens through which scholars interpret its role in religious experience. Van der Leeuw's (1950) theory of religious symbolism provides a foundation for understanding dance as a sacred act, describing the term 'movement' as the 'language of the divine.' This perspective positions dance as a vital medium for spiritual expression, underscoring its significance in ritual practices. LaMothe's (2005:40) framework on embodied spirituality further expands on this by emphasising that religious dance is not merely

performative but a crucial practice that shapes religious identity and belief systems. This theory highlights the embodied nature of faith, arguing that movement is integral to theological and communal experiences.

Complementing these perspectives, Hellsten (2024) examines dance as a transformative ritual, illustrating how it facilitates altered states of consciousness and deepens spiritual engagement across cultures. Similarly, Wu (2018) explores the concept of dance as a bridge between the human and divine realms, emphasising its role in channelling spiritual energy. These theoretical contributions collectively support the study's exploration of religious dance as a mechanism for spiritual connection, identity formation, and ritual expression.

Anthropological studies highlight how ritual dance functions as a form of embodied spirituality, where movement is not separate from religious doctrine but an integral part of worship (Cassar, 2024). The Zar healing dance ritual, performed in Iran, North Africa, and the Persian Gulf, exemplifies how dance is used for spiritual healing and exorcism, reinforcing the therapeutic and transformative aspects of religious movement (Beeman, 2018).

Religious dance traditions embody deep symbolic significance, serving as a conduit for spiritual expression and communal unity. Jones (2013) explores the role of symbolic gestures, costumes, and rhythmic patterns, illustrating how these elements contribute to the spiritual dimensions of dance across cultures. These symbolic components reinforce religious identity and deepen engagement within ritual practice.

The concept of *communitas*, as articulated by Turner (1969), provides a crucial lens for understanding the transformative power of dance in fostering collective bonding. This is exemplified in the medicine dance of the *!Kung Bushmen*, where rhythmic movement, chanting, and trance-like states enable participants to access spiritual connection and communal healing (Marshall, 1969). The embodied experience of religious dance aligns with Turner's framework, demonstrating how shared movement transcends individual identity and reinforces group cohesion.

Similarly, Hindu ritual dance operates within structured religious frameworks, reflecting the universal function of dance as a sacred form of expression. By integrating rhythmic patterns and prescribed movements, these practices exemplify Marshall's (1969) exploration of dance as a medium for transcendence, reinforcing its role in shaping spiritual experience and religious identity.

3.2.2. Theoretical Foundations of Performance

Performance, in its essence, is more than a spectacle - it is an intricate web of expression, ritual, and transformation. From the sacred movements of ritual dance to the theatricality of social interactions, performance theory unearths the layered complexities of human behaviour, movement, identity, and communication. Schechner (2002) suggests that “performances exist in the liminal space between reality and representation, blending art with life.” This form of liminality positions performance not merely as a creative act but as a site where meaning is negotiated, identities are moulded, and cultural narratives unfold. Schechner’s (2002) notion of liminality positions performance as a space between reality and representation, highlighting its role in meaning-making, identity formation, and the unfolding of cultural narratives. His perspective frames performance as more than a creative act—it is a dynamic site where human experience is negotiated and transformed.

Turner’s (1982) theory of *communitas* reveals how shared performative experiences dissolve hierarchies, creating collective emotional states that foster unity and transcend ordinary social structures. This principle is particularly evident in ritual contexts, where the act of performance generates heightened states of consciousness and communal bonding. Turner (1982) examines the realm of ritual and theatre, arguing that performance carries the ability to elevate human experience into moments of heightened consciousness. His theory of *communitas* reveals how shared performative experiences dissolve hierarchies, uniting individuals within a collective emotional state. Likewise, Goffman (1959) expands this discussion to the everyday, asserting that social interactions are inherently performative. His approach illustrates how identity is scripted, rehearsed, and projected within various societal contexts, underscoring the performative nature of human behaviour.

Meanwhile, McKenzie (2001) introduces a radical interrogation of discipline and performance, arguing that contemporary power structures dictate modes of performativity in corporate, educational, and political spaces. He explores how individuals are compelled to perform under institutional expectations, often reinforcing systemic hierarchies through learned behavioural patterns. Carlson (1996) similarly challenges static definitions of performance, advocating for a fluid, evolving understanding that transcends traditional theatre and embeds itself in activism, social engagement, and embodiment. He emphasises that performance is not limited to staged productions but exists within everyday interactions, political movements, and acts of resistance, shaping identities and cultural narratives in profound ways.

Together, these theories conceptualise performance as a living construct, an adaptive force that shapes discourse, redefines identity and embodies resistance. This is particularly evident in Hindu

dance traditions, where ritual movement transcends artistic expression, functioning as an act of devotion that reinforces the spiritual and communal dimensions of performance.

3.2.3 Hindu Dance Theory

Hindu dance occupies a significant space within religious, cultural, and artistic traditions, functioning as both a form of worship and a narrative medium across various historical periods and mythological contexts. As Zubko (2019) asserts, the gods and goddesses within Hinduism are often depicted as dancers, reinforcing the idea that dance serves as a divine practice reflected in human performances. This connection between the sacred and the embodied extends beyond mere artistic expression, becoming a devotional act in which performers embody deities as a gesture of reverence. Additionally, Hindu dance serves as a site for conceptual negotiation, shaping and reshaping categories such as classical versus folk, local versus global, gender binaries, colonial versus post-colonial influences, and diasporic reinterpretations (Zubko, 2019). These distinctions highlight the fluid and evolving nature of Hindu dance within shifting socio-cultural landscapes.

Building on Zubko's (2019) perspective, Popa-Blanariu (2015) situates Hindu dance within an interdisciplinary framework, arguing that dance must be examined in conjunction with theatre, music, and other performing arts to fully grasp its ritualistic essence. He proposes that dance functions as a complex communicative system, wherein bodily gestures, movements, and rhythms act as a semiotic language (Popa-Blanariu, 2015:3). Within Hindu dance traditions, verbal expression is not a prerequisite for meaning-making - instead, narrative, invocation, and spiritual transmission occur through explicit and implicit codes. The explicit codes, such as classical choreography and structured religious movement, align with formalised traditions, whereas implicit codes, including kinesic, proxemic, and rhythmic variations, enable dynamic interpretation across cultural and ritual contexts (Popa-Blanariu, 2015).

The intersection of devotion and cultural representation is particularly prominent in folk dance traditions, such as *Garba* and *Raas*, which seamlessly blend religious themes with social and celebratory performances. Additionally, ritual dances facilitate divine embodiment, wherein a deity is believed to inhabit the dancer, resulting in a trance-like spiritual engagement. Other performances, such as solo dance dramas, depict sacred narratives theatrically, using movement and characterisation to re-enact mythological themes (Zubko, 2019). These dances, embedded within choreological frameworks, rely on coded gestures that signal character identity, narrative progression, and spiritual significance, as outlined in the *Natyashastra*.

3.2.4. *Natyashastra* in Hindu Dance

To better understand the philosophical and technical foundations of Indian dance, it is essential to examine the *Natyashastra*, a seminal work in the field of Indian dance. This ancient Sanskrit discourse outlines the principles of dance, drama, and performance. Nair (2014) highlights how the *Natyashastra* constructs a theoretical discourse on body movement, gesture, and spiritual expression. She further describes one of its central theories, the *Rasa* theory, which explains how emotions (*rasas*) are evoked in an audience through performance. Srinivas (2014) identifies nine *Rasas*, such as love (*shringara*), heroism (*vira*), and tranquillity (*shanta*), which emerge from the interplay of *Bhavas* (emotional states) and *Abhinaya* (expressive techniques).

From a more secular perspective, Pillai (2023) discusses the concept of *Natya* (drama) as a divine creation, describing it as the 'fifth *Veda*' meant to educate and entertain. It integrates elements from the *Rigveda* (speech), *Yajurveda* (gestures), *Samaveda* (music), and *Atharvaveda* (emotion) to form a holistic approach to performance. Aligning with this study, the *Natyashastra* text examines the structure of dramatic composition, detailing aspects such as plot construction, character types, stage design, and audience reception. It emphasises the importance of aesthetics (*Saundarya*) and harmony (*Samvada*) in artistic expression.

This further offers a structured methodology for understanding Hindu dance beyond its aesthetic dimensions. The theory and technique of classical Indian dancing, as discussed by Vatsyayan (1967), further reinforce the technical rigour and symbolic depth embedded in Indian dance traditions. His analysis illustrates how classical dance forms serve as visual narratives, embodying religious stories through intricate movement vocabulary.

Bakka (2005) categorises choreology as an essential component of dance analysis, emphasising that technical vocabulary, movement structure, and sacred origin stories contribute to the ritualised construction of dance. Within Hindu dance traditions, choreology is intertwined with audience receptivity, which explores how dance conveys an aesthetic mood experienced by spectators (Bakka, 2005). As an embodied experience, Hindu dance demands an engaged audience, wherein receptivity to movement and expression plays a pivotal role in shaping disciplinary expectations and cultural understanding.

By synthesising perspectives on choreology, performativity, embodiment, and ritual function, Hindu dance emerges as a multifaceted tradition operating within historical, religious, and cultural dimensions. Its ability to negotiate identity, convey devotion, and create social cohesion illustrates the

continuity and adaptability of Hindu dance across various contexts. Hindu dance has persisted as a dynamic tradition, continually adapting and reimagining itself within diasporic contexts. The adaptability of Hindu dance within global and diasporic contexts is deeply intertwined with embodiment theory, which explores movement as a lived experience.

Hindu dance theories, as categorised by Bakka (2005), can be divided into three primary domains: philosophy (semiotics and aesthetics), choreology (movement analysis), and sociology (cultural and societal relevance). Each of these perspectives contributes to the understanding of embodiment in Nagara dancing. The philosophical dimension explores gesture symbolism and aesthetic meaning, emphasising how bodily movements function as 'spiritual signifiers.' The term 'spiritual signifiers,' as described by Bakka (2005), are embodied expressions - such as gestures, movements, and symbols - that convey sacred meaning, connecting performers and observers to transcendent or ritualistic experiences within choreology. Choreology focuses on the technical precision of dance, ensuring that movements align with ritual discipline and performative tradition. Sociologically, Nagara dancing operates as a cultural practice, maintaining its role within Hindu religious frameworks.

The connection between embodiment and Hinduism is further evidenced in Indian classical dance traditions, such as *Kathakali* and *Bharatanatyam*, which utilise choreographed movements to narrate epic religious stories, for example, the *Mahabharata*. (Holdrege, 1998). These traditions demonstrate the fusion of embodiment and religious storytelling, reinforcing how dance can serve as a conduit for spiritual engagement through embodiment. Similarly, Nagara dance relies on ritual movement to visualise spiritual devotion, allowing performers to embody sacred theological narratives. Hindu ritual dance is one of the most structured and codified forms of religious movement, deeply rooted in ancient scriptures, temple traditions, and mythological narratives (Zubko, 2023). The emphasis on spiritual, aesthetic, and communicative functions through dance aligns with the *Natyashastra* (Nair, 2014).

Dance in Hinduism is not merely an artistic expression but a sacred offering, where movement is a form of devotion and divine embodiment (Vatsyayan, 1967). *Bharatanatyam*, one of the oldest classical dance forms, originated as a temple dance performed as part of religious rituals in Tamil Nadu (Zubko, 2023). The dancer's movements, expressions, and gestures (*Mudras*) narrate stories from Hindu mythology, evoking divine blessings (Nair, 2014).

The cosmic dance of Shiva as *Nataraja* symbolises the cycles of creation and destruction, reinforcing the philosophical and theological dimensions of Hindu dance (Vatsyayan, 1967). Similarly, devotional folk dances such as *Garba* and *Raas*, performed during *Navaratri*, aim to invoke the presence of the

Goddess *Durga*, illustrating how dance functions as a spiritual ritual (Zubko, 2023). Hindu religious dance also incorporates gender fluidity, where male dancers embody female deities, challenging conventional gender binaries (Vanita, 2009). The tradition of *Devadasis*, women dedicated to temple service through dance, further exemplifies how movement is intertwined with religious devotion and social identity (Nanda, 1999).

3.2.5. Devotional Dance through *Bhakti*

Bhakti, rooted in the Sanskrit word for 'devotion,' offers a powerful theoretical lens for examining devotional dance within Hindu traditions (Novetske, 2007:261). As both a religious philosophy and a lived spiritual practice, *Bhakti* emphasises a profoundly personal, emotional, and embodied relationship with the divine. This orientation toward loving surrender and affective expression makes *Bhakti* particularly suited for analysing devotional dance forms, where bodily movement becomes a medium for intimate dialogue with the divine. Dance, in this framework, is not merely a performance but a ritualised act of offering where one that transcends aesthetic value to evoke *bhava* (emotion) and *rasa* (essence), key concepts within *Bhakti* poetics (Misir-Hiralall, 2021:70). Through gestures, facial expressions, and symbolic choreography, dancers manifest devotion, internalising divine presence while simultaneously rendering it visible to the audience (Haqqani, 2024).

As a theoretical framework, *Bhakti* enables an exploration of how dance functions as both personal devotion and collective worship. It situates the performer not just as an artist but as a devotee engaged in an embodied theology. This dynamic interplay between performer and deity enables scholars to understand devotional dance as a transformative spiritual practice - one that fosters inner purification, divine connection, and social cohesion (Zubko, 2019). Additionally, *Bhakti* offers a critical entry point into questions of gender, caste, and identity, particularly in classical forms such as *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi*, where historical negotiations of sacredness and propriety intersect with personal spiritual expression (Popa-Blanariu, 2015). In this way, *Bhakti*, as a theory, not only explains the spiritual devotion within dance traditions but also opens avenues for interrogating the socio-political and emotional dimensions that shape religious embodiment.

3.2.6 Embodiment and Ritual Subjectivity

Ritual dance is a fundamental aspect of cultural and religious expression, serving as a medium through which communities engage with the sacred, reinforce social cohesion, and embody spiritual narratives (Turner, 1967). Anthropologists and scholars of performance studies have long examined the symbolic and transformative power of ritual dance, emphasising its role in creating liminal spaces where

participants transcend everyday identities (Van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1969). Dance, within ritual contexts, is not merely an aesthetic practice but a structured, symbolic act that facilitates spiritual connection, communal bonding, and identity negotiation (Whitehouse, 2004).

Turner (1967) defines ritual as “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers”, highlighting the sacred function of dance within ritual frameworks. His concept of *communitas*, which emerges during the liminal phase of the ritual, illustrates how coordinated movement fosters collective unity and emotional intensity (Turner, 1969). Similarly, Durkheim (1915) and Ono (1996) describe ritual dance as producing ‘collective effervescence’, a heightened emotional state that strengthens social bonds and religious devotion.

Gennep (1909) categorises ritual into three stages: preliminal, liminal, and postliminal, each of which reflects ritual dance traditions worldwide. The preliminary stage involves preparations and symbolic purification; the liminal stage is where social order is suspended, allowing participants to engage fully in the ritual; and the postliminal stage marks reintegration into society with a transformed identity (Van Gennep, 1909). These stages are particularly evident in religious ritual dances, where movement serves as a conduit for spiritual transformation, primarily when focusing on embodiment as a theoretical concept.

The intersections of theories of dance and ritual position subjectivity as an embodied, performative process through which identity is negotiated in culturally specific settings, such as Nagara dance spaces. The theories mentioned above collectively demonstrate how movement, memory, and sacred practice converge to shape gendered and spiritual belonging in ritual performance.

3.3. Embodiment, Gender and Performativity

This section brings together key theoretical perspectives that interrogate the embodied nature of gender and the performative processes through which identities are expressed, disrupted, and reconstituted. The decision to group these works stems from their shared critique of essentialist gender models and their emphasis on movement, voice, and corporeality as central to the negotiation of identity. This begins with a detailed analysis of embodiment theory as to how it relates to the study in terms of ritual and dance, leading to how gender can be embodied and performed using Butler’s (1990) theory on gender performativity, to understand how gender is portrayed and how masculinity is negotiated in the Nagara dance space.

3.3.1. Embodiment Theory

By synthesising perspectives from anthropology, religious studies, and performance theory, Hindu ritual dance emerges as a complex, multifaceted tradition operating within historical, spiritual, and cultural dimensions. Its ability to negotiate identity, convey devotion, and create social cohesion illustrates the continuity and adaptability of Hindu dance across various contexts (Zubko, 2023). Hindu dance functions as a medium for both spiritual transcendence and cultural transmission. Examining these theoretical foundations further reveals how Hindu dance constructs identity, reinforces sacred narratives and sustains communal religious practices across historical and contemporary contexts.

Embodiment theory provides a critical framework through which dance can be understood as both a physical practice and a medium for cultural and ritual expression. Within the context of Nagara dancing, embodiment serves as the foundation for exploring how movement conveys religious significance, gender performativity, and communal identity. By situating bodily movement within the context of ritual dance and performativity theories, this subsection examines the intersection of physical discipline, sacred symbolism, and the construction of identity.

Merleau-Ponty's (1945) phenomenological approach to embodiment asserts that the body is not merely an object in the world but a lived experience through which individuals engage, perceive, and express meaning. This perspective is particularly relevant to ritual dance, where movement is not only symbolic but deeply rooted in the performer's embodied reality. In Nagara dancing, bodily gestures are not arbitrary; instead, they serve as extensions of spiritual devotion, linking physical enactment to metaphysical significance. Merleau-Ponty's (1945) theory of embodiment, which situates perception and bodily experience at the core of human consciousness, has been critically examined by several scholars. Dreyfus (1996:14) argues that while Merleau-Ponty successfully challenges the notion of embodiment, his account of embodiment lacks sufficient engagement with contemporary cognitive science, leaving unanswered questions about the intentional use of the body.

Similarly, Moya (2014) critiques Merleau-Ponty's notion of habit, arguing that his theory does not fully account for understanding why certain practices are performed, particularly how habitual movement patterns are formed and modified through traditions. Reynaert (2009) further problematises Merleau-Ponty's framework by highlighting its tension with naturalism, questioning whether the lived body can be fully integrated into explanations without losing its phenomenological depth. Additionally, Toadvine (2016) argues that Merleau-Ponty's rejection of objective realism poses challenges in defining the ontological status of the body, particularly in terms of how bodily perception is situated within material and social environments.

Kaepler (2010) further refines the idea of ritual movement, conceptualising dance as a structured and disciplined form of communication. According to Kaepler (2010), movement within ritual dance aligns with purposeful enactment, reinforcing the gestural expression of sacred narratives. In Nagara performances, bodily movements act as conduits for devotion, transforming individual actions into communal spiritual experiences. This notion aligns with Merleau-Ponty's (1945) concept that embodiment is an integrated, dynamic process in which the body becomes a vessel for collective memory and cultural transmission. These notions are evident during ritualised aspects of embodiment within the framework of Hinduism.

3.3.2. Ritual Embodiment in Hinduism

Building upon the ritualistic aspects of embodiment, Turner (2017) situates ritual as the foundation of theatre and performativity, arguing that religious and ritualistic performances convey messages meant for communal reflection and transformation. His concept of liminality, which emphasises the transitional and threshold experience within ritual processes, is critical to understanding ritual dance performances. Dancers enter liminal states by embodying the divine feminine, temporarily suspending conventional masculine identity to engage in a sacred ritual experience (Bigger, 2009:212; Wels et al., 2011). This transformation reflects fluid gender expression within ritual spaces, demonstrating how embodied identity becomes malleable in performative contexts.

In addition, Turner's (2017) notion of *communitas* highlights the collective belonging fostered by ritual movement, dissolving social distinctions in favour of spiritual unity. In Nagara dancing, the interconnectedness of movement, ritual, and communal engagement illustrates how embodied performance transcends individual expression and becomes a shared cultural and religious phenomenon.

Kamath (2019:58) defines the oral origins of Hindu religious dance as:

This linking of dance with continuous lineages of oral practice and recovered authoritative texts - acceptable to newly embraced Western scholarship - has come to be recognised as a characteristic of Sanskritised dance... 'Sanskritisation' had come to denote a deliberate, self-conscious return to ancient *Vedic* and *Brahminical* values and customs from a new intellectual perspective (often but not necessarily in response to 'Westernisation').

The oral origins of dance emphasise that Hindu masculinity has long been guided by Sanskrit texts, which link dance and performativity to religious doctrine. Kamath (2019:58) describes Sanskritisation as a deliberate return to *Vedic* and *Brahminical* values, often in response to Western influences. This

process reaffirms traditional gender roles while simultaneously allowing for gender fluidity within ritual spaces.

By integrating phenomenological embodiment theory (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), ritual movement (Kaepler, 2010), liminality and *communitas* (Turner, 2017), and interdisciplinary dance perspectives (Bakka, 2005), this study situates Nagara dancing within a comprehensive discourse of embodiment. These theoretical intersections establish a rigorous analytical foundation, guiding the study's broader discussions on movement, ritual significance, and identity construction in Hinduism.

Hinduism was recognised as a polytheistic religion due to the numerous forms of gods and goddesses it encompasses. These divine figures are depicted across various genders, social classes, and historical periods. Dance has been a fundamental form of worship within Hinduism, exemplified by ancient Hindu dance forms such as Kathakali and *Bharatanatyam*. Sax (1990) refers to dance as a form of storytelling without narration, where a single performer re-enacts an epic story of the divine, embodying all the characters (both men and women) in what is known as a recital. David (2009) considers such embodied practices as 'performances of faith', linking them to the concept of ritual manifestation within Hinduism.

When examining the term embodiment, the concept of impersonation also becomes relevant. Kamath (2019) employs a technique for identifying three main aspects of ritual performance and impersonation, which include,

Costume (*Aharya*), speech (*Vacika*), and bodily movement (*Angika*). In each of these cases, *Kuchipudi* impersonators transform their physical appearances to approximate an idealised understanding of 'real' women's bodies within the context of staged performance.

The quote affirms the core principles of ritual embodiment in Hinduism, specifically within classical dance traditions such as *Kuchipudi*, where performance serves as an intermediary between the physical and the divine. The three elements mentioned: costume (*Aharya*), speech (*Vacika*), and bodily movement (*Angika*), are fundamental components of the *Natyashastra's* performative framework, illustrating how embodiment extends beyond physicality into symbolism, transformation, and ritual identity. Thus, the quote significantly strengthens the theoretical framework of ritual embodiment, illustrating how classical Hindu dance serves as a vessel for religious experience. Through symbolic transformation, *Kuchipudi* performers negotiate identity, gender performativity, and spiritual invocation, reinforcing the sacred interplay between body, ritual, and divine enactment.

In the context of *Kuchipudi* impersonation, the transformation of the performer's physical appearance into an idealised representation of 'real' women's bodies exemplifies the ritualised embodiment of gender and divinity. This aligns with Merleau-Ponty's (1945) phenomenological embodiment theory, which argues that bodily perception constructs identity and meaning, reinforcing the fluid relationship between the performed self and the embodied self. The impersonators do not merely mimic female gestures but inhabit them, demonstrating how embodiment functions as both an aesthetic and metaphysical practice in Hindu religious dance.

Moreover, the concept of *Angika* (bodily movement) highlights Turner's (1992, 2017) theory of liminality, where performers enter a transitional ritual space, momentarily suspending their everyday identities to adopt sacred personas. Within Hinduism, classical dance is not simply an artistic endeavour but a devotional act, where the body serves as a medium for spiritual storytelling (Nair, 2014). The integration of *Aharya*, *Vacika*, and *Angika* ensures that the dancer's embodied expression fully aligns with sacred narratives, reinforcing the ritualistic function of performance.

Additionally, Vatsyayan (1967) emphasises that Indian classical dance operates within codified structures, wherein performers use gestural language to evoke mythological themes. In *Kuchipudi*, impersonators adhere to rigorous choreological techniques, ensuring that bodily movement, costume, and vocal expressions remain consistent with devotional accuracy. These techniques support the argument that ritual embodiment in Hinduism is not a passive representation but an active, lived transformation, where performers momentarily assume the divine through embodied practice.

Sax (1990) asserts that the boundaries between the divine and humans, as well as the geographies between text and performance, are blurred. Consequently, the heavenly powers manifested through ritual dances are perceived as powerful. Srivastava (2013) defines the term ritual as a set of actions performed primarily for their symbolic value. Many believe that through ritual performance, a connection to the divine is established, where the sacred is appeased by the performance, thus allowing prayers to be answered.

However, Strathern (2008) argues that:

Ultimately, performativity depends on the cosmos, and the cosmos is also the ultimate setting in which embodiment gains its meaning. We do not regard this as an abstraction, however. The cosmos is the whole world as inhabited by people and apprehended by them, including the life-worlds of spirits and deities.

The concept of embodiment has a dependency on the cosmos, as the cosmos fosters a space for existence, thus creating a core. Given the delineation between the divine and humans, ritual

performances enable humans to manifest the divine by embodying the gods and goddesses through worship and devotion. The act of performing for Hindu deities necessitates a profound sense of ritual openness and embodiment, wherein the dancer becomes a vessel for divine presence. Within this sacred performative context, bodily movement transcends mere artistic expression, evolving into an act of devotion and transformation (Nair, 2014). This transformative process is particularly evident in instances where male dancers embody the Goddess, adopting feminine gestures, costumes, and movement to channel divine femininity (Zubko, 2019). Through this practice, performers enter a liminal space where traditional gender binaries are temporarily suspended, allowing for the construction of fluid identities within the ritual domain (Turner, 2017).

This ritual embodiment not only reinforces the spiritual significance of bodily transformation but also challenges hegemonic gender norms by presenting an alternative framework of gender fluidity within religious performance (Bigger, 2009). The ability of male dancers to assume the divine feminine (Sharma, 2013) highlights the interconnection of gender, ritual, and embodied identity, laying the groundwork for a broader discussion on embodying gender within sacred Hindu performance spaces.

3.3.3. Embodying Gender in Ritual

Divine narratives form the origin of Hindu ritual practices. These narratives have ushered in a model of characterisation and embodiment that creates an artistic portrayal of the sacred. While Hinduism and Hindu devotees are becoming increasingly Westernised, many of the authentic gender-bending aspects of ritual remain significant in current Hindu practices. These aspects may promote gender equality within Hindu religious practices or create a queered space. The discussion between gender and sex becomes a focal point when situating the theory of embodiment within the concept of ritual.

Pollock (2010:148) argues:

Religious rituals can also work to problematise traditional beliefs about gender or the relationship between gender and sex. One of the most basic ways in which ritual problematises gender is through inversions: when men perform typically feminine actions or women exhibit masculine traits, gender roles are questioned.

Pollock (2010:148) highlights how religious rituals function as mechanisms for questioning and reshaping gender norms, particularly through gender inversions. This theoretical perspective posits that gender is not an inherent trait but a performative construct shaped through bodily expression, cultural narratives, and social rituals (Butler, 1990). In ritual spaces, when men engage in feminine-coded actions or women embody masculine traits, traditional gender binaries become destabilised, reinforcing Merleau-Ponty's (1945) argument that the body is a site of lived experience and identity construction. Such inversions challenge the assumed rigidity of gender roles, exposing their fluid and

contingent nature (Turner, 2017). Moreover, Bigger (2009) argues that ritual engagement produces liminal spaces where performers momentarily suspend conventional gender expectations, allowing for alternative identity formations. Thus, religious rituals do not merely reflect cultural gender norms but actively reconstruct them, illustrating how embodied gender disrupts societal binaries and reveals its performative dimensions.

In light of the above quote, the aspect of trance during various Hindu rituals is called into question. According to David (2010:338), men often acquire a trance state emulating the Goddess, embodying *Shakti* (divine female power). A man will go into a trance and become the mouthpiece of the Goddess (Moorthy 1986:13), cited in (David 2010:338), indicates:

From the moment the mother (Goddess) enters his body, he walks like a woman and talks in dignified, rhythmic language.

Devotees are then compelled to worship the man as a Goddess and use a feminine pronoun when speaking of him. The same phenomenon occurs when a woman enters a trance and embodies a deity during other Hindu rituals. Women behave in a masculine manner to emulate gods, indicating that embodiment and ritual possession change the outlook on gender, thus creating a nuanced perception of gender and sex. However, the respect given to a man possessed by a Goddess is more distinct and popular than that given to a woman possessed by a male deity, creating a discrepancy in the positionality of embodiment in specific ritual practices.

Sankaran (2003:256) concurs with this notion, stating, “Significantly, the ‘possessed’ woman is not automatically empowered like the ‘possessed’ male.” This statement justifies the positional aspect of men who embody the Goddess for ritual practices and performances. Sankaran (2003) illustrates the idea of an empowering male versus a subservient female space. She further emphasises that men occupy the centre of the ‘ritual space’; the term space can be defined by both feminists and post-colonial theorists, who indicate that space can be conceived as a tool that influences change and promotes new perceptions.

Smith (2010) situates spiritual possession within the broader framework of gender embodiment, emphasising its role in religious and therapeutic contexts. This form of embodiment reflects a dynamic process in which individuals, particularly men, assume divine personas to facilitate healing and spiritual restoration. The increasing acceptance of possession as a legitimate religious and psychological phenomenon aligns with global patterns, as observed in Taiwan, Korea, Africa, Micronesia, South America, and the U.S. (Smith, 2010).

The embodiment of gender within sacred spaces plays a crucial role in queer-ing religious rituals, challenging gender norms while maintaining spiritual legitimacy. While gender fluidity may be marginalised in secular contexts, ritual performances are widely accepted, reinforcing the complex intersection of religion and identity (Vanita, 2005; Nanda, 1999). This tension highlights how embodiment is both symbolic and performative, shaping the negotiation of sacred masculinity. Gender fluidity, sanctioned within religious traditions, shapes broader discussions on identity, ritual, and cultural legitimacy. A deeper understanding necessitates engagement with queer theory in Asian contexts.

3.3.4. Queer-ing Gender Performativity in Dance

Werther (2019:156) explains that the term 'queer-ing' refers to the active process of disrupting normative understandings of gender, sexuality, and identity within performance and artistic expression. Werther (2019) adds a critical queer lens, framing 'queer' as an active verb, a mode of doing that disrupts linear gender narratives and allows for fluidity, resistance, and reorientation. Rooted in queer theory, which emerged in the late 20th century through scholars such as Butler (1990) and Sedgwick (1993), Queer-ing performativity in dance challenges heteronormative structures by reinterpreting movement, embodiment, and choreographic narratives.

Queer-ing dance involves reimagining choreographic conventions, dismantling rigid gender binaries, and creating spaces for non-normative identities to be celebrated and acknowledged. This approach is particularly evident in ballroom culture, voguing, and contemporary dance, where performers use movement to critique and redefine gender norms (Wong, 2023). Additionally, queer-ing dance extends beyond individual expression to collective resistance, fostering inclusive spaces that challenge dominant ideologies (Bollen, 1999). Drawing on Ho (2024:70), the analysis foregrounds the role of bodily affect and expressive gesture as active sites of gender-making, particularly in ritualised performance. McIlvenny (2008:127) builds on this by examining the discursive construction of gender in interactional settings, affirming that embodied actions continuously rework normative categories.

Applying queer theory to Asian dance traditions requires an understanding of how gender and sexuality are constructed within specific cultural frameworks. Unlike Western contexts, where queer theory often critiques heteronormativity through explicit political activism, Asian queer performativity is frequently embedded within traditional and ritualistic practices. For instance, in *Kathakali* and Japanese *onnagata* performances, male dancers embody female roles, demonstrating gender fluidity within classical forms (Defrantz, 2017). These performances, while historically accepted, can be reinterpreted through a queer-ing lens to highlight their subversive potential.

Furthermore, contemporary Asian dance movements increasingly incorporate queer theory to challenge societal norms. In South Korea and Thailand, LGBTQ dance collectives use performance as a means of visibility and resistance, blending traditional aesthetics with modern queer narratives (Bollen, 1999). Puar (2007) expands this perspective by introducing homonationalism, which examines how queer identities interact with nationalist and global structures, complicating interpretations of gender and sexuality within Asian performativity. Halberstam (2005) similarly interrogates queer temporality, revealing how transgender and queer bodies experience time and space differently, which in turn influences movement and choreographic storytelling. This intersection of tradition and queer activism illustrates how queer-ing dance operates within diverse cultural landscapes, reshaping identity and performativity across Asian contexts.

3.3.5. Queer Theory in Asian Contexts

Butler (1990) states that queer theory emphasises the fluidity and humanness of gender. Queer/queering does not only relate to LGBTQ communities; rather, the notion of queer theory questions socially established norms and dualistic categories, focusing on challenging gender, class, race, and sexual classifications. Therefore, Nagara aligns perfectly with queer theory, particularly in the classification of gender, as gender becomes disrupted when men dress as women to perform a Hindu ritual to revere the Goddess.

Queer theory in Asian contexts challenges Western-centric notions of queerness, emphasising Indigenous expressions of gender fluidity within religious and cultural legitimacy (Vanita, 2009). Traditions such as *Hijra*²², *Jogappa*²³, and *Devadasi* communities illustrate how non-normative gender identities are institutionalised within sacred spaces, complicating the idea that queerness is inherently oppositional or subversive (Nanda, 1999).

In Hinduism, ritual performances both sustain and destabilise normative masculinities, allowing men to inhabit feminised roles without necessarily being marginalised (Vanita, 2009). Hindu mythology valorises androgyny and gender fluidity, as seen in *Ardhanarishvara*²⁴, *Krishna as Radha*²⁵, and *Vishnu*

²² *Hijras* are a recognised third gender in South Asia, encompassing transgender, intersex, and eunuch identities. They hold cultural and religious significance, often performing blessings and rituals (Parida, 2022)

²³ *Jogappas* are a transgender priestly community in South India, devoted to the goddess *Yellamma*. They occupy a sacred role, blending gender fluidity with religious legitimacy (Lorway, 2021).

²⁴ *Ardhanarishvara*, meaning "the Lord whose half is a woman," symbolises the union of masculine and feminine energies, representing non-duality and balance in Hindu philosophy (Chakravarty and Sharma, 2025).

²⁵ *Krishna* assuming *Radha's* form embodies divine love and gender fluidity, illustrating the inseparability of masculine and feminine aspects in *Vaishnavism*.

as *Mohini*²⁶, legitimising gender-crossing practices within religious traditions (Nanda, 2014). These performances do not undermine masculinity but instead redefine it within a divine spectrum, offering a 'queered' yet sanctified masculinity (Vanita, 2014). By integrating ritual embodiment and gender performativity, Hindu dance traditions illustrate how gender fluidity is both sacred and socially negotiated, reinforcing the complex interplay between identity, devotion, and cultural legitimacy (Nanda, 2014).

Croft (2017) explains that the term 'queer' arises from a critical entanglement of gender and sexuality within a larger call for resisting normativity. This statement facilitates the queering of the dance space in terms of Nagara dancing, portraying a different and unique way of worshipping the Goddess. The theory of embodiment facilitates the notion of queer-ing the dance space; thereafter, the movement and dance inform a distinct method of worship that speaks to the queering of ritual practices.

The fluidity of gender in Hindu ritual performances reflects a complex interplay between social identity, religious sanction, and embodied divinity. These performances are not simply acts of gender transgression but deliberate engagements with spiritual archetypes that challenge rigid notions of masculinity and femininity. The presence of gender-fluid figures within Hindu mythology enables the integration of femininity within sacred masculinity, reinforcing the view that gender is not a fixed construct but a dynamic expression of devotion and transcendence (Vanita, 2014).

Furthermore, within Hindu temple traditions, dance serves as an act of surrender, where performers invoke divine attributes through their bodily movements. The capacity for male dancers to embody feminine deities is not perceived as a departure from masculinity but rather an extension of spiritual power. This process aligns with the performative nature of gender, where ritual dance becomes a means of spiritual transformation rather than mere theatrical representation (Nanda, 2014).

These embodied enactments of gender fluidity set the stage for deeper discussions on sacred masculinities, which move beyond conventional gender dichotomies. Through ritual dance, masculinity is not weakened by feminisation but reimagined within a sacred framework, allowing for a more expansive understanding of gender expression within religious traditions. Masculinity emerges as another critical focus, as male Nagara dancers navigate their gender identity by performing as divine feminine figures during ritual ceremonies, only to return to their conventional masculine presentation afterwards. This fluid expression of gender within a sacred setting challenges hegemonic masculinity

²⁶ *Vishnu's* transformation into *Mohini*, his only female avatar, represents illusion, enchantment, and gender fluidity, reinforcing divine playfulness and cosmic balance (Kalidos, 1986).

and calls for a theoretical interrogation of how masculinity is reconstructed within the Nagara performance space.

3.3.6. Gender Performativity

Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity argues that gender is not an inherent identity but rather a series of repeated acts that construct societal norms. In dance, this manifests through the subversion of traditional gender roles, where performers engage in fluid expressions of identity that resist binary classifications. Butler (1990) discusses the internal essence of gender, which can be produced through certain bodily acts that conform to the societal perception of gender. According to Butler (1990), gender can be an impersonation of a socially constructed man (masculinity) or woman (femininity); therefore, gender roles can be performed by anyone. She defines the term 'performance' as distinct, concrete, or finished, whereas 'performativity' implies culturally sustained, temporal duration.

The term 'performativity' suggests that a man can perform or embody the roles of a woman. These roles are internal and can be produced through bodily acts. The concept of performativity blurs the social perception of gender. Butler (1990) shifts the gendered critique from a social setting to the individuals within that setting, suggesting that gender can be revealed through the lens of an individual. Ton's (2018) critique of Butler's theory of performativity challenges its abstraction and calls for a more situated, practice-based understanding, especially relevant within South Asian dance contexts where performativity is deeply enmeshed with ritual and sociocultural meaning.

Marcus (2005) illustrates that the famous Kinsey scale offers a slightly more nuanced approach by placing homosexuality and heterosexuality on a continuum. Still, its terms fail to capture the nuances of lived sexuality. In other words, the Kinsey scale cannot accurately measure what can be deemed as queer. The term 'queer' is a brushstroke of knowledge embedded deep within the study of human behaviour, encompassing more than just homosexual discourses and including the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality. In this case, the disruption of what is seen as usual and the behaviours that change the general conception of what is usually deemed continuous.

According to Butler (1990), there is a distinction between sex and gender that implies biological sex is natural, and gender is culturally constructed, allowing for gender to be portrayed without the influence of biological sex. Therefore, the argument is that sex cannot define the gender of a person; gender becomes the performance that can be embodied by any individual, which links to the queering of gender. Butler (1990) notes that sex is fixed, but gender can be altered in terms of the positionality of the individual, whether in religious spaces or when performing ritual practices. According to Xie

(2014), there is no pre-discursive identity, as all aspects associated with gender, including the subject, agency, gender norms, and even biological sex, are invariably produced by and through discourses. This critique of Butler's theory of performativity exemplifies the notion that gender is a tool for shaping the expected behaviour of men and women.

Butler's (2004) argument that gender becomes an art form of performativity aligns perfectly with Nagara dancing, as from observation, this ritual dance disrupts the idea of gender. This change can adapt to newer generations that are more expressive and artistic in their portrayal of gender. The theoretical underpinnings of queer performativity and embodiment within religious sacred dance provide a comprehensive understanding of how gender roles can be fluid and performative. By examining religious dance forms like Nagara dancing, we gain insight into how traditional rituals can challenge and transform contemporary understandings of gender, fostering a more inclusive and dynamic interpretation of identity. This approach aligns the significance of cultural and religious practices in shaping and redefining gender norms, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on gender fluidity and performativity, particularly masculinity. Masculinity is the primary focus in this study, as the central question seeks to understand how Nagara dancers navigate their masculinity through their lived experiences. The following section focuses on the vast array of masculinity concepts that will guide the study, ensuring a robust framework to understand the nuanced meanings and complexities of masculinity studies.

3.4. Masculinity Theory

Masculinity theory has never been just theory; it's a lived negotiation. To understand what it means to be a man in a context riddled with colonial residue, spiritual dedication, and cultural nuance, scholars have long drawn on the robust framework laid out by Raewyn Connell. Her concept of *hegemonic masculinity* provided scholars with the language to describe the hierarchy among masculinities, including dominant, complicit, subordinate, and marginalised (Connell, 1995). But in the vibrant and complex world of African identity-making, this framework needed more room to breathe.

Messerschmidt's (2019) expansion of the framework to include masculinities shaped through resistance, often hyper-masculine, forged under the weight of marginalisation and political struggle. These abstract definitions, though rooted in theory, crack open space for real-world observation, allowing scholars to ask: What *really* drives the desire for masculine power? To truly engage with masculinity theories, one must first understand the soil from which masculine identities grow. And so, the study of Nagara dancers is not simply about men who dance. It is about how these men perform masculinity amidst forces of religion, history, and power, how their rituals might echo hegemonic

norms or reimagine them. It is about attending to *how men become*, not only in ideology but in rhythm, movement, and memory.

In placing African men's experiences at the centre, this narrative resists abstraction and insists on complexity. Masculinity here is not a singular identity but a process, fluid, contextual, and deeply felt. Through their steps, beats, and expressions, Nagara dancers tell stories of power, belonging, and faith. They teach us, theory in motion, what it means to be a man in a changing world.

Masculinity is not a static identity; it is shaped by time, social context, and the lived body. In masculinity studies, the concepts of temporality, sociality, and embodiment are central to understanding how masculinities are constructed, performed, and transformed. Masculinity is profoundly temporal, meaning it changes across historical periods, life stages, and generational shifts. Scholars such as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) emphasise that masculinities are not fixed but are constantly being reconfigured in response to social and historical changes. For instance, older men may renegotiate their masculine identities in response to ageing, retirement, or changes in family roles. Berg and Longhurst (2003) argue that masculinity is "both temporally and geographically contingent," highlighting how time and place intersect in shaping masculine norms.

Masculinity is also socially constructed; it emerges through interactions, institutions, and cultural expectations. Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity illustrates how dominant forms of masculinity are maintained through social practices that privilege certain male behaviours while marginalising others. These social scripts are reinforced through various means, including media, religion, education, and peer groups. Reeser (2023) notes that masculinity is a 'complex phenomenon' shaped by intersecting factors such as race, class, sexuality, and colonial histories.

Embodiment refers to how masculinity is lived through the body, how men experience, discipline, and present their bodies in ways that align with or resist dominant norms. Marshall (2003) and Witz (2003) argue that classical sociological traditions have long embedded masculine embodiment as the default for social agency, often rendering it invisible while privileging male-coded forms of physicality and rationality. Masculinity is thus not only performed but also experienced through strength, vulnerability, ageing, and physical labour.

In contemporary studies, embodiment is crucial for understanding how men navigate expectations around fitness, sexuality, and health. For example, the muscular male body is often idealised in media, reinforcing narrow standards of masculine worth. Yet, as men age or face illness, these embodied ideals may be challenged, prompting the emergence of new forms of masculine identity. Together,

these three dimensions: temporal, social, and embodied, offer a rich, intersectional lens for analysing masculinity. They remind us that being a man is not just about who one is, but *when, where, and how* one becomes. If you'd like, I can help apply these ideas to a specific cultural or artistic context, like dance, sport, or literature.

Masculinity is deeply embedded in Hindu religious and cultural narratives, particularly through the visual and textual representations of deities. Banerjee (2005) argues that Indian masculinity is intrinsically linked to nationalism, shaped by colonial histories and political structures. However, South African Indians, while influenced by Indian national identity, have primarily been exposed to South African colonial legacies, which further complicate the construction of masculinity within diasporic Hindu communities (Kanjilal, 2018).

Connell (1995) theorises that the body is central to the social analysis of hegemonic masculinity, emphasising how biological distinctions shape gendered behaviours. Within Hindu traditions, masculinity is not merely a biological construct but a performative identity enacted through ritual practices, mythological narratives, and social expectations. The Nagara dancers, for instance, must alter their external appearance to embody the Goddess, illustrating how masculinity is negotiated through religious performance (Nanda, 1999).

Morrell et al. (2012) expand on hegemonic masculinity, proposing three dominant masculinities: White masculinity, linked to political and economic dominance. African masculinity is rooted in indigenous institutions such as chiefship and customary law. Black masculinity, emerging through urbanisation and township development. While this framework primarily applies to South African masculinities, Indian men within South African communities can be situated within the 'black' masculinity category, as colonial displacement and cultural adaptation have shaped their gender identities (Morrell et al., 2012).

Connell (2005) defines masculinity as a social construct that dictates male behaviour within specific cultural settings. Hindu masculinity, however, is not static - it is continuously shaped by religious traditions, colonial histories, and evolving gender norms (Cockburn, 1999). Butler (1997) further argues that masculinity and femininity are socially shaped, allowing for gender fluidity within performative spaces. These notions are evident in Hindu ritual performances, where male dancers embody feminine deities, reinforcing the intersection of tradition and gender performativity (Vanita, 2014).

Morrell et al. (2012) highlight how colonial history and traditional Hindu practices converge to shape masculinity within Indian communities in South Africa. This intersection creates a complex gender landscape where traditional Hindu ideals coexist with colonial influences, reinforcing hegemonic masculinity through religious and social structures (Nanda, 2014). The fluidity of gender roles within Hinduism challenges Western binary constructs, illustrating how masculinity is both sacred and socially negotiated (Vanita, 2009). Hindu masculinity is not a singular construct but a dynamic interplay of tradition, performativity, and historical influences. The dialogue between religious doctrine and contemporary gender theories continues to shape masculinity as an evolving identity, reinforcing the fluid boundaries between masculinity, femininity, and sacred embodiment.

The broader discussion on men's emotions and gender anxieties reflects concerns about political correctness and the perceived instability of heterosexual masculinity. Roseneil (2000) argues that the rise of queer spaces and practices has de-naturalised heteronormativity, making gender more reflexive and fluid. The embodiment of female characters by male dancers challenges traditional gender norms, reinforcing the fluidity of gender identity through ritual performance. Ultimately, Nagara performances exemplify how traditional Hindu rituals can be reinterpreted to foster a more inclusive understanding of gender and sexuality. The dialogue between tradition and modernity continues to shape gender as a dynamic and evolving construct, reinforcing the interplay between masculinity, femininity, and performativity within Hindu religious and cultural frameworks.

3.4.1. Hindu Masculinities

Masculinity within Hinduism is deeply interwoven with religious doctrine, mythology, and cultural traditions, shaping gender identities through ritual, performance, and social hierarchy. Connell (2000) argues that masculinities do not exist independently before encountering femininities; instead, they are produced together, forming a gender order that dictates social roles and expectations. This perspective aligns with Hindu masculinity, where divine figures are often depicted as embodying both masculine and feminine attributes, thereby reinforcing fluid gender expressions within sacred spaces (Vanita, 2009).

Kanjilal (2018) highlights how Hindu doctrine and epic narratives reinforce hegemonic masculinity, particularly through the portrayal of warrior archetypes and mythological figures. This hegemonic masculinity, rooted in religious and historical traditions, continues to shape gender expectations among Hindu men globally. Brickell (2005) expands on this by discussing the intersection of hegemonic masculinity and performativity, linking ritual practices to the reinforcement of gender norms.

One of the most notable queered performances within Hinduism is *Satyabhava*, a rite of passage for *Brahmin* men, which exemplifies how traditional rituals challenge and transform contemporary gender understandings. Kamath (2019:57) explains:

The earliest village performances of the introductory item in which *Satyabhama* declares, “I am *Bhama* [woman], I am *Satyabhama* [True Woman],” were danced by *Brahmin* men. Although all *Brahmin* men are required to dance *Satyabhama* once in their lives, impersonation as a rite of passage is not its only social function. Rather, impersonation is a practice of power that creates normative ideals of gender and caste in village performance and everyday life, particularly as the practice of impersonation onstage spills into personation offstage.

Kamath (2019) describes how impersonation in village performances serves not only as a ritualistic practice but also as a mechanism for constructing normative ideals of gender and caste. The declaration “I am *Bhama* [woman], I am *Satyabhama* [True Woman]”, performed by *Brahmin* men, illustrates how gender impersonation extends beyond the stage into everyday life, reinforcing social hierarchies through embodied performance (Kamath, 2019:57).

Rites of passage have historically played a critical role in shaping Hindu masculinity, aligning with Connell’s (2005) theory that “there is no masculinity without femininity intertwined”. Roseneil (2000) further destabilises the masculine binary, arguing that masculinity is increasingly a conscious state, requiring self-monitoring and negotiation. From observation, this is particularly evident in Nagara dancers, who involuntarily maintain their masculine appearance before and after performances while embodying femininity during ritual enactments. The hetero-masculine demeanour remains dominant, yet their embodied femininity requires deliberate construction, reinforcing the performative nature of gender (Roseneil, 2000).

Kamath (2019:59) explores the experiences of male dancer *Satyantarayana Sarma*, who describes how wearing female attire, ornaments, and anklets induced a temporary shift in his gendered self-perception. His state of mind remained feminine until he removed his makeup and resumed his masculine attire, illustrating how gender embodiment is deeply tied to performative acts.

3.4.2. Men Who Wear Saris

Dance culture within Hinduism serves as a critical site for gender negotiation, where fluid expressions of masculinity and femininity are enacted through ritualised movement and costuming. Hindu dance traditions, particularly Nagara, challenge Western binary constructs of gender, illustrating how masculinity is not fixed but performative (Butler, 1993). The interplay between queer theory and dance studies reveals how ritual embodiment disrupts normative gender roles, allowing men to navigate their masculinity through sacred performance (Ferrey, 2010).

The South African Indian diaspora is deeply rooted in the legacies of indenture, migration, and racialised marginalisation, particularly following the arrival of Indian labourers in Natal between 1860 and 1914 (Desai and Vahed, 2010). These indentured migrants endured exploitative conditions and systemic segregation under colonial rule, which shaped a collective diasporic consciousness framed by displacement and subjugation (Vahed, 2001). Their silenced narratives reflect Spivak's (1988) theorisation of the subaltern, wherein colonial discourse actively suppressed non-Western voices. Postcolonial theory thus provides a critical lens through which their historical experience is understood, not only as a record of trauma but as foundational to diasporic identity formation.

Within apartheid South Africa, economic adaptation, religious retention, and political mobilisation became avenues through which South African Indians renegotiated their socio-cultural positioning. Maharaj (1995:229) highlights how spatial segregation entrenched by apartheid led to the consolidation of enclosed cultural communities, preserving tradition while facilitating transformation. These evolving practices exemplify what Bhabha (1994) theorises as hybridity: the productive tension between cultural continuity and adaptation. Diasporic enclaves became sites where Indian heritage and South African realities converged, producing an emergent identity shaped by both memory and locality.

In the post-apartheid era, identity among South African Indians remains fluid and anchored in diasporic memory, yet shaped by contemporary lived experience. Gopal and Marimuthu (2017) argue that Indian identity in South Africa is forged through dual affiliations to both ancestral origins and national belonging. Archary (2022) extends this view, emphasising the generative role of memory in sustaining cultural ties, even as identity undergoes redefinition through local engagement. This aligns with Chakrabarty's (2000) postcolonial imperative to decentralise dominant historical narratives, placing diasporic communities at the centre of their own historiography. Together, these perspectives highlight the complex processes of cultural negotiation and resilience within the South African Indian diaspora, offering a framework for further inquiry into performativity, identity politics, and ritual adaptation.

This reconfiguration of masculinity through dance aligns with Connell's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which posits that masculinity is socially constructed and continuously negotiated. Figure 2 below depicts the direct misconception of men who wear a *Sari* when they perform:

POST

Men who don saris

The sound of the nagara drum echoes as men dressed in beautifully stitched Indian outfits sway their hips and sing and dance before an audience. Nagara dancing has been around for decades but only a handful of people are aware of its rich history.

CHANELL

Music • Entertainment • Dance • Arts
9 Aug 2017

FOR years, nagara dancers have been misjudged.

People are quick to assume that the men who dress up and dance in women's saris and punjabis are homosexual or gay. Most communities fail to understand where nagara stems from and its true meaning.

Nagara refers to the drum instruments played during perfor-

Figure 2: Article from the Post Newspaper – Describing Nagara Dancers as men who don a Sari

Despite its deep religious significance, Nagara dancers often face misconceptions and assumptions regarding their gender identity. Many non-practising Hindus and outsiders fail to recognise the historical and spiritual embodiment associated with Nagara, leading to misinterpretations of male dancers as desiring femininity rather than embodying divinity (Post Newspaper, 2017). This misreading of gender performance reflects Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity, where gender is enacted through repeated social rituals rather than being an inherent trait.

This ritualised gender transformation queers the gender order of religious spaces, reinforcing the sacredness of gender fluidity (Vanita, 2009). The usage of the term 'queer' in this context describes the disruption of gender norms, where men and women traditionally adhere to distinct dress codes and appearances. Ferrey (2010) elaborates on movement as a performance of gender, emphasising how dance serves as an embodied state of gender expression. The transition from male identity to divine femininity within Nagara performances exemplifies the fluidity of masculinity, reinforcing the interplay between gender performativity and ritual embodiment (Ferrey, 2010). This temporary transformation aligns with Butler's (1993) theory, which argues that gender is not an inherent identity but a series of performative acts.

Ultimately, Nagara dance challenges rigid gender binaries, illustrating how masculinity is continuously shaped through ritual performance. The dialogue between queer theory and Hindu dance traditions highlights how sacred embodiment functions as a site of gender negotiation, reinforcing the fluid and performative nature of masculinity within religious and cultural contexts.

3.5. Conceptualising Multi-Disciplinary Theories

The conceptualisation of religious dance, gender performativity, and masculinity within Nagara dancing presents a multilayered, intersectional framework that challenges dominant gender boundaries. By queering gender and religious spaces, Nagara performances embody fluid gender expressions, reinforcing the interplay between masculinity, femininity, and performativity (Lewis, 1998).

Cultural context plays a pivotal role in shaping the associations between movement and gender. Lewis (1998) asserts that “all movement must be considered as an embodiment of cultural knowledge,” reinforcing the idea that Nagara performances function as both a gender expression and a ritual practice. This embodied knowledge situates dance as a cultural phenomenon, where gender fluidity is enacted through ritualised movement (Lewis, 1998).

Lewis (1998) further argues that multiple theoretical perspectives intersect within specific phenomena, in this case, Nagara dance, allowing for divergent interpretations that enhance the discourse on masculinity and performativity. The interplay between theories does not necessitate compatibility; rather, their divergence identifies distinct issues and concerns, enriching the analysis of gender negotiation within ritual dance.

Campbell (2020:136) emphasises the importance of integrating multiple theoretical frameworks to enhance the depth and trustworthiness of research. By drawing from diverse theories, scholars can broaden the landscape of gender studies, offering a more comprehensive understanding of Nagara performances. This approach aligns with the concept of theory triangulation, which mitigates the limitations of singular theoretical perspectives (Campbell, 2020:139).

Bans-Akutey (2021:6) defines three primary methods for theory triangulation: Conceptual Integration, which involves identifying key constructs such as ritual dance, masculinity, and queer performativity and synthesising them into a cohesive framework. Comparative analysis - systematically contrasting theoretical perspectives, highlighting their strengths, limitations, and intersections. Theoretical synergy - combining theories to generate new insights, surpassing the explanatory power of individual frameworks (Bans-Akutey, 2021:6).

The fluidity of masculinity within performances challenges hegemonic gender norms, reinforcing the performative nature of masculinity (Connell, 2005). The embodiment of the Goddess by male dancers disrupts traditional gender binaries, illustrating how masculinity is continuously shaped through ritual performance (Vanita, 2009).

Ferrey (2010) elaborates on movement as a form of gender performance, emphasising how dance serves as an embodied state of gender expression. The transition from male identity to divine femininity within queer performances exemplifies the fluidity of masculinity, reinforcing the interplay between gender performativity and ritual embodiment (Ferrey, 2010). Nagara dance challenges rigid gender binaries, illustrating how masculinity is continuously shaped through ritual performance. The dialogue between queer theory and Hindu dance traditions highlights how sacred embodiment functions as a site of gender negotiation, reinforcing the fluid and performative nature of masculinity within religious and cultural contexts.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter approaches dance as a complex theoretical construct, drawing on theories of religion, gender, and embodiment to deepen the understanding of how Nagara dancers articulate and negotiate masculinity within the South African Indian diaspora. Beginning with religious dance theory, it traced how movement operates simultaneously as a devotional act and a performative tradition, offering insight into the spiritual dimensions that underpin male participation in Hindu dance forms. Hindu dance theory, particularly as outlined in the *Natyashastra*, situates sacred performance within a codified tradition. At the same time, *Bhakti* philosophy emphasises affective and devotional expressions that complicate rigid notions of masculine behaviour.

The integration of gender embodiment theories highlights the performative nature of identity within sacred spaces, revealing how embodied ritual enables the fluid navigation of masculinity beyond binary constraints. Embodiment theory further contextualised dance within lived experience, showing how spiritual practice becomes a mode of negotiating cultural identity and gendered subjectivity.

Queer theoretical perspectives on gender performativity challenged normative frameworks. They provided critical tools to interpret how Nagara dancers subtly reconfigure masculinity through stylised gestures, devotional intent, and aesthetic choices, particularly in a diasporic setting shaped by hybrid identities. Theories of masculinity examine how being a man is not a fixed essence, but a socially constructed, historically situated, and bodily lived identity, shaped by time, culture, and embodied practices. In turn, this highlights the tensions between traditional Hindu male ideals that guide their everyday life. These forms of masculine traits have been nurtured through diasporic movements globally. These movements have created shifts, particularly within a multicultural South Africa. South African Indian diasporic discourses deepen this discussion by contextualising Nagara dance within histories of indenture, cultural transmission, and the negotiation of belonging, revealing how

masculinity is reimagined through embodied performance in response to displacement, hybridity, and transgenerational memory.

Finally, the chapter formed an understanding of the significance of a multi-disciplinary theoretical framework, demonstrating that the intersection of performance, religion, gender, and history provides a comprehensive lens for analysing how Nagara dancers embody, contest, and reimagine masculine identity in a contemporary South African context. This foundation lays the groundwork for the following chapter, which outlines the methodological strategies employed to further explore these embodied practices.

4. CHAPTER 4 – Research Methodology

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter established the theoretical framework underpinning this study, highlighting the intersection of the three bodies of theories, religious dance and its ritual significance, embodiment and gender performativity, and masculinity within Hindu religious dance traditions. Drawing from queer theory and phenomenology, the discussion foregrounded how embodiment in Nagara dance challenges and negotiates masculinity within ritual dance spaces. In addition, it examined the role of performativity in religious supplication, illustrating how the body serves as a site of sacred expression.

This chapter begins with an understanding of the art of Nagara dancing, particularly *Kirtan*. This ritual serves as the focal point of the study, which interrogates the religious nature of the subject. This section rightly belongs in the research methodology chapter, as it establishes the ontological and cultural foundations that enable interpretive engagement. Performance here is approached not as a distant object, but as a dynamic site of meaning-making, where ritual, embodiment, and community intersect to reveal the lived contours of masculinity and gender. This dance form reflects cultural adaptation and religious devotion, which impacts the research methodology, requiring context-sensitive approaches to explore masculinity, ritual embodiment, and religious dance. This necessitates methodological flexibility to account for the evolving socio-cultural influences shaping Nagara performances.

The following section presents a concise account of the research design, followed by the methodological framework, which emphasises the significance of adopting an IPA and its suitability for examining the lived experiences of embodiment and gender performativity. The following section offers insights into the participants' profiles and the data collection methods employed. This section also outlines the fieldwork process, which encompassed the use of one-on-one interviews and a focus group session.

The following section then addresses the data analysis, elaborating on the thematic analysis approach and its relevance to the study. At this point, a reflexive account of the researcher's positionality is provided, acknowledging the potential influence of the researcher's background and biases on the study. Finally, the chapter concludes with an examination of research ethics and limitations, including considerations of trustworthiness and reliability. It highlights the necessity of maintaining rigorous standards throughout the research process to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

By employing a comprehensive methodological framework, this study aims to provide a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Nagara dancers, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on gender performativity, ritual embodiment, and religious dance within the context of South African diasporic Hindu dance practices.

4.2. The Art of Nagara Performance

Positioning Nagara performance as a methodological site is not simply about foregrounding its aesthetic dimensions, but about recognising its epistemic potential, as a space where knowledge is generated through embodied practice. Within this framework, ritual movement, dress, and devotional enactment are not treated as supplementary or illustrative data; instead, they constitute the analytic terrain upon which gender, identity, and spirituality are negotiated and expressed. By framing performance as both method and meaning, this study aligns with performative methodologies that value situated, experiential, and affective forms of knowledge.

This section, therefore, justifiably resides within the research methodology chapter, as it lays the ontological and cultural groundwork through which meaning-making becomes possible. Here, performance is not an object to be passively studied from afar, but a reflexive site of inquiry between the dancer, the community, and the researcher. Attending to the ritual and expressive dynamics of Nagara allows for a richer, contextually grounded interpretation of participants' experiences, particularly as they pertain to masculinity and gender embodiment. In this sense, the performative becomes both a means of accessing lived realities and a lens through which those realities are made legible within academic analysis.

As outlined in Chapter One, Nagara dancing in South Africa evolved into a symbol of cultural resilience, playing a vital role in preserving Hindu religious identity amid displacement and migration. Vahed (2024) explains that traditional Hindu practices in South Africa were reshaped by the need to create sacred spaces in the foreign land, conforming to colonial regulations, and navigating the socio-political constraints of apartheid. These conditions influenced the transformation of Nagara dancing from a strictly ritualistic practice into a hybrid form that blends devotional and entertainment elements. Nevertheless, its religious dimension, particularly through *Kirtan*, remained a core expression of Goddess worship. The link provided (for visual reference) features a full video of *Kirtan* being performed at a public Goddess celebration in Durban.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7aIBNE5dAcsandt=132s>

Kirtan is typically performed as a community prayer at temples, where those who cannot afford to host the prayer at home can still participate in the practice. However, it is also performed in sacred spaces within Hindu households. According to Richmond (1971), religious performance spaces must be blessed and demarcated before any ritual performance can take place. Singh (2016:NP) asserts that within the household, the mother is responsible for initiating this ritual. She begins by consecrating the dance space, carrying a tray with lit camphor and red powder. The ritual involves marking the Nagara drum with a symbolic dot, signifying spiritual invocation. Upon completing this sacred act, the *Kirtan* commences. This ritual entails a devotional song that portrays the life of the Goddess *Saraswati*. This story is told through dance, and the music is provided by the musician who plays the Nagara drum. Before the dancers perform the ritual, they are required to purify their bodies by fasting for a specific number of days, signifying readiness for divine embodiment. Enacting the story of *Saraswati*, the Nagara dancer performs upon a *Sari* laid on the ground, which serves as both a performance space and a sacred offering. In temple settings, multiple *Saris* may be used to delineate the ritual area.

The *Sari*, revered as a sacred garment, holds deep spiritual significance in Hindu ceremonies. As Banerjee (2005) explains, the *Sari* is a vessel of cultural identity and spiritual devotion, making it an appropriate offering in religious contexts. Within household rituals, the woman who organises the ceremony receives the blessed *Sari* as a mark of honour and responsibility, symbolising her role in maintaining sacred traditions. This act reinforces the *Sari's* function as more than attire; it becomes a vessel of divine blessings, linking the wearer to the spiritual essence of the ritual and affirming her place within the religious and familial structure.

The Nagara drum is the primary source of music, producing the beats that capture the essence of Nagara dancing. Male dancers involved in this dance are required to dress as the Goddess *Saraswati* and embody the attributes, bringing her image to life as they perform to the beats of the Nagara drum. According to Pennington (2015), *Saraswati* is the Goddess of learning, knowledge, and wisdom. He further explains that the Sanskrit words *Sara* and *Swa* mean 'essence' and 'self,' respectively. Thus, *Saraswati* means 'the essence of the self.' This formed the foundation of Nagara dance, which then became a widespread form of religious dance.

Singh (2016:NP) further asserts that the dancers must embody the Goddess in worship of the mother Goddesses (*Lakshmi*, *Kali*, *Durga*, and *Saraswati*). However, *Saraswati* is most acknowledged during Nagara dancing, as she embodies the core of the performance. Each performance begins with a prayer dance to invoke the Goddess *Saraswati* and is brought to a close with an *Aarti* (veneration) of the Goddess. Mickeviciene (2004:60) and David (2012) discuss an ontological relationship between the dance and the temple, as well as the link between the performer and the embodiment of the divine.

David (2012) further emphasises the significance of conducting ritual performances within sacred spaces, as these settings foster an atmosphere of reverence essential for prayer and worship.

Nagara dancers are restricted to respectful body movements derived from *Bharatanatyam* and/or *Kathak* dance styles. These are the initial dance styles that modelled the emergence of ritual dance and folk dancing, maintaining the poise and beauty of the Goddess during the narration of the divine.

The evolution of Nagara dancing reflects broader socio-cultural transformations influenced by colonialism, apartheid restrictions, and generational shifts in performance aesthetics. Historically, male dancers have incorporated symbolic elements into their attire, such as tying a cloth around their waist to signify phallic power, embodying feminine movements, and mimicking the movements of female dancers (Singh, 2016:NP). This practice reinforced the fluidity of gender representation within ritual dance, highlighting the performative embodiment of divine femininity. In contemporary settings, Nagara dancers have transitioned to wearing *Saris* or intricately decorated skirts, signifying a shift in costume traditions while maintaining the sacred essence of the performance. Despite these stylistic adaptations, the reverence for the Goddess remains central, ensuring that devotional integrity is preserved. Singh (2016:NP) further notes that traditional Nagara costumes included a crown and bold stage makeup, transforming male dancers into visual representations of Goddess *Saraswati* (See Figure 3 below). This transformation highlights the ritualistic function of Nagara dancing, where embodiment serves as a conduit for divine presence, reinforcing the intersection of gender, spirituality, and performative devotion.



Figure 3: Post Newspaper Facebook Page (2017). A Nagara dancer from Flash Entertainers has celebrated 63 years of performing.

<https://www.facebook.com/postnewspaper/photos/a.247246001989793/1433200483394333/?type=3> (Accessed: August 23 2023)

Many dancers have shifted from the original performance of the ritual to entertainment, which affirms David's (2012) assertion that religious dance within religious spaces (temples) is becoming more secularised. This explains the significant changes that are apparent in the South African context when comparing Nagara performances in 2023 to those in the early 2000s. The expanding role of Nagara dancing beyond religious spaces highlights its evolving function in contemporary society. While historically rooted in sacred rituals, its presence in entertainment settings, such as concerts, weddings, and charity events, demonstrates a shift in performative meaning and cultural significance (Singh, 2016:NP). This transition reflects broader discussions on gender representation within Hindu traditions, particularly regarding the portrayal of masculinity. As male performers embody the divine feminine, Nagara dancing disrupts conventional understandings of masculinity, thus echoing Connell's (1995) critique of gender norms. The ritualised performance of Nagara dancing aligns with early *Vedic* notions of masculinity, where embodiment and ritual practice were central to constructing male identity (Kanjilal, 2018:27). Through the interplay of gender, devotion, and performance, Nagara dancing serves as a dynamic site for negotiating masculinity within Hindu religious and cultural frameworks.

4.3. Research Design

The research design of this study is structured to provide a methodological framework that ensures a distinctive exploration of the lived experiences of Nagara dancers. Given the study's qualitative nature, it employs IPA as a key approach, facilitating an immersive investigation into how dancers navigate masculinity within ritual performance spaces (Smith et al. 2015). IPA is particularly suited for this study as it enables an understanding of how individuals construct meaning within their cultural and religious contexts. In addition, the study incorporates phenomenology, which examines the dancers' embodiment, allowing for an interpretative process that acknowledges both subjective experience and broader structural influences (Van Manen, 2016). By combining phenomenology and IPA, the research strikes a balance between first-person accounts and the analytical depth necessary to critically engage with gender performativity and ritual embodiment.

The main research question for the study is:

How is masculinity performed, understood, and navigated by Nagara dancers when practising ritual performances within and beyond the performance context?

The following sub-questions will inform this question:

1. How is gender portrayed within the performances of Nagara dances?
2. How do Nagara dancers define and navigate masculinity through ritual dance?
3. How, and in what ways, does Hindu ritual dance open a more nuanced and embodied conception of masculinity among Nagara dancers?

To ensure rich and insightful contributions, the study employs purposive sampling, selecting participants based on their experience and relevance to the study's objectives (Campbell et al., 2020). Given the unique cultural and religious dimensions of Nagara dance, this approach ensures that the selected dancers possess substantial exposure to Nagara performance traditions, enabling an analysis that reflects deep engagement with both ritual and identity formation. The study employs both focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews to capture varied perspectives. Focus groups encourage collective dialogue, allowing dancers to reflect on shared experiences, while individual interviews provide a more personalised setting for discussing sensitive or nuanced themes (Morgan, 1997; Kvale, 2007). This combination enhances the depth and diversity of the data collected, ensuring a comprehensive interpretation of masculinity within Hindu ritual performance.

Data analysis follows a reflexive thematic approach, which is integral in qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2019:560). Reflexive thematic analysis is employed to identify patterns within participants' narratives, ensuring flexibility while maintaining methodological rigour. Through this approach, the study systematically organises recurring themes while acknowledging the researcher's positionality, recognising how their perspective may influence interpretation. To enhance credibility, thematic analysis follows a structured set of phases, including data familiarisation, coding, theme development, refinement, and reporting (Braun and Clarke, 2021:329). By integrating reflexivity, the research mitigates bias and ensures that the findings accurately represent the lived experiences of Nagara dancers, while maintaining an ethical and academically rigorous approach.

Overall, this research design offers a coherent and structured methodology for exploring the navigation of masculinity, embodiment, and ritual performance among Nagara dancers. It ensures that data collection methods align with the study's objectives while maintaining ethical integrity and analytical depth. Through purposive sampling, IPA, phenomenology, and reflexive thematic analysis, the study systematically captures and interprets the complexities of gender performativity within South African diasporic Hindu dance traditions.

4.4. Methodological Framework

Phenomenology and IPA are central to this study, as they enable an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of Nagara dancers. Phenomenology provides a framework for understanding embodiment, while IPA emphasises subjective meaning-making, allowing a nuanced analysis of masculinity and ritual performance within Hindu dance traditions (Van Manen, 2016; Smith et al., 2015). By integrating these approaches, the study ensures a contextually rich and interpretatively rigorous examination of gender performativity in Hindu dance spaces.

4.4.1. Phenomenology Approach

The phenomenology of religion emphasises that religious experience is embodied, manifesting in ritual practices such as Hindu religious dance. In Hinduism, sacred dance acts as a medium for divine expression, allowing performers to channel spiritual energy through movement as a form of worship (Flood, 1996). This approach highlights how embodiment in dance contributes to meaning-making within Hindu ritual practices (Van Manen, 2016).

Phenomenologists such as Kersenboom (1987) and Van Manen (2016) argue that embodied religious experiences provide insight into the universal structures of devotion, ritual purity, and transcendence. Intentionality theory posits that all religious experiences, including sacred dance, are directed towards something, such as deity invocation, cosmic alignment, or spiritual surrender (Holdrege, 1998). Dance transforms the performer's body into a sacred vessel, reinforcing ritual embodiment as central to Hindu worship.

Because religious experience is deeply subjective, phenomenology acknowledges the significance of language and performance in conveying spiritual truths (Kersenboom, 1987). Religious dance functions as a corporeal language, bridging individual spirituality with communal ritual. This study examines Nagara dance as a phenomenological practice that expresses and enacts the sacred through movement.

Phenomenology also facilitates an understanding of sociological imagination by analysing the interaction between individual experience and broader social structures (Hoop, 2009:48). It enables scholars to assess how personal histories are shaped by societal forces, fostering critical thinking and ethical awareness (Marczak, 2018:4). This approach highlights the evolving nature of religious performance, identity formation, and gender dynamics within South African diasporic Hindu dance

spaces (Hoop, 2009:48), highlighting the importance of embodiment and collective meaning-making in phenomenological research.

4.4.2. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA is a practical methodology for exploring how individuals make sense of their experiences within specific contexts (Smith et al., 2015; McMullen, 2018). Applied to Nagara dance, IPA provides an in-depth analysis of how gender identity is constructed, negotiated, and expressed through ritual performance (Smith et al., 2015). Given that Nagara dance is voluntary and deeply personal, IPA helps capture subjective interpretations, revealing how dancers navigate their masculinity within sacred traditions.

This study adopts an IPA lens to analyse how gender is portrayed in Nagara dance, how masculinity is defined and embodied, and how Hindu ritual dance fosters a fluid conception of gender identity. Through in-depth interviews and reflexive thematic analysis, IPA facilitates an exploration of personal narratives, uncovering the complex interplay between gender performativity, embodiment, and cultural identity (Hoop, 2009). It also situates individual experiences within broader socio-cultural and historical frameworks, enriching discussions on diasporic Hindu traditions.

IPA ensures reflexivity, acknowledging researcher positionality and the influence of cultural, historical, and social structures on dancers' self-perceptions (Marczak, 2018). Integrated within phenomenology, IPA strengthens discourse on gender performativity and ritual embodiment, reinforcing methodological validity. As Smith (2015) highlights, IPA captures personal meaning-making, prioritising first-person accounts. The study employs focus group discussions and interviews to rigorously engage with dancers' lived experiences, ensuring comprehensive analysis.

By focusing on how masculinity is embodied through Nagara dance, IPA reveals key themes and patterns in gender performativity. Previous studies, such as Mitchell et al. (2017), demonstrate the effectiveness of IPA in exploring dance-related identity negotiations, particularly in the fields of gender and queer studies. Finlay (2013) emphasises phenomenology's ability to capture rich, ambiguous lived experiences, thereby deepening our understanding of masculinity, societal norms, and ritual practices. The study's data analysis follows the five IPA stages outlined by Pearson et al. (2006), ensuring a structured interpretation of dancers' emotional and cognitive processes within religious and cultural contexts. (See Figure 4 below.)

Stage	Activity	Actions
1	Reading and re-reading the interview transcription	Significant responses from the reader, statements, sentences, or quotes are identified in the transcripts (open coding).
2	Identifying themes	Identification of and labelling of major and minor themes.
3	Structuring the analysis	Clusters of themes are labelled in a way that captures their essence.
4	Production of a summary table of the themes	Quotations selected that illustrate themes. Abandoning of themes that are not well-represented.
5	Construction of a cohesive narrative	The narrative is based on the summary table; quotes from participants are included to add depth and richness

Figure 4: Pearson et al. (2006) five stages of IPA

The study employs Pearson et al.'s (2006) five stages of IPA to ensure methodological rigour, emphasising an idiographic approach that prioritises experiential findings over generalisable ones. IPA is particularly well-suited for examining complex, emotionally charged topics, ensuring that participants' perspectives are thoroughly explored to enrich the final narrative. Given (2008) highlights IPA's ability to capture both individual and collective experiences, making it valuable for analysing shared dynamics in focus groups and individual follow-up interviews. These discussions provide insight into the formation of identity and masculinity within performance contexts.

As a methodological tool, IPA situates individual experiences within broader socio-cultural frameworks (Pearson, 2006), illuminating gender performativity, embodiment, and identity within the context of ritual dance. Smith (2015) and McMullen (2018) emphasise its capacity to reveal subjective meanings, examining the role of cultural and historical influences in shaping perceptions of gender and religious performance. Through IPA, this study examines how masculinity is constructed, negotiated, and expressed by Nagara dancers.

By integrating phenomenology and IPA, the research adopts a qualitative approach that captures the complexities of masculinity in Nagara dance. Phenomenology contextualises experiences within broader social structures, while IPA provides an individualised interpretative lens. Supported by thematic analysis, this synthesis offers a nuanced understanding of masculinity, ritual embodiment, and performative identity. Ultimately, this framework contributes to scholarly discussions on gender

performativity within South African diasporic Hindu traditions, leading to the exploration of the research population.

4.5. Purposive Sampling

This study employs purposive sampling, selecting participants based on their direct engagement with Nagara dance traditions to ensure rich and relevant insights (Campbell et al., 2020). Nagara dancers play a vital role in Hindu religious performance, expressing femininity, masculinity, and divinity through their embodied movements. Their lived realities offer a rich lens into ritual practice, making them an ideal group for examining gender negotiation in sacred dance traditions.

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the selection of participants whose experiences directly align with the study's objectives. Campbell et al. (2020:652) claim that purposive sampling is an effective method for identifying individuals most suited to contribute meaningful insights, particularly in qualitative research. This approach enhances the rigour and trustworthiness of the study by ensuring that participants possess the relevant lived experiences necessary to address the core research questions. Moreover, he asserts that purposive sampling facilitates a more precise match between the sample and the study's aims, thereby strengthening the validity and depth of the findings. In addition, purposive sampling upholds the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the qualitative conclusions (Campbell et al., 2020:653). These aspects are crucial in reinforcing the reliability of participants' accounts, ensuring that their insights contribute to a coherent and well-substantiated discussion on masculinity within Hindu ritual dance traditions.

The samples for qualitative inquiry are generally assumed to be selected purposefully to yield cases that are 'information-rich' (Patton, 2001), as noted in Schreier (2018). As Emmel (2013) notes, this method of sampling enables access to specific, under-researched populations for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest, in this case, Nagara dancers in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

As an active dancer in the Hindu dance community, I was confident that accessing the Nagara groups within the dance network would not pose any difficulties. At the start of the research, I identified two Nagara groups in Verulam, Durban, with whom I could conduct my research. This ensured a data set of approximately fifteen participants: eight from Flash Entertainers and seven from Nagara Touch. However, before I could begin the empirical research, the dance groups disbanded, and the dancers started performing as freelancers.

Nonetheless, thirteen of the fifteen dancers were contacted via WhatsApp, as the two dancers had moved away from Durban and weren't planning on returning anytime before the date of the focus group session. Despite the keen interest in the invitation from the other dancers, a significant number of Nagara performers decided not to participate in the study, citing a complex interplay of personal, cultural, and structural concerns. Two dancers expressed apprehension about publicly engaging with topics that interrogate gender, identity, and sacred performance. They feared community judgment, misrepresentation, or the perception that their masculinity might be called into question. Three dancers felt uncertain about the implications of academic research on their personal spiritual practices, preferring to keep their embodied devotion private. Moreover, Logistical barriers, including demanding work schedules, limited transportation access, and a lack of institutional incentives or support for sustained engagement with the other two dancers, were other reasons cited for non-participation. Two additional dancers indicated that they lacked sufficient experience to contribute to the study, as they had only recently started dancing.

As emphasised in research ethics procedures, participants' right to withdraw from the research is a fundamental factor (Dahal et al., 2024), especially when participants feel their identities or sacred practices may be misunderstood. Melham et al. (2014) similarly stress the ethical obligation to respect participants' autonomy throughout the research process. In culturally layered contexts, such as the South African Indian diaspora, changing one's mind at the last minute often reflects deeper concerns about trust, representation, and the need for culturally sensitive, non-extractive methodologies. As such, to follow due process, I was obliged to respect the decisions of the dancers who declined to participate in the research.

While this numerical reduction may appear significant, the qualitative intent of the study remained intact. As Islam and Aldaihani (2022) and Dawson (2002) argue, the value of qualitative inquiry lies not in quantity but in the depth of engagement and interpretive insight that smaller samples can yield. The shift was not merely circumstantial but methodologically coherent, aligning with the qualitative framework's emphasis on reflective justification and adaptive rigour (Mthuli, Ruffin and Singh, 2022). Drawing on Vasileiou et al. (2018), sample sufficiency is better understood in terms of data richness and thematic clarity rather than predefined numbers.

Supporting this argument, Bekele and Ago (2022:46) caution against rigid numeric expectations in favour of alignment with the study's epistemological goals. Given these scholarly arguments and the dwindling time frame for conducting the research, I made the bold and risky decision to work with the remaining four dancers. Fortunately, the decision highlighted that the quality and nuance of the four

narratives collected offered the kind of textured, emic understanding that Bartholomew et al. (2021:13) describe as ‘central to voice-centred qualitative research.’ Furthermore, the responsive and context-sensitive nature of this adaptation reflects the principles of the qualitative framework (Ting et al., 2023). It affirms Sharma et al.’s (2024) assertion that sample adequacy in qualitative work is a dynamic, interpretive process that is negotiated in practice, not dictated by prescription.

The participants who chose to participate are based in the Durban suburbs of Phoenix, Asherville, and Newlands, which are typically areas of Indian diasporic communities. Their ages range approximately from 36 to 70 years. Two of these dancers started dancing in their teenage years, while the other two began in their early twenties.

4.5.1. Participants’ Profile

The table below presents a demographic and contextual overview of the four Nagara dancers, highlighting key aspects such as their age, experience, background, and previous dance group affiliations. The participants engaged in a focus group session conducted on November 11, 2023. The session was initially scheduled for an hour, but lasted over two hours. It included two dancers who were initially affiliated with Flash Entertainers, one dancer affiliated with Nagara Touch, and an individual who had performed for various other Nagara groups. The table below indicates the profiles of all participants.

Table 4.1: Profile of Participants

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
Age	70	40	37	32
Experience (years)	56 years	25 Years	12 Years	8 Years
Age started dancing	14	15	25	26
Population group	Indian	Indian	Indian	Indian
Nationality	South African	South African	South African	South African
Religion	Hindu	Hindu	Hindu	Hindu
Sexuality	Heterosexual	Heterosexual	Homosexual	Homosexual
Location	Phoenix, Durban	Phoenix, Durban	Asherville, Durban	Newlands, Durban
Initial Group (Before Freelancing)	Flash Entertainers	Flash Entertainers	Flash Entertainers	Nagara Touch
+Occupation	Self-employed	Businessman	Salesman	Self-employed

Each participant demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of *Kirtan* within the Nagara framework, a profound knowledge of the historical evolution of Nagara dancing, including their forefathers' contributions to its development, and an awareness of the nuanced representations of Nagara in public discourse. As IPA prioritises depth over quantity, fortunately, the participants with the most expertise allowed for a richer exploration of the core themes related to masculinity within Nagara dance (Smith, 2015; McMullen, 2018). While the findings cannot be generalised to all Nagara dancers, they provide valuable insights into how masculinity is constructed, maintained, and expressed through ritual performance. This methodological approach ensures rigorous interpretative analysis, offering a meaningful representation of the embodied experiences within this dance tradition. The picture below illustrates the research population from which the four dancers were drawn.



Figure 5: An example of how Nagara has become a popular form of entertainment is one of the nuanced forms of Nagara Dancing, where younger dancers dress in contrast to older dancers.

<https://theluvvie.com/2017/08/24/enjoy-a-great-night-out-and-help-raise-money-for-blankets-for-the-homeless/>

(Accessed: August 25 2023)

4.6. Data Collection

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Nagara dancers, this study employs two qualitative methods: focus group discussions and follow-up interviews. The focus group facilitates collective reflection on gender performativity and ritual embodiment, while individual follow-up interviews provide deeper personal insights. A structured data collection procedure ensures methodological rigour, capturing both shared and individual narratives within Hindu dance traditions. These methods enhance the study's exploration of masculinity, ritual embodiment, and religious dance in South African diasporic Hindu contexts.

Both the focus group session and the individual follow-up interviews took place at the Resmount Primary School multipurpose room. The data collected for the study consisted of responses from the Nagara dancers after they participated in focus groups and individual interviews, both of which were recorded via voice recordings. The data was recorded with a cell phone (Samsung Note20 Ultra) using the app 'Samsung Recorder'. The recording device has proven to be a reliable tool for capturing clear voices and eliminating other interferences such as sound distortion and echoes. Once obtained, the data was stored on a USB drive, and a backup copy was saved to a hard drive, both of which are stored in a safe that can only be accessed by me for research and analysis purposes.

All recordings obtained were later transcribed (December 20, 2023, to January 5, 2024) using a listen-and-write technique, where notes are taken word-for-word as the recordings are played (McMullen, 2023). McMullen (2023:140) further describes transcription as a spectrum between 'naturalised' transcription (or 'intelligent verbatim'), which adapts the oral to written norms, and 'denaturalised' transcription ('full verbatim'). The responses from the Nagara dancers (in both focus group and individual interviews) included utterances, mistakes, repetitions, and all grammatical errors. This approach enabled the inclusion of Hindi words and terminology, as well as their quick responses, historical accounts, and reactions to the questions. All transcribed data have been analysed using the RTA approach to ensure the validity, reliability and rigour of the study.

4.6.1. Focus Group Session

In qualitative research, focus group sessions serve as a valuable tool for capturing diverse perspectives within collective discussions. Bremborg (2011) highlights the significance of qualitative focus groups

in religious studies, emphasising their ability to yield rich, nuanced data that reflects the complexity of individual beliefs. Given the IPA framework of this study, focus group sessions were employed to facilitate reflective engagement among Nagara dancers, enabling them to critically explore their personal experiences within and beyond the dance spaces.

Bryman (2012) notes that semi-structured questions offer flexibility, guiding discussions while allowing for a deeper exploration of responses. By adopting this method, I guided participants through introspective discussions, allowing them to articulate meaningful moments and challenges encountered in their performance practice. Notably, the collaborative environment fostered peer learning, encouraging dancers to gain confidence in expressing their thoughts and ideas. This methodological approach was particularly insightful in uncovering the deeper motivations behind their participation, including the performative transformation required to embody the Goddess. By providing an interactive platform for dialogue, the focus group method enriched the study's exploration of gender performativity and ritual embodiment within Nagara dance.

To facilitate open communication, a structured and supportive environment was established, incorporating community guidelines to ensure respectful dialogue and maintain order throughout the session. Although the dancers were from different groups, this approach allowed participants to express their experiences freely while fostering meaningful engagement with the study's thematic focus.

Focus groups, as Kamberelis (2008) highlights, foster an environment where participants feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, particularly when engaging with familiar peers. Given that Nagara dancers perform together in ritual settings, the focus group provided a natural and familiar space that encouraged open dialogue. This method enabled the exploration of how gender is portrayed within Nagara dance, how dancers navigate masculinity through ritual performance, and how Hindu ritual dance fosters an embodied conception of masculinity, the core research sub-questions of the study. Although the session was conducted within a collective framework, the unit of analysis remained focused on individual experiences, ensuring that the richness of personal narratives was captured. Dancers shared insights into their evolving notions of masculinity, influenced by cultural expectations, ritual embodiment, and peer interactions.

As the focus group session unfolded, the Nagara dancers engaged in a discussion, revealing the complexities of their experiences with masculinity and ritual performance. Initially, the conversation was marked by a sense of mutual curiosity and hesitation, particularly when addressing societal perceptions of their craft. A participant's recollection of being accused of 'wanting to be a woman' for

embodying the Goddess sparked a candid discussion on the gendered nature of dance. Some laughed uneasily, while others expressed silent solidarity. Participants shared experiences of stigma, ridicule, and struggles with masculinity, yet all emphasised the empowerment gained through performance, highlighting how Nagara dance challenges societal norms and affirms identity. This exchange deepened the understanding of gender performativity within ritual spaces, reinforcing the transformative impact of dance.

The group dynamic fostered a sense of solidarity and learning. Younger dancers, initially reserved, became more vocal as they realised they were not alone in their experiences. The shared reflections sparked a collective recognition that masculinity, within the context of Nagara dance, was not rigid but fluid and deeply embodied. As the session concluded, a palpable shift was evident in the room - what had begun as an exploration of stigma and identity had transformed into a reaffirmation of self-acceptance and artistic legitimacy. The focus group not only provided deep reflections on the self but also illuminated the dancers' ongoing navigation of masculinity within their ritual practice, reinforcing the significance of communal discourse in understanding identity and performativity, which led to further responses beyond the focus group session.

4.6.2. Individual Follow-Up Interviews

While the focus group provided valuable insight into collective experiences, individual follow-up interviews were essential in capturing personal narratives with greater depth and nuance. According to Smith (2015), IPA requires detailed, first-person accounts to fully comprehend how individuals perceive their experiences. Interviews allowed participants to reflect without peer influence, offering more candid perspectives on how they define and navigate masculinity through ritual dance. This ensured that unique experiences were not overshadowed by dominant group dynamics (McMullen 2018), thereby enriching the study's exploration of gender performativity and identity formation within Nagara dance traditions.

The individual follow-up interviews incorporated all the participants who attended the focus session. In these interviews, in-depth discussions about the dancers' appearances, both as the embodiment of the Goddess and in their non-performance contexts (before and after Nagara performances), were noted. The research questions played a critical role in shaping the data analysis and methodological approach for this study. By using IPA, the study aimed to capture the subjective meanings that Nagara dancers attribute to their performances, as well as their understanding of masculinity and spiritual embodiment (Smith, 2015; McMullen, 2018). Their responses helped identify core themes related to self-expression, cultural identity, and performative agency within the context of ritual dance.

This approach provided a deeper understanding of the dancers' experiences, allowing them to speak without the judgment of other dancers and fostering a sense of affirmation and validation. Weber (2008) affirms this approach, emphasising the use of individual interviews in studies as a popular tool for gaining a deeper understanding of discussions. Weber (2008) further states that the ability of participants to convey multiple messages, pose questions, and express both abstract and concrete thoughts in a safe space creates an appropriate landscape for the communication of academic knowledge. Following the IPA framework, follow-up interviews were built on the initial focus group discussions, allowing dancers to share additional insights on masculinity in Nagara dance (Given, 2008). The trust established in group interactions made one-on-one conversations more open and reflective, ensuring rich narratives that deepened the study's analysis of ritual embodiment. The following section details the method of analysis beyond the data collection procedure.

4.7. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

To ensure a meaningful exploration of Nagara dancers' lived experiences, this study adopts Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which allows for interpretative depth, prioritising researcher reflexivity and context-driven meaning-making, essential for examining complex identity negotiations within ritual dance. Castleberry (2018) further enriches this framework by emphasising structural coherence and pattern identification across participant narratives.

RTA is described as a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data (i.e. text). The usage of RTA can enable researchers to quantify and analyse the presence, meanings, and relationships of certain words, themes, or concepts (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Clarke (2015) further describes RTA as a method of retrieving meaningful information from documents and spoken words, including how language is used in texts and contexts to make meaning of the responses, particularly in this study, where language (Hindi and Sanskrit) plays a vital role in understanding the rich history behind Nagara dance.

The data collection process, incorporating focus group discussions and individual follow-up interviews, provided rich insights into dancers' perceptions of masculinity, ritual embodiment, and religious dance. Focus groups fostered collective reflection, encouraging participants to engage with shared experiences, explore common themes, and articulate the social and cultural dimensions of gender within Nagara dance. The open conversational format allowed for candid discussions, which was essential given the sensitivities surrounding gender identity and religious performance (Braun and Clarke, 2006). To deepen individual narratives, semi-structured follow-up interviews complemented

the collective discussions, allowing participants to elaborate on their personal experiences in a more intimate setting (Castleberry, 2018:810).

This combination ensured the study captured both communal and personal interpretations, reinforcing the data collected in each process. Below is a visual representation of the phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2020).



Figure 6: Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2020). https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Phases-of-Reflexive-Thematic-Analysis-Braun-Clarke-2006-Braun-Clarke-2020_fig3_384081964 (Accessed: August 25 2024)

By integrating Braun and Clarke's (2020) RTA, which prioritises interpretative engagement, the study presents a comprehensive analytical framework that illustrates both individual and collective themes within the data. This methodological synthesis ensures rich, reflexive insights, guiding the next stage of the study's analytical process.

Castleberry (2019:807) confirms RTA as a method of analysing qualitative data, which is usually applied to a set of texts, such as interviews or transcripts. Castleberry (2019:807) further elaborates that the researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that repeatedly emerge. In summary, RTA provides a systematic and rigorous approach to analysing qualitative data, ensuring that research findings are grounded in participants' lived experiences and offer meaningful insights into the phenomenon under study. After compiling the transcribed data, Braun and Clarke's (2020) 6-phase method of RTA was employed.

Naeem et al. (2023) and Castleberry (2018) suggest that Braun and Clarke's (2020) 6-phases used within RTA ensure a systematic and rigorous approach. I have integrated these steps into the study as follows:

- Familiarisation with the Data The first step involved immersing myself in the data through repeated reading of the transcripts from both focus group discussions and individual interviews. This phase was crucial for developing a comprehensive understanding of the content and identifying initial patterns or areas of interest. Listening to the recordings multiple

times during transcription also enhanced familiarity with the narratives, enabling me to capture nuances in tone and context.

- Upon engaging the familiarisation technique, I began to generate the initial codes, which will be further detailed in the next chapter. The next step was to systematically code the significant features of the data. Using a manual coding process, recurring phrases, concepts, and experiences that were directly relevant to the research questions were highlighted. These initial codes served as building blocks for identifying broader themes. Examples of initial codes included 'embodiment of the Goddess', 'community expectations', and 'personal transformation'.
- Identifying themes, the initial codes were then clustered and organised into potential themes. This step involved identifying patterns and relationships between the codes to construct broader thematic categories. For example, codes related to ritual performance, gender fluidity, and personal identity were grouped under a potential theme, 'reclaiming masculinity through embodiment.'
- Once the themes were identified, the process of reviewing and refining them began. In this step, the identified themes were carefully examined to ensure they accurately represented the data and addressed the research objectives. Themes that lacked sufficient supporting evidence or overlapped with other themes were either refined or consolidated. This iterative process ensured that the themes remained grounded in the data while maintaining conceptual clarity.
- The next step involved defining and naming themes after finalising them. Each theme was then defined and named to reflect its essence. Descriptive names were assigned to communicate the key focus of each theme, such as 'Negotiating Masculinity in Ritual Spaces' and 'Sexuality and Identity'. This step also involved articulating the scope and focus of each theme in relation to the study's objectives.
- The final step is to write the report, which involves integrating the themes into a coherent narrative for the analysis chapter. Direct quotes from the participants were included to illustrate and validate the themes, ensuring the voices of the Nagara dancers were authentically represented. The thematic findings were further analysed in relation to existing literature and theoretical frameworks to provide critical insights into the navigation of masculinity within the context of Nagara dance.

RTA, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), ensures rigorous engagement with qualitative data by integrating researcher reflexivity into the analytical process. This approach enables a critical examination of assumptions, biases, and positionality, ensuring that findings remain grounded in

participants' lived experiences. By emphasising active meaning-making and inductive theme development, RTA captures the complexities of masculinity within Nagara dance, enabling a nuanced exploration of gender performativity and ritual embodiment. Braun and Clarke (2019) advocate for this iterative process as a means of producing rich insights into identity negotiation within cultural traditions.

Through systematic thematic coding and reflexive engagement with focus group discussions and interviews, RTA reinforces methodological integrity while remaining responsive to the fluidity of gender expression in Nagara performance. By positioning individual narratives within broader socio-cultural frameworks (Braun and Clarke, 2006), RTA provides a comprehensive lens for examining masculinity, embodiment, and identity within Hindu religious traditions. This approach not only enhances the depth of interpretation but also contributes to broader scholarly discussions on gender performativity and ritual dance, ensuring a rigorous and ethically sound analysis. The following section addresses ethical considerations, ensuring responsible engagement with participants and their lived experiences.

4.8. Ethical Considerations

This study acknowledges the ethical complexities of researching Nagara dancers, particularly in navigating participant availability, trust-building, and data confidentiality. As explained above, the dancers' freelance nature and demanding schedules required adaptability and sensitivity to their commitments when securing interviews and focus group sessions. Ethical engagement was prioritised through careful venue selection, informed consent, and the creation of a safe space for open dialogue on masculinity and ritual embodiment. Data confidentiality was ensured through secure storage and rigorous transcription methods.

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Research Ethics Committee, ensuring adherence to institutional guidelines on participant protection, informed consent, and confidentiality. The approval allowed the research to proceed with focus groups and individual follow-up interviews, maintaining ethical integrity while safeguarding the rights and welfare of Nagara dancers.

The focus group session was conducted in a neutral and accessible venue; the Resmount Primary school multi-purpose room was selected to ensure that participants felt at ease in a non-religious setting. The primary consideration in venue selection was to provide a quiet and peaceful setting, minimising external disturbances that could interfere with the voice recording of the session. The room was arranged in a circular seating format, facilitating direct engagement among participants.

Upon arrival, participants were presented with an informed consent form, which was verbally explained before they were asked to sign. These forms outlined the purpose, scope, and nature of their participation, ensuring that each dancer was adequately informed before proceeding with the discussion. Establishing this framework fostered a relationship of trust between the researcher and participants, reinforcing confidentiality and ethical integrity throughout the study.

Creating a safe space was prioritised, as participants needed to feel comfortable discussing their experiences. The focus group and individual follow-up interviews process was semi-structured to allow for follow-up questions related to any uncertain aspects of the outlined questions. The focus group and individual interviews were designed to align with the study's objectives, emphasising how Nagara dancers navigate masculinity within and beyond their performances.

The structured approach followed these key steps:

1. Ensuring a safe and inclusive environment, with participants confirming their informed consent through signed documentation.
2. Structuring the discussion and interview questions to align with the study's focus on masculinity, ritual embodiment, and gender performativity in Nagara dance.
3. Conducting debriefing sessions after the focus group and individual follow-up interviews, though participants did not indicate the need for psychological support, as the questions did not evoke distressing triggers.

Overall, this methodological framework ensured a rigorous and ethical approach, allowing participants to engage meaningfully while maintaining a respectful, supportive, and reflexive research environment.

4.8.1 Limitations

Working with Nagara dancers presented logistical challenges due to their demanding performance schedules and frequent bookings across Durban and its surrounding areas, which impacted their availability for interviews. Some dancers were hesitant to participate given the study's focus on masculinity and ritual embodiment, requiring careful facilitation to foster trust and openness. Despite these constraints, four experienced freelance dancers, each with over nine years in Nagara performance, were successfully engaged. Their freelancer status removed the need for a gatekeeper's letter, allowing them to participate in religious and cultural events as required. This dynamic highlights the complexity of studying freelance performers, reinforcing the need for flexibility in scheduling, ethical engagement, and a methodologically sound approach.

4.9. Trustworthiness, Reliability, and Rigour

Ensuring trustworthiness, reliability, and rigour in qualitative research requires adherence to fundamental ethical principles, including respect for participants, transparent communication, and responsible data handling (Bird, 2011). Since qualitative inquiry inherently involves subjectivity, minimising bias is essential for maintaining scientific integrity. RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2006) strengthens rigour by integrating researcher reflexivity, allowing for critical engagement with data while acknowledging positionality. This approach promotes transparent reporting and ensures methodological coherence, reinforcing the credibility and depth of research findings.

Objectivity is crucial for producing robust and trustworthy results. Strategies such as rigorous methodologies, peer review, and clear documentation help mitigate subjectivity while fostering scientific impartiality. Incorporating RTA into the study facilitates the systematic exploration of participant narratives, supporting ongoing reflection by researchers to refine interpretations and prevent assumptions from distorting lived experiences. Additionally, ethical integrity is upheld through confidentiality measures, ensuring secure data management and respecting the autonomy of Nagara dancers when discussing masculinity and ritual embodiment.

This research design provides a framework adaptable to other studies, offering a structured and reflexive approach that enhances analytical depth while maintaining ethical responsibility. By following these rigorous methodological standards, the study contributes to broader scholarly discussions on gender performativity, embodiment, and identity. My positionality and reflexivity further strengthen the validity and reliability of my findings, as examined in the next section.

4.10. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

My strong passion for the arts and dance entertainment has inspired this study, enabling me to position myself as both a performer and a researcher. I have been in the South African entertainment industry for more than a decade. Most of the performances I am involved in do not include any Nagara-based performances; however, I own a dance production company that mainly provides entertainment for Indian weddings and *Mehndi* (Henna) functions. On occasion, I participate in religious dance festivals. As a result, this research study is personal. As Carol Hanisch (1969) says, “The personal is political”.

Exploring reflexivity as a set of mutually interrelated processes and practices involving the reflexive thinking, doing, and evaluating of qualitative research. Understanding the researcher’s positionality provides insights into debates surrounding the theory and practice of reflexivity, and argues that the

researcher's epistemological assumptions underpin these. Holmes (2020:1) indicates that the importance of knowing your own positionality shapes the design of the research:

Master's and PhD student researchers in the social sciences are often required to explore and explain their positionality, as, in the social world, it is recognised that their ontological and epistemological beliefs influence their research.

My positionality is an essential component of this study, as I am a 32-year-old Indian man and identify as a member of the LGBTQ community. I was brought up in a Hindu home and have experienced many ritual practices and performances, one of which is Nagara dancing. Having viewed Nagara performances on numerous occasions and possessing knowledge of the historical nature of Nagara, my experiences with the performative aspect of Nagara served as the starting point of this study. In addition, I have a family member and many friends who are Nagara dancers. Given that I am entering the Nagara circle as a Hindu male dancer, bracketing my experiences and opinions will be an essential aspect of my role as a researcher. Constant reflection will be necessary to ensure that my subjective positionality does not influence the analysis method.

Reflexivity is a fundamental principle in ethical research, particularly when engaging with unique cultural and ritualistic communities, such as Nagara dancers. It requires researchers to engage in critical self-awareness and continuous self-assessment, reflecting on how their perspectives may shape the design, implementation, and interpretation of research findings. Berger (2015) emphasises that the primary objective of reflexivity is to acknowledge and critically evaluate potential researcher biases, ensuring that they do not compromise the integrity of the study. In qualitative research, reflexivity can serve different purposes, depending on the epistemological approach. At the same time, some methodologies aim to minimise bias, while others leverage researcher perspectives as a central tool for knowledge construction.

RTA enhances objectivity by encouraging researchers to critically engage with their positionality, minimising bias through continuous self-reflection (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This approach acknowledges the interpretative nature of qualitative research while ensuring transparency in the decision-making process (Braun and Clark, 2023). By systematically analysing data and recognising researcher influence, RTA fosters methodological rigour, allowing for nuanced interpretations that remain grounded in participant experiences, thereby reinforcing credibility and ethical integrity in qualitative inquiry (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Dodgson (2019) emphasises the importance of reflexivity in qualitative research, as it is inherently dependent on participant narratives and researcher-led inquiries. Given that qualitative data collection often involves discussions and interviews, the researcher's subjective positioning can

influence how questions are framed and how responses are interpreted. Recognising this challenge, I will employ triangulation theory as a methodological safeguard against subjectivity and bias. Given (2008) states that triangulation requires researchers to validate interpretations by incorporating multiple data sources, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of findings. By cross-referencing data from focus groups, interviews, and additional supporting sources, this study ensures academic rigour, allowing for a more balanced and comprehensive representation of Nagara dancers' experiences. This approach strengthens the validity of qualitative inquiry while reinforcing an ethical commitment to objectivity and reflexive engagement, particularly in the study of gender performativity within Hindu ritual practices.

4.11. Conclusion

Chapter 4 has laid the groundwork for a careful and thoughtful exploration of how Nagara dancers make sense of their masculinity through ritual performance. Rather than relying on large datasets, this chapter affirms that depth, nuance, and trust are central to qualitative research, particularly when engaging with culturally sacred practices. While working with four participants might seem limited on the surface, it is entirely appropriate, and even ideal, within the IPA approach, which values rich, detailed narratives over statistical breadth. These participants brought with them not only years of experience but deep personal insight into the emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions of Nagara dancing.

By combining phenomenology, IPA, and RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2019), the chapter demonstrates how gender, identity, and embodiment are not only researched but also felt through methodological care and reflexivity. The methods used here include focus groups, individual follow-up interviews, and iterative coding. These were not just tools for gathering data, but also encounters that allowed dancers to speak, be heard, and see themselves reflected in the research.

With this solid methodological foundation in place, the study now turns to the next chapter, where the participants' voices take centre stage. Their stories, shaped by ritual, resistance, beauty, and a sense of belonging, become the heart of the analysis. This next chapter will present the data thematically, allowing us to see how masculinity is negotiated, affirmed, and sometimes reinvented through the embodied artistry of Nagara dancing.

5. CHAPTER 5 - Data Presentation

5.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to present the narratives of the Nagara dancers. Noting that there is no research or literature on Nagara dancers in South Africa, providing a space for them to share their thoughts and reflections on embodying the Goddess Sarawasti was a unique opportunity for them to offer insight into their devotional performances.

In order for the dancers to share their dancing realities, a focus group discussion was held with four Nagara dancers, followed by individual face-to-face interviews with each of the four, to explore the following research sub-questions:

1. How is Gender portrayed within the performance of Nagara dances?
2. How do Nagara dancers define and navigate masculinity through ritual dance?
3. How, and in what ways, does Hindu Ritual dance open a more nuanced and embodied conception of Masculinity among Nagara dancers?

As such, this chapter presents the narratives of the dancers, facilitating an exploration of their positionalities and lived realities within a prevalent yet niche religious ritual in the Durban Indian diaspora. Although these narratives are a snapshot representation or sample of the Nagara dance scene, they do not necessarily represent the shared reality of all Nagara dancers. Nonetheless, the narratives provide an articulation for the meaning-making of their lived religion, while recognising that Nagara dance is not merely a cultural performance but a ritualised, affective practice through which masculinities are redefined and reconstructed.

Furthermore, this chapter will present the main findings of the study in relation to the key research objectives. The chapter is organised in the following way: the first section provides an overview of the participants' demographics, and the second section summarises the participants' responses into relevant themes that relate to the research sub-questions.

5.2. Profile of Participants

As illustrated in Table 4.1 on page 78 in the Research Methodology chapter, the participants were four self-identified Indian South African Hindu men, aged between thirty-two and seventy years, who had all been actively engaged in Nagara dance groups. Their Nagara careers spanned eight to fifty-six years of performance experience, with their introductory years into Nagara ranging from early adolescence,

at the age of fourteen, to young adulthood, at the age of twenty-six. The older participants 1 and 2 began their training at an early age (14 and 15 years, respectively), reflecting the deep-rooted traditional ideologies that emphasised the importance of immersing oneself in cultural practices from a young age. This early exposure allowed them to internalise the rhythms, movements, and spiritual significance of the dance, building a foundation of confidence that came from years of practice and cultural affirmation. In contrast, participants 3 and 4, who began later in life (at 25 and 26 years, respectively), presented a lack of ingrained familiarity and confidence, as they missed the formative years of gradual skill acquisition and cultural immersion. Starting later might also reflect a shift in societal priorities or a waning emphasis on preserving traditional practices, highlighting generational differences in how cultural values are transmitted and embraced.

Participant 1's extensive knowledge, spanning 56 years, aligns with the values prevalent during earlier decades, where he explains that traditional practices were often prioritised, and children were encouraged to engage in cultural activities to preserve their heritage. Social norms likely emphasised the importance of starting young to master skills deeply rooted in communal identity, fostering confidence and lifelong dedication to the craft. Similarly, Participant 2, who began at 15 years old, reflects the lingering influence of these traditional expectations, albeit at a time when the world was gradually modernising and diversifying priorities.

In contrast, Participants 3 and 4, starting at ages 25 and 26, respectively, reveal a divergence from earlier norms. This later initiation into Nagara dancing indicates evolving societal priorities, where cultural practices may no longer hold the same immediate urgency as they once did. Instead, these individuals might have pursued the art form out of personal interest or a rediscovery of their heritage, rather than adhering to generational traditions. This shift also reflects modern pressures, such as career and educational pursuits, or broader societal changes, which can delay engagement in cultural activities. As Participant 4 stated, he needed to complete his degree and find a job before becoming a Nagara dancer as a weekend hobby. In addition, the confidence of these later starters may not stem from prolonged cultural immersion, but rather from personal resilience and adaptability as they took up dancing later in life. These patterns unequivocally illustrate that societal expectations and individual circumstances are not peripheral but central in shaping both the timing of cultural participation and the intensity of engagement, signalling profound generational shifts in how traditions are lived and transmitted.

The participants resided in historically Indian residential suburbs of Phoenix, Asherville, and Newlands in the city of Durban. The geographic locations of the participants (Phoenix, Asherville and Newlands

in Durban) offer insights into Nagara dancing and its cultural significance in these areas. As noted by Singh (2016:NP), the introduction of Nagara dance to South Africa can be traced back to the arrival of indentured labourers in 1860. During this period, Indian communities were formed, and cultural practices such as Nagara dancing were preserved and maintained as integral components of their heritage. These neighbourhoods, situated in Durban, are home to vibrant Indian communities where the preservation of cultural heritage remains a cornerstone of social identity. The Nagara dancers represent localised efforts to maintain and celebrate such traditions. Each area has its unique approach to fostering community involvement, reflecting the diverse dynamics within Durban's Indian diaspora.

Phoenix, for instance, has historical ties to the establishment of Nagara dance as a prominent cultural activity, nurturing Nagara groups like Flash Entertainers that bring people together through shared performances. Meanwhile, Durban's connection to Flash Entertainers highlights the evolving participation in the art form, indicating the expansion of traditional practices into new settings. These locations not only serve as physical spaces for dance but also act as cultural hubs where heritage, identity, and artistic expression thrive in modern-day South Africa. This demonstrates how regional engagement adapts and continues to resonate within the framework of Nagara dancing across generations.

Two participants identified as heterosexual and two as homosexual. While they shared a common cultural and religious heritage, their perspectives reflected a generational and sexual diversity that enriched the study. The oldest participant, a grandson of the indentured labourers, tended to reference inherited traditions, discipline, and ritual, while younger and queer-identifying dancers emphasised creativity, audience interaction, and gender fluidity. This divergence highlighted differing interpretations of masculinity, yet all four participants articulated a shared understanding of Nagara dancing as a spiritually affirming and culturally rooted practice.

The intersection of sexuality and location reveals an evolving dynamic that impacts both personal identity and traditional frameworks within Nagara dancing. Participants 1 and 2, as older heterosexual individuals, align with longstanding cultural norms that historically emphasised conformity to heteronormative expectations. In contrast, Participants 3 and 4, as younger homosexual dancers, reflect a growing acceptance and celebration of diverse sexual identities within the Nagara dance space. This diversity illustrates how Nagara dancing has become a platform where tradition intersects with modern expressions of individuality.

The diversity of ages, sexual orientations, and performance styles illustrated in Table 4.1 not only reflected the dynamic and inclusive nature of Nagara but also highlighted how cultural, religious, and gendered identities intersect in the lives of its practitioners. The dual representation of heterosexual and homosexual dancers further emphasised the tradition's capacity to accommodate multiple forms of gender expression and personal devotion.

Being South African adds another dimension to their shared experience, as they embody the intersection of Indian cultural heritage with South African societal dynamics. As members of the Indian diaspora, their participation in Nagara dancing reflects a collective effort to sustain cultural practices and maintain a connection to their ancestral roots in the face of historical and contemporary challenges. The practice of Hinduism further solidifies this commonality, as it imbues their dancing with spiritual significance, grounding their performances in religious devotion and cultural celebration. These shared traits enable the dancers to find camaraderie within their careers, as they have performed together at some point during their time together before becoming freelance performers.

The data portrays how Nagara dancing serves as both a cultural expression and a social bridge, enabling individuals to connect through shared values and experiences while celebrating their unique identities within the broader context of their heritage, as highlighted by Singh (2016:NP). Their performances extended from temple festivals, weddings and community prayers to charity events, thus offering diverse insights into embodying *Saraswati* across varying contexts.

5.3 Overview of Proceedings

The focus group session took place on a single day, 11 November 2023, at Resmount Primary school in a predominantly Indian diasporic suburb of Durban, South Africa. The research process was firmly rooted in ethical and participant-centred methodologies that sought to prioritise dignity, voice, and relational care. Conscious of the power dynamics embedded in qualitative inquiry, I approached the data collection as a co-created space rather than a neutral extraction of information. The goal was not just to elicit responses, but to cultivate a shared atmosphere where vulnerability, reflection, and embodied truth could surface naturally.

Data collection was conducted in November 2023. Instead of a 1-hour session, the discussions lasted 2 hours, with very in-depth data being collected. Semi-structured individual follow-up interviews followed this on the same day. The focus group was more than a gathering of debate; it was conceived as a conversation between dancers reflecting on their collective experiences. I began by welcoming participants into the space with genuine warmth, ensuring that each individual felt recognised and

heard. Special attention was paid to the pronunciation of participants' names, signalling respect for cultural identity and linguistic integrity. Ground rules were co-articulated with participants and framed around mutual respect, active listening, and non-judgment. The setting was intentionally informal, with participants seated in a circle and refreshments nearby, to mirror the engagement found backstage at Nagara performances.

One of the standout moments of the session emerged when I asked, "How were the dance gigs this weekend?" Some participants described the events as tiring, while others found them neutral. I then asked, "It must be tiring to dress up with all those heavy skirts and make-up?" This question sparked a conversation as they shared what makes dressing up easier and shared tips, starting to recognise dressing up as an authentic part of being a Nagara dancer. Others drew a more defined line, describing the Nagara persona as a sacred channel that exists only within the ritual context, and that dressing up must be done for the sake of *Kirtan*. These responses set the tone for deeper explorations of identity multiplicity, performance as transformation beyond fixed binaries.

The focus group transitioned into open-ended questions that explored participants' initiation into Nagara, the spiritual and affective dimensions of their dance practice, and how they navigate visibility, judgment, and reverence in both sacred and social contexts. Themes of tradition, the history of Nagara dancing, devotional labour, audience recognition, and intergenerational friction surfaced throughout the conversation. The most notable theme was how the participants transformed into the living embodiment of the Goddess, explaining in detail how they observed strict fasting periods and prepared as a group in preparation for performances.

The one-on-one interviews that followed built upon the trust established in the focus group. These were conducted in a quiet, private setting, on a bench outside the classroom, away from the other participants. These conversations allowed participants to speak at their own pace, often venturing into deeply personal and theoretical terrain. Responses ranged from autobiographical memory to spiritual theory, revealing how Nagara dancing is experienced not only as a performance but as a mode of being. When asked whether they would still perform if the religious framework were removed, most dancers affirmed that the aesthetic, affective, and self-affirming qualities of Nagara would persist, an insight that blurred the distinction between the sacred and the secular in compelling ways.

Each session concluded with a deliberate moment of closure, during which I checked in on participants' emotional well-being, reminded them of the optional debriefing services, and expressed sincere thanks for their time and openness. These gestures reinforced the ethical ethos of the research, ensuring that participation felt like sharing, not surrender.

5.4. Formulation of Themes

The thematic structure of this chapter was developed through a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach, as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This method was selected for its flexibility and capacity to engage meaningfully with complex, experiential data, particularly in contexts where identity, performance, and spirituality intersect. RTA acknowledges that themes do not passively emerge from the data but are actively constructed by the researcher, through a recursive, interpretive engagement shaped by theoretical frameworks and reflexive awareness.

The process began with repeated immersion in the transcripts of both the focus group and individual interviews. This stage was characterised by close, embodied reading, allowing for an intuitive and emotional connection with participant narratives. Early coding focused on the semantic content, that is, what participants explicitly stated about masculinity, identity, ritual, and perception. However, as the process evolved, more latent patterns became visible, where meaning was drawn from tone, contradiction, and affect, as well as the interplay between what was said and what was implied.

Throughout the process, I maintained a reflective stance, journaling impressions, questions, and tensions that surfaced during the interpretation. This reflexivity was especially critical given the personal and spiritual depth of the data and the intersectional identities being shared. Rather than striving for thematic objectivity, I embraced the co-constructed nature of meaning, recognising my own cultural and academic positioning within the analytic process. Ritualised Femininity as Gender Expansion: This concept encompassed all the subquestions, as it addressed the experiences of change and the efforts made over the years of dancing. These themes were then refined by testing them against the whole data corpus, ensuring they captured both breadth and depth. The resulting themes were not exhaustive categories, but fluid and porous zones of meaning, each illuminating a particular dimension of how Nagara dancers negotiate masculinity through ritual performance.

The final themes derived from the first subquestion: *How is Gender portrayed within the performance of Nagara dances?* Include: Duality and Identity Integration, Masculinity Through Devotion and Discipline, Nagara Dancers' Understanding of Masculinity, and Femininity in Nagara Dancing. The second subquestion: *How do Nagara dancers define and navigate masculinity through ritual dance?* Derived the following themes: Embodied Vulnerability and Sacred Labour, Reclaiming Masculinity in Feminised Spaces, Sacred Performance vs Spectacle, and Sexuality and Misrecognition. Lastly, the third and final subquestion: *How, and in what ways, does Hindu Ritual dance open a more nuanced and embodied conception of Masculinity among Nagara dancers?* Although this question was the focus of the individual interviews, three standout themes were derived: Collective Identity and

Community Belonging, Diasporic Memory and Ancestral Continuity, and Mentorship, Kinship, and Nurturance. These themes are presented in this chapter, reflecting not only what participants said but also how they made sense of their experiences and how those meanings intersect with broader cultural, spiritual, and gendered structures. Each theme is presented in the sections that follow, interwoven with participant quotations and theoretical reflection. Together, they offer a textured account of how masculinity is not merely performed within Nagara dance, but reimagined, ritualised, and embodied. The themes derived from the data supported the research subquestions as follows.

5.4.1. How is Gender portrayed within the performance of Nagara dances?

After setting the scene for the focus group session, I initiated the discussion by asking the first question. However, before any responses were given to the question, participants 1 and 2 felt it necessary to include their historical recollections of how they remembered Nagara dancing. Their input on the history provided interesting and rich details; however, as this does not relate to the research focus, I will give some insight in my final chapter. The first question aimed to understand how Nagara dancers perceive gender within the dance space, whether for religious or other entertainment purposes. In response to the question, *From your perspective, how is gender portrayed within Nagara dancing as a religious practice?*, I share the following quotes:

“When we dance, we feel like we’re becoming the Goddess herself. It’s not just a performance; it’s a spiritual connection that fills you with her power and love.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

“I don’t dress as a woman to attract attention, I do it to channel the divine, so others recognise me as a Goddess.”

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

“Gender is not the only thing. I have faith. I wear what I wear for the Goddess, not to be seen as a woman or man.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

“When I dance as the Mother, I am not being a man or anything. I can’t explain this feeling.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

Their responses collectively reveal a powerful theme of sacred ritual embodiment, in which Nagara dancers perceive their performances not as acts of gender impersonation but as transformative rituals rooted in devotion. Across all four narratives, the dancers articulate that their embrace of feminine aesthetics, whether in dress, movement, or persona, is not for spectacle or entertainment, but to channel the divine presence of the Goddess. Gender, in this context, becomes secondary to spiritual

intentionality; what matters most is the authentic offering of self through ritual. Participant reflections highlight that the act of becoming the Goddess dissolves conventional binaries, enabling dancers to transcend the material constraints of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. This profound sense of spiritual identification led me to ask: *How, then, do dancers reconcile or transition between these ritual identities and their day-to-day understanding of themselves as men in broader society?*

“When I wear a Sari and make-up, I know I’m performing for the Mother... I am still a man, and I cannot take that away; me being a man is upheld by my wife and children.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

“People don’t understand that we change into the Mother as respect. But when we leave the stage, we are who we are in everyday life. It doesn’t confuse us, it’s part of the show.”

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

“Our movements are part of the Mother, but when the music stops, I go home, I take off the Sari, and I’m back to being just me. Both are real.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

“Now, preparing for a performance, taking a bath, doing my make-up, fasting and going to work, it has become part of my life. It’s just another side of me.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

These responses illustrate a theme of embodied duality, in which Nagara dancers seamlessly inhabit both ritual and everyday masculine selves without perceiving contradiction. Participants articulate a conscious and fluid transition between their identities, stepping into the Goddess during sacred performance and returning to their daily roles as men with clarity and composure. Rather than fragmenting their sense of self, this shift is integrated into their rhythm of life, becoming a routine, a ritual, and an extension of who they are. The sacred persona assumed in performance is not seen as destabilising masculinity but as expanding its possibilities, allowing dancers to embrace softness, beauty, and spiritual intensity while remaining anchored in their everyday realities. This understanding of self leads to a more nuanced inquiry: *How do you manage the two personas that you assume, 1) as a man, and 2) as a Nagara dancer, and how do you think people view you after Nagara performances?*

“You see, when I put on the Sari and make-up, it’s not like I’m pretending to be someone I’m not. That time is for the Goddess. But when I finish dancing, I’m back to being me, the father, the husband, the man who goes to temple and looks after the family. People look at us and think, ‘he’s confused’ or ‘he’s not a real man’. But what they don’t know is that it takes more guts to stand on that stage, hold that space, and still be respected in your own home. I’ve been doing this my whole life. I don’t separate the two, I just carry them both.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

“I’ve learned how to keep the balance. When I dress and dance, I do it properly, with full intention. That’s for the prayer. But after that, I take everything off and carry on like normal. My family knows who I am. But you get some uncles and all who’ll clap for you and then turn around and say things like, ‘eh, he’s dressing like a woman’. So what? I’m still a man, still providing, still leading. This dancing doesn’t make me less. If anything, it makes me more grounded.”

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

“To be honest, growing up, I always felt a bit different, like I didn’t fit that ‘strong, silent man’ image. But when I started Nagara, something shifted. When I perform, I feel whole. On stage, I can be graceful and powerful at the same time. Off stage, I’m back in my jeans, chilling with the boys or going to work. It’s not like I’m changing masks—it’s all me. But yes, some people still stare, say nonsense, and act awkward. I don’t entertain that. I know who I am.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

“Look, I’ll be honest, when I first started performing, I was nervous about how people will see me. But after a while, it just became part of my life. Putting on make-up, draping the Sari—it’s like brushing my teeth now. It’s just another part of me. I know when I’m performing, I step into something sacred. But when it’s done, I pack away my things, and I go home. Ja, people will always have something to say. One day they’re clapping, the next day they’re gossiping. But I’ve learnt: you can’t dance for them-you-you dance for yourself and for the Mother.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

These reflections construct a clear theme of Nagara as a lifestyle, not as a role temporarily assumed, but as a devotional mode of being that integrates seamlessly into everyday life. For these men, the dancer and the father, the performer and the provider, are not contradictory identities, but co-existing dimensions of self. Dressing as the Goddess, performing in sacred spaces, and returning to daily life is not framed as a rupture, but a rhythm, where devotion, masculinity, and selfhood cycle through one another. The ritual persona does not destabilise their sense of manhood; it deepens it. Over time, this practice becomes intuitive, almost habitual, where “putting on the Sari” feels as natural as “brushing your teeth.” Yet, within this integration lies something more intangible, an inner shift, a sacred becoming. This leads to the following question: *When you embody the Goddess, what emotions do you experience during the performance?*

“When doing Kirtan, I feel so powerful and as much as we get people who look at us as men wanting to be women, I don’t feel their judgments when I perform, because of the power of becoming the mother Goddess.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

“When I dance, it is an offering - not just to the Gods but to my sense of self as a man.”

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

“When I perform Nagara dancing during Kirtan, I feel closer to the divine, embodying a strength and courage I never knew I had.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

“When I dance as an offering to the divine, I don’t feel bound by being a man or anything else; I feel free.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

The dancers’ reflections crystallise a compelling theme of ritual embodiment, where sacred performance becomes not just a symbolic act but a profound transformation of self. For each participant, *Kirtan* is far more than choreography; it’s a devotional state through which they feel spiritually charged, emotionally expanded, and intimately connected to the divine. The body becomes a vessel: not simply for feminine adornment or aesthetic movement, but for invoking the presence of the Goddess. In this liminal space, normative boundaries of gender dissolve. What might appear to outsiders as mimicry or theatricality is, for these performers, an act of prayer, immersed in power, beauty, and grace. Several dancers describe a shift in energy, a boldness, a sense of wholeness they rarely access outside ritual. For them, *Kirtan* embodies a sacred space, freeing them from the constraints of masculinity while simultaneously affirming their sense of manhood through vulnerability, reverence, and presence. This depth of experience draws attention to *Kirtan* itself, not just as a context for transformation, but as a ritual that enables this altered state of embodiment. This leads to the subsequent inquiry: *What does Kirtan mean to you personally, and how do you experience it as a ritual, not just a performance?*

“For Kirtan, I participate for various reasons. Some of us take vows, while others do it for joy and happiness, inviting people to become themselves spiritually when they are together.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

“Kirtan is the religious form of Nagara, and there is an aspect to it which shows all the mother Goddesses coming as one to bless the people.”

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

Participant 3 responded by referring to Participant 1 as the eldest to explain *Kirtan* fully.

“The reason for the woman’s role is that she represents Lakshmi Mata. When we perform the Lakshmi Mata prayer, we offer money, rice, flowers, betel nuts, betel leaves - anything that may be considered appropriate - fulfilling what we call the Mother’s blessings, which are then consumed as part of the ritual. In some Nagara groups, it’s said that observers give money to the Kirtan dancer to contribute money as part of the aarti. The rule is that the money must be placed in the ‘aarti’ tray, representing a kind of power; if it’s thrown aside, that power is lost. A woman from the household sits in the designated spot. She opens the scarf and fills it with

five handfuls of rice along with money, flowers, or other offerings. She then lights the camphor on a tray and hands it to the dancer. Once this is done, the music begins, the singing starts, and the dancer begins his performance.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

These quotes together offer a layered articulation of ritual embodiment in *Kirtan*, demonstrating how gendered roles within the performance are not only symbolic but also materially and spiritually enacted. Participant 4's reflection frames *Kirtan* as a space of personal and communal spiritual entry, where dancers commit to ritual either through vows or for emotional and devotional fulfilment. This view emphasises the porous boundary between the individual self and the sacred, reinforcing the notion that the embodiment of the Goddess is not a performative spectacle, but a deeply felt act of presence and participation.

Participant 2 then invokes the cosmological dimension of *Kirtan*, describing it as a moment when “all the mother Goddesses come as one to bless the people.” Here, the performance becomes a convergence of divine femininities, where the dancer is not simply embodying a single deity, but channelling a collective, cosmic power. This elevates the act beyond aesthetics; it is ritual embodiment, a conduit for divine grace offered to the community. Participant 1's detailed description deepens the understanding of gendered ritual. The strict protocol involving a woman from the household performing the preparatory *aarti*, placing rice, money, and other offerings in the scarf before lighting the camphor, illustrates how women participate not as dancers but as ritual anchors, enabling the male dancer's transformation into the Goddess. Her role in initiating the ritual mirrors the maternal blessings of Lakshmi Mata, suggesting that while men perform the divine feminine, women ground the ritual in its devotional legitimacy. The placement of offerings in the tray and the emphasis on doing so correctly signal that the ritual choreography between male embodiment and female ritual authority upholds the sanctity of *Kirtan*.

Together, these perspectives demonstrate how ritual, with its distinctly gendered spiritual roles, scaffolds the notion of embodiment. Men become vessels for the Goddess through public performance, while women, often unseen in the spotlight, fulfil essential ritual gestures that activate the sanctity of the event. This interplay sets the stage for further inquiry into how such gendered sacred transactions shape Nagara identity and belonging. At this point in the investigations, I was intrigued by the gendered roles and further asked about the role of women and why women should not be allowed to dance for *Kirtan*.

“In our house, we observe a different kind of fasting. Very strict! For example, the dancer must fast strictly, and no physical contact with a woman is allowed during the time. Even though I

am married, my wife is not permitted to hand me my coat when I go out. Likewise, I make sure not to enter the kitchen as I get ready - any contact is considered a break of our ritual purity. My Mother used to stand by, ensuring that all of our protocols were followed correctly. We also have the ritual of applying 'haldi' water on our bodies before leaving the house for performances. When I return, the 'haldi' water and the lamp water are kept by the doorway, and regardless of what time it is, my Mother collects the lamp water to dispose of it and then gathers the 'haldi' water."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

This quote invites multiple interpretations. Firstly, it is not the presence of women that inherently compromises ritual purity. Rather, Participant 1's decision to avoid physical contact with his wife during the fasting period reflects a personal commitment to maintaining strict abstinence. His actions are not indicative of a belief in female impurity. Still, rather a self-imposed discipline aimed at preventing any form of sexual arousal or distraction that might disrupt the sanctity of his ritual preparation. Participant 1 offers a rich insight into the embodied discipline and gendered ritual framework underlying Nagara performance, highlighting a key theme: masculinity as an embodied form of discipline. The dancer's preparation is not only physical, but also deeply spiritual, encompassing acts such as fasting and purification, including the application of *haldi* water. These practices reflect a worldview in which ritual purity is tightly linked to spiritual authority and gendered embodiment, upheld through generational matriarchal oversight as the nurturer (the Mother enforcing protocols) and patriarchal values around restraint and control.

The quote also reveals how masculinity in this context is not about domination or public assertiveness, but about ritual containment, moral integrity, and religious responsibility. Despite the external performance of femininity, the dancer's masculinity is reinforced through rigorous discipline, abstention, and adherence to codes of sacred conduct. What is striking is how these practices reassert male ritual authority, not through force, but through submission to structured devotion. His role, though outwardly feminised in performance, is legitimated through these internalised masculine features: self-control, sacrifice, and purity.

This sets the tone for the next analytical movement in the study: exploring how dancers reclaim and reinterpret masculinity through ritual practices, affective embodiment, and performances that transcend hegemonic definitions of manhood. But I had to ask if women could perform *Kirtan*? This question was not intended, but the responses were very interesting, particularly from Participant 1.

"No, no women. Only men. Okay, as I said earlier, in the old days, both men and women did Nagara Dancing. Women played female roles, and men played male roles. But then something happened - some confusion or incident that the elders disapproved of. So, they decided to separate men and women."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

“Well, I heard of situations where someone’s wife was involved with someone else. They fell in love during performances, and the elders couldn’t tolerate it because respect was so important. They couldn’t act together because there was a risk of romantic involvement. And I heard that a man had an affair with someone’s wife who was performing with him. Happened long ago, and I only know the story from others. That’s why men and women were separated.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

“My grandmother used to tell me stories of how women danced alongside men in Nagara rituals. She described it as a time when the energy felt balanced - men embodied the strength of the divine, and women channelled its grace.”

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

“Women were seen as distractions, not because they lacked skill but because their presence could disrupt the focus and discipline required for such a sacred performance.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

These participant reflections construct a theme of gendered separation in Nagara performance, rooted not in theological prohibition but in the social policing of discipline, desire, and perceived respectability. Participant 1 recalls a shift from gender inclusivity to segregation, citing an unspecified “incident” that provoked elders to exclude women from active participation. Participant 3 elaborates on this by referencing rumours of romantic entanglements that threatened the ritual’s integrity, where a dancer’s affair with another performer’s wife became a cautionary tale. These accounts suggest that the decision to separate men and women was less about doctrinal purity and more about controlling interpersonal boundaries, where the fear of emotional or sexual distraction became justification for institutional change.

Participant 2 offers a poignant counter-memory, passed down through his grandmother, where men and women once co-performed Nagara in harmony, embodying complementary aspects of the divine. This evokes a ritual past in which gendered embodiment was not oppositional but symbiotic, with men offering strength and women offering grace, both contributing to a balanced spiritual dynamic.

Yet, as Participant 4 notes, this balance was later reframed through a disciplinary gaze: women, however capable, came to be seen as “distractions.” This framing transforms the female presence from sacred collaborator to potential threat, reinforcing patriarchal anxieties about male focus, control, and ritual authority. What emerges is a historically contingent movement that reflects broader cultural dynamics around purity, propriety, and power. This context of separation sets the

stage for more profound questions about how masculinity itself has evolved in the absence of women performers: *If men now portray the divine feminine in isolation, how does that shape their own gender identities, responsibilities, and ritual authority within the Nagara tradition?*

"I know from what my father told me, that because of the menstrual cycle, Hindu tradition in India mandates a 40-day fasting period. I think if a similar 40-day period applies after childbirth, then that custom is also observed only in cases of death. In death, the observance of 40 days is maintained, as death needs a mourning time. Forty days is for childbirth (in some houses), but in our house, we use the 40-day period for mourning after death. Since women get their menstrual cycle once a month, a period that does not add up to 40 days, priests says that women should observe a 40-day fasting cycle with each period. Because the cycle always happen and they can't fulfil the 40 days, this is what I think the reason why women should participate in mass Kirtan fasting, but not dancing. These practices must be followed to do Nagara the right way."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"The women in my community used to perform in the temple during festivals. I've only ever heard about it, but the way people describe it, their movements were as powerful as their male counterparts, just expressed differently. Women started Nagara dancing, with their own musicians and dancers. They even had their own instruments, like the drums. The singer would narrate stories, like Hindu tales, in a sequence. One woman would rise, dressed in a white 'langa' (the underskirt of a Sari) and begin singing and dancing. Eventually, the dancers were removed from the scene as no other women were brave enough to carry on the tradition. I once saw Indian women dancing - my uncle's Mother and her two sisters. It was a beautiful sight, like a flower in bloom. But beyond that, I don't know much."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

These reflections reveal how deeply gendered ritual restrictions, particularly surrounding purity, menstruation, and fasting, were instrumental in justifying the separation of women from Nagara dancing. Participant 1 refers to inherited beliefs, rooted in interpretations of Hindu tradition, which conflate menstrual cycles with spiritual uncleanliness. The inability to fulfil an uninterrupted 40-day fasting cycle becomes a rationale for excluding women from sacred performance, while still allowing them to participate in peripheral roles such as collective fasting. These beliefs underscore a ritual logic that ties feminine biology to disqualification, marking male bodies as more consistently 'pure' and therefore more eligible to host the divine on stage. Participant 2's memory, however, speaks to a lost heritage of female performance, one that was vibrant, embodied, and community-rooted. Yet despite their skill and presence, women gradually disappeared from the Nagara space, not because of theological invalidation, but due to social and cultural erosion. The 'bravery' to continue was lost under mounting restrictions.

With women removed, men assumed full custodianship of both masculine and feminine ritual roles. This shift opened a new terrain for masculine identity to evolve, not in opposition to femininity, but through the ritual embodiment of it. This leads us to explore the next section on how the participants review and understand their masculinity. This subquestion produced the following key themes: Ritual Embodiment as Gender Expansion, Nagara Dancers' Understanding of Masculinity, Masculinity Through Devotion and Discipline, Duality and Identity Integration, and Women and Nagara Dancing.

5.4.2. How do Nagara dancers define and navigate masculinity through ritual dance?

The participants' responses indicate that masculinity, within the ritual framework of Nagara dancing, is neither diminished nor contradicted; instead, it is actively reconfigured through practices of discipline, devotional commitment, and embodied vulnerability. This study attends to three critical dimensions in the conceptualisation of masculinity: its performance within broader social contexts, its articulation through embodied ritual practice, and its negotiation across temporal states of transformation. Notably, for these participants, embodying the Goddess is not perceived as a negation of masculinity, but rather as an extension and deepening of it. This perspective prompted a deeper inquiry into their self-construction of manhood, beginning with the question: *Besides the biological make-up of your body, what makes you feel like a man?*

"Uh... I mean... that's a bit hard, hey. I don't usually think of it like that. But I think... for me, being a man is about how you carry yourself. It's... It's the way you show up for your family. You take responsibility. You protect your home. And when I dance, that discipline, I feel like that's part of being a man, too. You honour the tradition. You don't take shortcuts. That's how I understand it."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"That's a tough one. Uh... I never really spoke about... uh... that kind of thing before. I guess... I feel like I'm a man when I stand by what I believe. You know, when I wake up early, fast properly, go for prayer, help others without expecting anything back, that's strength. It's like it's something deeper. Maybe being a man is about keeping your word."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

"Uhm... I used to think being a man meant being strong, being quiet, being... not emotional. But now, I think it's more than that. Like, when I dance, and I'm soft, gentle... it doesn't mean I'm not a man. I think, being a man is having the courage to just be yourself, even when people judge or don't understand. That's harder than just acting tough, you know."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

"Okay. Umm... I'm still figuring that out, I think. But what I do know is, when I help my Mother at home, when I teach the younger boys how to dance properly, when I respect elders and

listen even when I disagree... those things feel important. It makes me feel grounded. That's maybe what being a man means. Not loudness, but presence."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

These reflections from the participants converge around a profound theme of reclaiming masculinity, not as a static identity rooted in dominance, stoicism, or control, but as a dynamic ethos shaped through service, care, emotional courage, and spiritual discipline. Their hesitancy in answering the question signals that masculinity, for them, is not commonly verbalised but lived, quietly enacted through familial responsibility, ritual observance, and personal integrity.

Participant 1 anchors masculinity in the act of "showing up" with discipline and respect for tradition, suggesting that ritual commitment itself is an expression of masculine strength. Participant 2 frames manhood as "keeping your word" and serving without expectation, reframing authority as a combination of humility and consistency. Participant 3 challenges hegemonic masculinity directly by embracing gentleness and emotional authenticity, arguing that true manhood requires the bravery to remain visible despite being misrecognised. And Participant 4, still shaping his sense of self, locates masculinity in acts of nurture, mentorship, and thoughtful presence rather than assertion.

Together, these perspectives demonstrate that masculinity within the Nagara tradition is not reclaimed by resisting femininity, but rather by absorbing and transcending its binary logic. The very act of dancing, teaching, fasting, listening, and leading becomes an expression of manhood rooted in cultural and spiritual belonging. However, further explanations were needed, so I probed a question to elicit a solid response that grounded the study in the research question: *how does Nagara dancing make you feel like a man?*

"When I move to the rhythm of the Nagara drums, I feel like I'm understanding what being a man means for me, it's not about being tough; it's about being whole, it's about knowing who you are embodying and also knowing you are as an individual outside of the dancing."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"I was always told that a man must be unyieldingly tough, but as soon as I began moving to that rhythm, I felt an inner shift, was reshaping what it meant to be a man in my own way."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

"Through Nagara dance, I feel connected to my roots and understand my role as a man in our community and mostly as a devotee to the Goddess. I feel like a man when I dress as a woman. People don't feel what I feel, and I don't care."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

“The stage was set with the musicians, the Sari was all draped in flowing fabrics, and the jewellery was recently bought. These symbols of the Goddess made me feel a sense of empowerment I have never experienced before as a man. People during Kirtan will not even consider me a man but see me as the Goddess. This makes me feel different, it makes me feel as though I want to be this.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

These quotes reflect deeply personal understandings of masculinity as shaped through the ritual space of Nagara. Participant 1 describes feeling ‘whole’ when dancing, suggesting that masculinity is not about dominance or rigidity, but rather self-awareness and spiritual completeness. Participant 2 similarly recalls a transformation: moving beyond inherited ideals of toughness to redefine manhood through rhythm, movement, and inward shift. Participant 3 offers a striking fusion of masculinity and ritual femininity, asserting that dressing as a woman enhances rather than diminishes his identity as a man, anchored in cultural duty and divine connection. Meanwhile, Participant 4 expresses how performance empowers him in ways that conventional masculinity never did; being seen as the Goddess onstage evokes a profound self-recognition that blurs the line between desire, divinity, and gender identity. Collectively, these accounts frame masculinity in Nagara not as something to be defended, but as something *embodied, temporal, and spiritually affirmed*, inviting a more fluid and context-rooted conception of what it means to be a man. This evolving definition lays the groundwork for the following line of inquiry: *Masculinity refers to the attributes and roles typically associated with men. How do you maintain your masculinity when performing as a Nagara dancer, and after you perform?*

“Many people refer to men performing Nagara dance in a feminine manner as ‘Naachanya’, but I believe this word is often misunderstood. In my experience, people don’t understand that ‘Naachanya’ is used only for a woman dancer. ‘Naachwala’ is the right word for a man who dances, even if he uses women’s clothes or movements or not. We remain ‘Naachwala’ because our masculine identity within our homes is never erased, even when we embody feminine ways for public performances or ritual purposes.”

Participant 1 (11 November 2023)

“Now, preparing for a performance... taking a bath, doing my make-up, and heading to work... is as routine as any other job. It has become my daily life.”

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

“For me, it’s a lifestyle now... it doesn’t matter what others think, as I have a strong fan base, and the opinions of a few don’t affect me. The process of stepping into the role, embodying a woman while performing, and then returning to my everyday identity as a man has become second nature.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

“They love seeing how we switch identities... It’s like the magic of the performance. One moment, we are strong and commanding; the next, we move with grace and elegance. But when I return from backstage, the people get a shock.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

These responses articulate a compelling theme of identity and misrecognition, where Nagara dancers inhabit femininity not as a form of identity displacement, but as a conscious, sacred mode of expression. Participant 1’s clarification of being a *Naachwala*, a male dancer, even when performing in feminine form, asserts that public embodiment of the Goddess does not erase their masculine self; rather, it co-exists with domestic and cultural roles that reaffirm their manhood. For other participants, the repeated ritual of transformation, bathing, applying make-up, and donning the *Sari* has become so profoundly integrated into their lives that it blurs the line between persona and practice. This stylised switching between identities speaks to Butler’s (2015) theory of gender as performance: something enacted, repeated, and socially read, rather than inherently fixed. While many audience members celebrate this fluidity, others are visibly startled by the dancers’ offstage maleness, reflecting the tension between visibility, embodiment, and public perception. This naturally leads to the following question: How do you think people perceive you when you perform with the entire costume as a Nagara dancer?

“They think that because I do this, I’m a gay or want to attract men. They don’t see the truth of what we do as Nagara dancers; they don’t know I am a married woman with grandchildren. But there are gay men who do perform, you can tell.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

“Through my dance, I have learned not to worry about people. The power of the Goddess within me is more important than the ridiculous things people say. I focus on entertaining and the power of the Goddess.”

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

“Once, after a performance, someone approached me. They asked me why I do this type of dance, only gay men do these things. They didn’t call me rude names, but I know, being a Nagara dancer, one can’t even think of being gay. Me being a man. I stood my ground, not in anger, but they needed to know why I did this.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

“I used to be unsure about how people would react to my performances, but now I see the support online, it reminds me that this dance is for people who know the history and don’t see it as men wanting to become women.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

These participant reflections highlight the persistent misconceptions surrounding sexuality in the practice of Nagara dancing, particularly the tendency to conflate ritual embodiment of the Goddess with assumptions about gender identity and sexual orientation. Participant 1's frustration underscores the reductive views held by some observers, where the act of donning feminine attire in performance is read as indicative of queerness, erasing both the sacred context and the dancer's personal life. This conflation reflects broader societal discomfort with non-normative gender expression and highlights the fragility of masculinity as perceived by the public.

Other participants challenge these assumptions by reaffirming the spiritual intentionality behind their performance. Participant 2 frames the criticism as 'ridiculous' in the face of divine embodiment, while Participant 4 recounts a direct encounter with judgment that he met with clarity and composure. Participant 3 offers a turning point, affirming that online support and informed audiences validate their artistry and counteract misinterpretation.

Collectively, these perspectives reveal that sexuality in the Nagara space is less about identity and more about projection, how outsiders perceive the body, rather than how the dancer inhabits it. This leads to a deeper inquiry: *How do you navigate interactions with men in the audience while in performance, particularly when they may view you through a sexualised or misunderstood lens?*

"Let the people talk and behave like they do. We do what we love, and for us to be men and change to look like women within a timeframe gives us an ability that no other man can do. We should be proud and keep being unique."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

"On stage, I am not just a man. I am a person who is doing a dance that has been done for years as a tradition. If only people understood the history of Nagara dancing, they would know that I will never flirt with men on stage."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"When I dance with straight men, it is not fuelled by sexual attraction but by a shared commitment to our art."

Participant 4 (11 November 2023)

"For me, this misunderstanding shows how confusing Nagara dancing can be, where we, as performers, embody roles that are not normal. But we know that we are men. We don't become fully female, even though I am attracted to men, I can't do that, because people who see us perform can see that we are men and can see us as men dressed as women, and it is not normal."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

These responses reflect a tone of vulnerability, pride, and nuanced resistance, each shaped by the participant's personal history and social context. Participant 2 speaks with quiet confidence; his tone is measured but firm. His statement celebrates the unique discipline required to momentarily embody femininity through dance without losing sight of masculinity. The pride in this transitional ability is framed not as confusion, but as a form of cultural power, subtly pushing back against public misunderstanding.

Participant 1 adopts a resolute and dignified tone. His remark, "I am not just a man... I will never flirt with men on stage," is a direct attempt to defend the sanctity of Nagara as a ritual tradition, not a sexualised performance. His appeal to historical knowledge and tradition suggests a desire to protect both the ritual's legitimacy and his own masculine identity from misinterpretation.

Participant 4 offers two perspectives that carry both personal complexity and emotional weight. In the first, his tone is one of calm professionalism, explaining that interactions with male dancers, even those he finds attractive, are not romantic but artistic. In the second, his tone becomes more conflicted. He openly acknowledges his same-sex attraction while navigating the discomfort of embodying femininity under public scrutiny. His use of the word "not normal" signals internalised tension between his personal identity and cultural expectation. However, the probing question on this note was to understand how the participants interact with other men while dancing, which destabilises their thoughts about their own masculinity.

"Some men mistakenly assume that we are women, and we always have to correct them when that happens, especially when they push the boundaries or take advantage."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"If a man genuinely wants to dance with you, that's acceptable on occasion, though not all the time. Simply put, if you join in the dance, then I'm happy to dance with you."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

"Most men who attend our performances respect us as dancers, but there are some who drink alcohol and misbehave with us; we don't like that."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

"I don't dress as a woman to attract attention... I do it to channel the divine, so others recognise me as a Goddess."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

These responses reflect how the embodiment of feminine roles through Nagara dance both complicates and reinforces the dancers' understanding of masculinity. While participants adopt aesthetic elements associated with femininity to channel the divine, they remain acutely aware of how this performance is received, particularly by male spectators. Participant 1 notes the need to correct misrecognitions, asserting their male identity when audience members cross boundaries. Participant 2's openness to dancing with men is framed by discernment and mutual respect, not flirtation. Participant 3 expresses frustration at being objectified, highlighting how some audience members sexualise the performance despite its sacred intent. Yet Participant 4 reaffirms that their embodiment of femininity is not for attention, but for spiritual connection. Together, these perspectives reveal that Nagara dancers internalise masculine roles not through distancing themselves from the feminine, but by asserting control, intention, and dignity within the act of embodiment.

I asked the participants within the group to individually discuss the efforts they had to make to effectively achieve the role of a Nagara dancer, for example, what kind of effort was required when dressing up as the embodiment of the Goddess. I probed for a unique response to elicit a response that was not echoed by others.

"I've been doing this thing for decades now nothing really is difficult, but my age is catching up to me now, I need assistance now and then."

Participant 1 (11 November 2023)

"Backstage, everything is very busy and hectic. I take a long time to put on make-up because after I shave, I have to put extra make-up to cover the marks. With the make-up, I was terrible."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

"Backstage taught me patience and care by fixing costumes, calming nerves, and cheering others on. Now, with my own children, I find myself doing the same, nurturing their dreams and helping them shine, just like we did before the curtain rose."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

"Transforming from a male to a female appearance requires a lot of work, especially with make-up. Even tasks like pleating the Sari take effort."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

These reflections offer valuable insight into the embodied labour and quiet perseverance that underpin the performance of gender and masculinity within Nagara dancing. Participant 1, speaking with the assured tone of an elder, highlights endurance as a cornerstone of his masculinity, stating that while the ritual itself is no longer complicated, the ageing body has introduced new limitations.

His admission of needing assistance marks a subtle shift in masculine identity: from autonomous strength toward interdependence and the humility of asking for support.

Participant 2's account, tinged with self-deprecating humour, suggests that masculinity can also be expressed through vulnerability, through learning, imperfection, and persistence. His struggle with make-up reflects a deeper theme: the physical negotiation of gender performance and the invisible challenges that come with ritual transformation. Participant 3 echoes this sentiment, but with a nurturing gaze. His experience backstage becomes a metaphor for masculine caretaking, mentoring, and emotional presence. This contrasts sharply with dominant notions of masculinity as individualistic or emotionally distant.

Participant 4 reiterates the physically taxing nature of transformation, underlining that the ritual embodiment of femininity requires mastery, patience, and qualities traditionally aligned with masculinity but reframed here through the lens of aesthetic and spiritual commitment. These voices suggest that masculinity within Nagara is not just performed onstage, but behind the scenes, through persistence, mentorship, and care work. These layered challenges, such as ageing, bodily transformation, and backstage chaos, lead us into the subsequent vital inquiry: *How do you manage or overcome the challenges you face as a Nagara dancer, emotionally, physically, or socially?*

"I learned that dancing doesn't take away my masculinity; instead, it calms me down. I have become so understanding that I sit and help the younger dancers. I can be mean, but I want the best for them and the way they will uphold our work."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"At first, we had difficulty learning all the steps, but over the years, it has become so simple that we now do it ourselves. I can change my Sari or outfit in just a few minutes. Make-up, on the other hand, takes a bit more time, about 30 to 45 minutes, since we need to look our best on stage."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

"We have the elder dancers to help us quickly backstage to hold things while we get everything in order, especially with Saris. I'm so used to it now that I can manage on my own without much assistance, but I still look to my elders for a final check before I go on stage."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

"When I started, we had someone older or a woman to assist us quickly in the back to help with these details, and we manage it nicely. I'm so used to it now that I can handle it myself. It has just become second nature. I now help the newer dancers as they join the group."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

These participant reflections illuminate a recurring and quietly transformative. Rather than aligning masculinity with dominance or hierarchy, these Nagara dancers describe a world of backstage care, mutual support, and mentorship. Participant 1 candidly shares that dance has softened him over time, anchoring him emotionally and inspiring him to help younger dancers, even if his guidance has a slightly firm tone. His use of “I can be mean” is less a confession than an acknowledgement of the emotional investment he brings to safeguarding the ritual’s future.

Participant 3 adds to this ethic of care through the language of routine mastery. What once felt complex is now second nature, and he articulates a quiet pride in presenting oneself with discipline and elegance, not just for aesthetic purposes, but to honour the sanctity of the stage. Meanwhile, Participants 2 and 4 discuss the intergenerational flow of support, where they receive care from elders and later become caregivers themselves. Even the smallest gesture, such as a final check of a *Sari* pleat before stepping into the lights, carries cultural and emotional weight. The key themes derived from this subquestion are Sexuality and Misrecognition, Embodied Vulnerability and Sacred Labour, Reclaiming Masculinity in Feminised Spaces and Sacred Performance vs Spectacle. The thread of nurturance reframes masculinity through a collective ethic of patience, grooming, and interdependence.

This signalled the end of the focus group discussion. I invited participants into a moment of collective reflection, allowing them to share final thoughts, clarify earlier points, or express sentiments that may not have surfaced during the group exchange. This closing gesture was intentional, designed to honour the dialogic space we had co-created and to signal a respectful transition from collective to individual engagement. I thanked the group for their openness and reiterated the value of their contributions, framing their insights not merely as data but as acts of cultural preservation and personal testimony. Following this, I introduced the individual interview sessions as an opportunity for deeper introspection. In this intimate space, participants could explore aspects of their identity, ritual practice, and emotional experience that they may have felt too vulnerable or complex to articulate in a group setting. Each participant was invited to step into a quieter, more focused space, where the rhythm of the conversation could slow, and the nuances of their personal narratives could unfold without interruption. This shift from communal dialogue to one-on-one engagement was not only methodological but symbolic: it acknowledged the layered nature of their experiences and the importance of creating space for both collective resonance and individual voice.

5.4.3. How, and in what ways, does Hindu Ritual dance open a more nuanced and embodied conception of Masculinity among Nagara dancers?

The majority of the questions for this subquestion were asked during the individual follow-up interview sessions, which were held at the school, but on a bench in the courtyard of the next block. The other participants were having refreshments while waiting for their turn. The questioning style for these sessions was personal, which entailed the decision to become a Nagara dancer. Their responses are often shaped by deeply personal, spiritual, and familial influences, which are best discussed in one-on-one settings. In these moments, tradition intersects with individual identity and the longing to fulfil a religious vow. For many participants, the pathway into Nagara was not simply a choice, but a transmission of legacy, often introduced through witnessing community elders or family members perform. At this point, I asked, *'When did you decide that you wanted to become a Nagara Dancer, and what motivated you to pursue this path?'*

"My father always talked about how his father came from Kerala to South Africa as an indentured labourer. He said that conditions were very sad, and the long days on the sugar plantations, and the Nagara dance was like his way to cool off. He carried with him a Nagara drum which he got from his village priest, this was like continuing the tradition in the new land. My mother's father also played the Nagara on the ship that brought them here, a tradition my mother passed down, saying it was my nana's Nagara that played during the journey. They came from Kerala, and most of those from Kerala settled in Riverside, where the Nagara group was managed by his older brother before he passed away."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"Some of the people lived near the harbour, while others stayed closer, like Pandans Hill, trying to adapt by wearing traditional Indian costumes and clothing. People had to pay to watch to support the performance, and it became our family business."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"I think Nagara dance became more than just an act; it turned into a community kind of celebration among the workers, a way to party, to heal, and to live their culture, not think of the hardships."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

"For me, this dance is not just a ritual; it's my way of being free. I now understand that it's something that was passed down, generation to generation, by both men and women, but I always wanted to honour the Goddess through movement."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

The participants' reflections reveal how diasporic movement, historical trauma, and cultural continuity converge in the practice of Nagara dance, transforming it from a mere performance into

both a ritual and a refuge. Participant 1's account highlights the transmission of tradition through material objects and memory; his grandfather's Nagara drum, carried from Kerala, serves as a symbolic bridge between his ancestral homeland and South African soil. In this context, tradition becomes portable, not just an idea, but an heirloom rooted in spiritual continuity.

Yet, as these traditions settled into new contexts, such as Pandans Hill and Riverside, they were reshaped through public performance and necessity. Participant 1 highlights how dance became a "family business," sustained economically through community contributions. This signals a shift from ritual in the private domain to performative tradition in the diasporic public sphere. Participant 2 echoes this evolution, portraying Nagara not as static devotion, but as a collective release, a "celebration among workers" to resist the mental and physical toll of indenture. Dance is a form of emotional emancipation, a healing experience that unfolds through motion and rhythm. Participant 3 adds a personal layer, revealing that Nagara is not only inherited but reclaimed. For him, it is a gendered, embodied ritual that offers *freedom*, linking him to his ancestors and the Goddess.

Together, these voices demonstrate how Nagara dance serves as both tradition and ritual, legacy and liberation, shaped by diasporic struggles and spiritual desires. This leads us to the following question: *In what ways has Nagara, as both heritage and embodied practice, been most memorable to you?* This question was only answered by Participants 1 and 2, as they began to discuss how the younger dancers are now disregarding the traditional look and dance aesthetics that were adhered to by the elder dancers.

"When I was very young, on my way home from school, I'd pass by a paper factory that made colourful papers. I'd often gather some of those papers, and I used them to make a crown. I still have that crown to this day. I must have been around 12 or 13 years old. It's made from that chocolate foil you used to get back then. I used to make crowns myself, but now I prefer getting someone else to do it. My grandson helps sometimes, but I don't have the time or energy to run around making crowns anymore. I spent so much money on materials, sequined everything, cut wires to shape, and used fabric to craft it. I've made a crown, one every year, and during Navratri, a new crown would replace the old one. I remember all the effort, even using super glue for the decorations. But now, after turning 70, I feel I must retire, and I've stopped making things. I worry now if dancers have the same motivation I had."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"Youngsters need to learn about tradition and values, but their way of dancing, who they learn from, seems not to be what we learned. Modern Bollywood dancing is taking over; they are now inspired by leading dancers like Sunny Leone and Aishwarya Rai rather than embodying traditional deities like Saraswati. This is causing traditions not to be upheld."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

These accounts from Participants 1 and 2 signal a clear shift in the intergenerational transmission of Nagara aesthetics and values, emphasising a theme of generational change and cultural continuity under pressure. Participant 1's reflection is steeped in nostalgia, recalling a childhood marked by creativity and ritual discipline, where crafting a crown was not just an adornment, but a labour of love and spiritual devotion. His concern is not only about ageing and retirement, but also about whether younger dancers hold the same reverence for the embodied traditions that have shaped his life.

Participant 2 echoes this unease, pointing to a stylistic and ideological drift among younger dancers who draw more from popular Bollywood influences than ritual iconography. The invocation of figures like Sunny Leone and Aishwarya Rai signals a perceived dilution of sacred intent, where sensuality and spectacle overshadow the invocation of deities like Mother *Saraswati*.

Together, these responses reveal an emerging tension: how do Nagara dancers uphold tradition in the face of cultural evolution, and where does masculine identity reside when aesthetics are redefined? These shifts prompt the following line of inquiry: *In what ways do you feel Nagara dancing has changed over time, and how do you personally manage or respond to these changes?*

"Some of these dancers today are behaving very badly. They are tarnishing my reputation. I cannot agree with or accept such behaviour, as it is not true to the behaviour of Nagara dancers. These groups involve people who don't know what to do when they dance, and that's why the communities mock us."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"The dancers today don't have discipline in performance, they don't know how to match movements, rituals, or respect for tradition. They are using the dance in ways for fame. They only like entertainment or personal gain rather than the true meaning of Nagara dancing. They do not respect elders. They want to be better."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

"This is what happens when the true significance of a Nagara dance is misunderstood by a dancer. A pure Nagara dancer, like us, and the rest of us in the group, respects the traditions and the meaning behind the dance. There's a fine line between honouring Nagara and simply dressing up as a woman without understanding its religious and essence."

Participant 1 (11 November 2023)

"It feels like the essence of the dance is being taken over by modern influences. It's very scary because this might replace other traditional dances, which we will not allow. Bollywood movements are very exciting, but we can't have it in everything, you know. We need to be original by carrying what our forefathers taught us."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

The participants' reflections demonstrate a growing tension within the evolving landscape of Nagara: the widening gap between sacred embodiment and performative aesthetics. As expressed with concern and frustration, elders like Participants 1 and 2 observe a shift away from discipline, ritual coherence, and ancestral reverence. The newer generation's engagement with Nagara is, in their view, increasingly shaped by individualism, fame-seeking, and stylistic deviation. This perceived erosion of intent, notably through the incorporation of popular dance forms or disregard for ritual etiquette, risks reducing Nagara to a spectacle.

Participant 1's anxiety about reputation and communal mockery speaks to the fragile respectability dancers work to maintain in a society that already questions their masculine integrity. The rise of untrained or flamboyant performances heightens the risk of misinterpretation: not as spiritual transformation, but as cross-dressing or attention-seeking. Participant 3 explicitly warns that without rootedness in spiritual lineage, Nagara may be mistaken for mere imitation of femininity rather than the divine embodiment it is meant to express. These shifts demand closer examination. As tradition and modernity intersect, the next question arises: *How do you feel about the way Nagara is evolving today, and what are the group dynamics like when working with other Nagara dancers?*

"One boy started dancing with me when he was just 13 years old. Yes, he danced with everyone here a few times, too, but he danced with me first. Then, he left and ran to another group. He told me about following the same dance and everything, and that's when he started performing. The boy then joined different groups. I think he was trying to save money. Honestly, if I were in his place, I'd probably be jumping from one group to another, performing here and there. But in doing that, you end up missing out on the connections and focus you need to truly grow and be where you're meant to be."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"We're not just dancers; we're brothers. We support each other on and off the dance floor. Once we change into our outfits, we become sisters, and when we are done, we have a drink and call each other brothers."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

"We all now want to see more creativity. So we help each other, we try to learn from the elders, as they don't just want the same movements they've seen before. If we don't add something new, they say we lack originality, but that helps us."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

"When I dance with men, I feel like we're working together to create something beautiful, a balance of energies that honours the Goddess."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

These quotes provide a nuanced examination of communal masculinity, kinship, and creativity within the evolving landscape of Nagara dancing. Participant 1's reflection highlights a generational ethic of mentorship, in which sustained relationships and ritual grounding are viewed as essential to spiritual and artistic growth. His concern over dancers "jumping from one group to another" speaks to a perceived loss of rootedness and accountability, disruption in the moral and aesthetic lineage traditionally passed down within Nagara circles. Participant 2 deepens this with a metaphor of familial transformation, describing the dancers as 'brothers' outside of performance and 'sisters' in their embodied ritual state. This fluid dynamic challenges binary gender boundaries while reinforcing bonds of loyalty, mutual support, and masculine care throughout the transformation. The act of returning to 'brotherhood' after performance subtly reclaims male identity while affirming the temporary sacred femininity adopted onstage.

Participants 3 and 4 highlight an ethic of collaborative learning, suggesting that masculinity within Nagara is not defined by dominance, but by receptivity, reinvention, and spiritual co-creation. Their desire for creativity, guided by elder expectations, reflects how tradition and innovation co-exist within a framework of respect and communal purpose. This brings us to a final reflection: What does it mean to you personally to be a man in the context of Nagara dancing?

"Being a man in Nagara means carrying tradition with dignity. Even when we dress in feminine attire, we honour something far greater than ourselves. That is strength."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

"To me, it means responsibility... to dance with devotion, to support the younger ones, and to represent our elders with respect."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

"It means learning to lead without pride. I feel like a man when I can express grace and still stand tall in who I am."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

"As a man, I find purpose in the balance... Dressing as a woman on stage does not confuse me. It reminds me that manhood is about discipline, not display."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

The concluding quotes of this section offer profound insight into how masculinity is reconfigured within the Nagara framework, revealing a fluid, relational, and spiritually grounded understanding of gender. Participant 1's reflection frames manhood as the act of "carrying tradition with dignity," emphasising that even within feminised performance, masculinity is not eclipsed but spiritually

affirmed. Participant 2 positions masculinity as responsibility and mentorship, reinforcing an ethic of intergenerational care and communal leadership. Participant 3 asserts that grace, humility, and self-assurance are not contradictions to manhood but expressions of it. Participant 4 offers a striking interpretation: manhood is defined not by appearance, but by discipline and purpose. His perspective acknowledges the aesthetic transformation without confusing it with a loss of identity.

Together, these reflections draw the analytic threads woven throughout this subsection. The sub-questions, exploring how masculinity is embodied, how gender roles are performed and challenged, and how participants navigate respect and misunderstanding, were answered with exceptional nuance. Using the reflexive thematic analysis framework, the data were interpreted inductively and idiographically, allowing participants' voices, cultural specificity, and emotional texture to guide the analytic process. The richness of the data lies not only in the directness of their statements but in the hesitations, tensions, and affective resonances embedded in their narratives.

Each sub-question contributed to a composite understanding of masculinity as lived through Nagara, formed not in opposition to femininity, but through its ritual embodiment; not through assertion, but through vulnerability, mentorship, and devotion. These meanings are not uniform but context-specific, shaped by tradition, generational legacy, and diasporic struggle.

In the following section, themes will be constructed iteratively from this interpretive groundwork, using a recursive coding process. Attention will be paid to intersectional meanings, where ritual, gender, and identity intersect, and how dancers' performances both resist and reconfigure normative masculinity. The main themes derived from this subquestion are Mentorship, Kinship, and Nurturance, as well as Diasporic Memory and ancestral continuity, and Collective Identity and Community Belonging. The analysis will remain grounded in the participants' perspectives, honouring the multiplicity of voices while generating theoretical insights that speak to the decolonial, gendered, and ritual complexities within the Nagara tradition.

5.4.4. Themes Derived from Data

Table 5.1 indicates the themes derived from the data as presented above.

Research Subquestion	Codes / Core Concepts Identified	Themes
1. How is gender portrayed within the performance of Nagara dances?	Embodying the Goddess, spiritual transformation, transcending gender binaries	Duality and Identity Integration
	Fasting, purity, sacred labour, intergenerational responsibility	Masculinity as Responsibility, Discipline, and Care
	Switching personas, “ <i>Naachwala</i> ” vs “ <i>Naachanya</i> ”, embodied masculinity	Nagara Dancers’ Understanding of Masculinity
	Menstrual taboos, ritual purity, exclusion from sacred roles, and generational shifts	Feminine Roles in Nagara Dancing
2. How do Nagara dancers define and navigate masculinity through ritual dance?	Ageing, transformation rituals, resilience through make-up, costume, and devotion	Embodied Vulnerability and Sacred Labour
	Performing femininity to affirm manhood, discipline over display, and the coexistence of strength and grace	Reclaiming Masculinity in Feminised Spaces
	Tradition vs Bollywood influence, aesthetic drift, preservation vs innovation	Sacred Performance vs Spectacle
	Misinterpretation of queerness, public gaze, stigma vs self-assurance	Sexuality and Misrecognition
3. How, and in what ways, does Hindu ritual dance open a more nuanced and embodied conception of masculinity among Nagara dancers?	Brotherhood/sisterhood dynamics, creative co-production, ritual as collaborative meaning-making	Collective Identity and Community Belonging
	Kerala origins, indenture legacies, family narratives, emotional inheritance	Diasporic Memory and Ancestral Continuity
	Backstage care, intergenerational learning, performing masculinity through kindness and guidance	Mentorship, Kinship, and Nurturance

5.5. Conclusion

Chapter 5 has illuminated the intricate ways in which masculinity is embodied, contested, and reimagined through the lived experiences of Nagara dancers. Through the application of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019), the chapter presented a nuanced synthesis of participant narratives, revealing how gendered identities are not merely performed but spiritually and culturally negotiated within the sacred framework of Nagara. The twelve themes that emerged,

ranging from Ritual Embodiment as Gender Expansion to Collective Identity and Community Belonging, collectively map the terrain of how masculinity is shaped by ritual discipline, aesthetic labour, intergenerational transmission, and cultural memory.

What becomes evident is that masculinity within Nagara is not a fixed or hegemonic ideal but a fluid, relational, and deeply embodied practice. Participants articulated a masculinity that is grounded in devotion, vulnerability, and ethical responsibility, one that resists dominant scripts of stoicism and control. The dancers' experiences challenge binary constructions of gender by demonstrating how the embodiment of the feminine divine, the performance of softness, and the enactment of care are not antithetical to manhood but integral to its sacred expression. Their narratives reveal that masculinity is not performed in isolation from femininity but is continually shaped through its proximity to the divine feminine, through ritualised acts of transformation, and through the emotional labour of community care.

Moreover, the chapter demonstrates how Nagara dancing serves as a site of both resistance and continuity. While some participants reaffirm traditional boundaries, such as the exclusion of women or the preservation of ritual purity, others actively question and reinterpret these norms, advocating for more inclusive and expansive understandings of gender and participation. This tension between tradition and transformation highlights the dynamic nature of Nagara as a living cultural practice, one that accommodates both reverence and reinvention.

These findings lay the groundwork for the interpretive analysis in Chapter 6, which will bring the themes into critical dialogue with the theoretical frameworks outlined in earlier chapters. The next chapter will explore how Nagara dancing challenges hegemonic masculinity, how ritual performance fosters gender fluidity, and how sacred embodiment serves as a vehicle for cultural belonging and identity formation. In doing so, Chapter 6 will not only deepen the theoretical implications of the study but also position Nagara as a powerful lens through which to rethink masculinity in diasporic, postcolonial, and sacred contexts.

6. CHAPTER 6 – Discussion: Navigation of Masculinity Through Ritual Dance

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapter presented the data and illustrated the twelve themes derived from it. This chapter critically engages with the central themes that emerged from the participants' narratives, situating their lived experiences within the theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 3. Drawing on the voices of Nagara dancers, the discussion explores how the concepts of masculinity, gender performativity, ritual embodiment, and dance intersect within the twelve themes. The chapter examines these concepts as interwoven dimensions of identity, spirituality, and community. To draw clarity from the complexity of the themes, I've categorised the findings into four interpretive groupings:

1. Diasporic Memory, Femininity, and Ritual Embodiment
2. Navigation of Masculinity
3. Duality, Sacred Labour, Sexuality, and Misconceptions
4. Performance, Community, and Mentorship

These groupings are not random or decorative; they serve a purpose. They are shaped by how themes connect to space, body, power, and relationships. They help trace the links between cultural memory, gendered authority, embodied practice, and the transmission of sacred knowledge. Each section explores the tension between what Nagara inherits and how it is lived, showing not only what it preserves, but also what it leaves out, reshapes, and makes room for.

The analysis highlights how ritual performance serves as a site for negotiating gendered expectations, challenging hegemonic masculinity, and reimagining the boundaries of sacred embodiment. Participants' reflections reveal a masculinity that is not fixed or hegemonic but fluid, relational, and deeply embedded in spiritual labour. Their narratives complicate binary understandings of gender by demonstrating how the embodiment of the feminine divine does not undermine masculine identity but expands it through devotion, discipline, and vulnerability.

This chapter also presents an interpretive analysis of the findings derived from in-depth engagements with Nagara dancers, situating their narratives within the theoretical framework articulated in Chapter 3 and contextualising them alongside existing literature from Chapter 2. The research centred on three core questions: 1. How is Gender portrayed within the performance of Nagara dances? 2. How do Nagara dancers define and navigate masculinity through ritual dance? 3. How, and in what ways, does

Hindu Ritual dance open a more nuanced and embodied conception of Masculinity among Nagara dancers? Building on the Reflexive Thematic Analysis outlined previously, this chapter presents a synthesised account of participants' experiences related to embodied masculinity, ritual legitimacy, cultural transmission, and gendered exclusion.

The discussion is informed by three theories: ritual dance, embodiment and gender performativity, and masculinity theories, each selected for their resonance with the complexities of South African Hindu ritual contexts. These frameworks, centred on performativity, ritual subjectivity, and embodied negotiation, allow for a nuanced reading of the participants not merely as performers but as cultural agents actively navigating inherited norms and shifting identities. The interpretation pays close attention to how symbolic boundaries are maintained and reimagined within Nagara, highlighting both the coherence and fluidity of gendered expression. Through this analysis, the chapter aims to establish whether and how the research questions have been addressed, while illustrating the broader significance of ritual dance as a lens through which identity politics, cultural resilience, and embodied knowledge become visible.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that Nagara dancing is not merely a cultural performance but a dynamic space of identity formation, resistance, and belonging. Through embodied ritual, dancers articulate alternative masculinities and spiritual subjectivities that challenge normative constructs and affirm the transformative potential of sacred performance.

6.2. Diasporic Memory, Femininity, and Ritual Embodiment

This section encompasses three themes: diasporic memory and ancestral continuity, women and Nagara dancing, and ritual embodiment. These themes have been grouped together for a simple reason: they all belong to the same story, even if they speak from different corners of it. Each explores how identity, culture, and gender are carried, expressed, and contested through the body in motion, across oceans, generations, and ritual borders.

In the diasporic Hindu experience, memory is not just nostalgic; it is performative. It lives in gestures, song, rhythm, and repetition. Ritual embodiment serves as the vehicle through which these memories take form and continuity, especially in communities negotiating heritage within South Africa's diasporic landscape. The Nagara tradition, then, becomes more than a religious performance; it becomes a site of negotiation where identity is not only remembered but actively made. This tradition becomes the first encounter of how masculinity is maintained through the engagement of continuity and ritual discipline.

However, this story is incomplete without attending to the gendered politics of exclusion and symbolism. Women's positioning in Nagara practice, often celebrated symbolically yet barred from participation, complicates the construction of ritual memory and embodiment. Their absence is not just social; it's sacredly codified. To interrogate diasporic ritual embodiment without foregrounding the gendered dynamics would risk flattening the very terrain we seek to map. These themes offer a layered interpretive frame: one that asks not only how culture is retained and reinvented, but whose bodies get to carry that culture in ritual space, and why. It's in this triangulation of memory, movement, and gender that the heart of this chapter beats.

6.2.1. Diasporic Memory and Ancestral Continuity

The first step in analysing this theme is to understand the relationship between tradition and ancestral continuity as a springboard into the discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of masculinity. The lived practices of Nagara dancing reflect an intricate weaving of ritual memory and ancestral resilience, constituting what Halbwachs (2020:340) terms collective memory, the social frameworks through which communities remember, ritualise, and transmit their identity. Within the South African Indian context, in some spaces, diasporic memory is not a passive recollection but an embodied performance, a spiritual retrieval of the cultural homeland enacted through sacred dance. In this instance, the participants' reflections have all found a similar point of departure: why they dance, because their ancestors did it, when they came to South Africa. Drawing on Vahed's (2024) study, rich culture and religious practices were introduced to South Africa through the indentured labour movement, thus illustrating that Nagara performances are more than a devotional expression; they are a cultural archive that has been transported through indentured migration and adapted within a postcolonial context, this establishes the groundwork for how Nagara came to South Africa also aligning with the participants' recollections.

Having discussed the notion that Nagara dancing is a traditional religious dance, tradition plays a pivotal role in shaping the performative dimensions of Nagara, as highlighted by the participants. Connell (1995) argues that hegemonic masculinity often draws legitimacy from tradition, positioning certain masculine traits such as authority, control, and heterosexuality as timeless and culturally sanctioned. These traits become embedded in institutions (like religion, family, and education), giving masculinity a historical and moral weight. Tradition lends masculinity a historical arc, grounding it in ancestry, lineage, and sacred repetition. This temporal dimension strengthens the perception that masculine roles are timeless and 'naturally' tied to heritage (Jeffrey, 2011; Golwakar, 2005). This diasporic memory finds potent articulation in Participant 1's notable recollection:

“My father always talked about how his father came from Kerala to South Africa as an indentured labourer. He said that conditions were very sad, and the long days on the sugar plantations, and the Nagara dance was like his way to cool off. He carried with him a Nagara drum which he got from his village priest, this was like continuing the tradition in the new land. My mother’s father also played the Nagara on the ship that brought them here, a tradition my mother passed down, saying it was my nana’s Nagara that played during the journey. They came from Kerala, and most of those from Kerala settled in Riverside, where the Nagara group was managed by his older brother before he passed away.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

Here, the drum serves as a symbol of cultural endurance and ancestral invocation (Zubko, 2019). The ritual performance is thereby shaped by traditions, which often prescribe roles and behaviours that align with dominant masculine ideals, such as discipline, strength, leadership, and authority. These values get passed down as ‘correct’ ways of being, especially in religious or communal performance spaces (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018; Krishnan, 2009). Participant 2 echoes this blending, stating that Nagara dance became more than just an act; it evolved into a communal form of celebration among the workers, a way to party, heal, and live their culture, rather than dwelling on the hardships.

These accounts invoke Turner’s (1969) notion of *communitas*, where ritual creates a communal gathering and reconstitutes a shared identity grounded in culture and transcendence. Moreover, Hindu dance theory, particularly as outlined in the *Natyashastra*, supports this embodied remembrance: movement is not only aesthetic but metaphysical, expressing cosmic continuity (Vatsyayan, 1967; Nair, 2014).

Through devotional practices such as *Kirtan*, descendants reclaim a sacred lineage, where it both memorialises and reanimates the journeys of their forefathers. Participant 3’s affirmation that dance is not just a ritual; it’s his way of being free. Participant 3 is an openly gay male, and words like ‘being free’ spark interesting notions about how Nagara dance spaces create a safe space for queer men to express themselves through performance without altering their standing as men in society. This also signals Nagara dance as a site of intergenerational dialogue of queer freedom and spiritual connection. In this way, Nagara becomes both an archive and an altar: a diasporic technology of cultural survival, where tradition is performed not as rupture but as continuity through reverent embodiment. Thus, diasporic memory and ancestral continuity in Nagara do not simply preserve the past; they ritualise it, animate it, and, in doing so, make space for a recreated form of ritual embodiment that is devotional, diasporic, and defiantly alive.

6.2.2. Femininity in Nagara

The role of women in Nagara dancing holds a distinctive position within this dance tradition, shaping both its cultural meaning and spiritual significance. Their presence transcends mere participation, as women embody the divine feminine in ways that align deeply with religious and cultural frameworks. Participant 3 shared:

“The reason for the woman’s role is that she represents Lakshmi Mata...A woman from the household sits in the designated spot. She opens the scarf and fills it with five handfuls of rice along with money, flowers, or other offerings. She then lights the camphor on a tray and hands it to the dancer. Once this is done, the music begins, the singing starts, and the dancer begins his performance.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

This statement emphasises how women’s roles are central to the enactment of divine embodiment, but not aligned with performing. This highlights their unique ability to embody the Goddess, but from afar, they are not entirely excluded from the practice; instead, they participate as an act of handing the embodiment to the men who dance. This act is symbolic, as a woman must initiate Kirtan, and then the men follow through. However, the overarching question (although not particularly relevant to this study’s objectives) is: Why are women allowed such a symbolic role in the initiation of the dance but not permitted to perform?

The interplay between gender and tradition, values the authenticity of women’s contributions, framing them not as imitators but as vessels of sacred expression. This dynamic challenges societal stereotypes about femininity, presenting women as active agents within Nagara rather than passive participants. Moreover, women’s involvement is crucial in preserving the cultural integrity of Nagara.

The role of women is as custodians of tradition, ensuring the continuity of Nagara’s spiritual and cultural legacy. The exclusion of women from Nagara dance emerges not merely as a social norm but as a ritualised boundary sustained through gendered performance and inherited authority. Participant narratives revealed that while femininity is symbolically embodied within the dance, actual female bodies are systematically disallowed from participation. The construction of ritual legitimacy appears tethered to masculinity coded as discipline, strength, and religious fidelity, positioning male dancers as cultural intermediaries while rendering women peripheral.

Several participants articulated this exclusion as ‘tradition’ or ‘respect,’ invoking ancestral authority to legitimise gendered boundaries. Yet such appeals conceal what Filippidou (2023) calls ritual essentialism: a discursive act that freezes gender roles within sacred temporality, obscuring their sociohistorical contingency. The tension between symbolic femininity and embodied exclusion speaks

to Ton's (2018) critique of abstract performativity, demanding a grounded account of whose bodies can perform and whose presence constitutes legitimacy.

Moreover, the absence of women was not passively accepted; it was negotiated through affective responses, quiet resistance, and re-narrativisation. Some participants acknowledged the discomfort of this dynamic, gesturing toward broader questions of gender equity within sacred practice. Here, Krishnan (2009:380) becomes instructive, situating South Asian performance as a contested site where diasporic memory and patriarchal control intersect. The dancers' reflections suggest that Nagara's gendered boundaries are not fixed but are being reinterpreted in lived, embodied ways, offering potential for transformation from within.

In addition to challenging gender norms, the 'real' women of Nagara also foster inclusivity within the practice. This collaboration illustrates the fluidity of gender dynamics within Nagara, emphasising harmony and mutual respect rather than rigid binaries. Such interactions allow the ritual to transcend conventional notions of masculinity and femininity, fostering a collective embodiment of divine power (Halberstam, 2012). One of the initial inquiries posed to the dancers focused on the rationale behind men embodying the Goddess in performance, rather than women, who are often regarded as inherent embodiments of the divine feminine. Additionally, the question explored whether women actively participate as Nagara dancers in contemporary Nagara spaces. Participant 1 explained:

"No, no women. Only men. Okay, as I said, in the old days, both men and women did Nagara dancing. Women played female roles, and men played male roles. But then something happened - some confusion or incident that the elders disapproved of. So, they decided to separate men and women."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

The statement reflects the historical transition within Nagara dancing, where the role of gender in sacred performances shifted from inclusivity to exclusivity. Initially, both men and women actively participated, with each gender portraying roles aligned with their identities, thereby fostering a balanced representation of the divine. However, the reference to an 'incident' leading to the disapproval of elders highlights the influence of cultural and social dynamics in shaping religious practices. This decision to separate men and women in performances highlights a shift toward preserving ritualistic boundaries, while simultaneously revealing tensions surrounding gendered participation in sacred spaces (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), which aligns with how participants understand the portrayal of gender in Nagar dancing. The absence of women in contemporary Nagara dancing reflects broader societal constructs that prioritise male dominance in spiritual and

performative traditions, reducing female representation despite their inherent connection to the divine feminine (Halberstam, 2012).

The reasons that cause the separation of men and women in Nagara dancing, such as incidents of romantic involvement during performances, reflect a broader societal effort to preserve perceived ritual purity through segregation. This segregation is justified by the notion that any breach of emotional restraint, such as one's wife engaging in an affair, inherently disrupts the required sanctity of the performance, as discussed by Participant 1. This perspective reinforces traditional gender binaries and entrenches hegemonic masculinity by suggesting that male dancers must remain detached and free from the influence of desire to maintain respect and discipline (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). By defining masculinity in such rigid terms, the tradition marginalises women and constrains their participation while upholding an ideal of male performance that is indifferent and disciplined. This rigid delineation ultimately stifles potential shifts toward a more inclusive and fluid artistic expression, where diverse emotional identities could coexist harmoniously (Halberstam, 2012).

Historically, women held central roles in Nagara dancing, particularly in rituals that shaped its spiritual and cultural framework. Participants 1 and 3 noted that this shift began as societal views on gender evolved, leading to the gradual exclusion of women from performance and their relegation to spectatorship. This transition reflected growing concerns that female presence could distract male performers and audiences, an idea rooted in hegemonic masculinity, which prioritises male dominance, discipline, and ritual control within sacred spaces (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Such exclusion became part of broader cultural efforts to preserve spiritual focus, reinforce rigid gender binaries, and redefine legitimacy within the performance. These practices were underpinned by patriarchal notions of ritual purity, often linking menstruation to impurity and restricting women's ritual participation. Collectively, these dynamics reveal how Nagara evolved into a predominantly masculine domain, shaped not by original intent but by cultural reinterpretations that marginalised feminine embodiment. The result is a complex interplay of tradition and exclusion, underscoring the need for deeper engagement with the gendered politics of sacred performance.

Participant 1 provided a detailed quote illustrating how ritual codes are gendered, placing disproportionate spiritual burdens on women. The expectation that women fast for 40 days with each menstrual cycle is not only impractical but also reinforces their exclusion from expressive ritual roles. As Flood (1996) and Durkheim (1912) argue, such purity codes are socially constructed mechanisms that regulate access to the sacred, often privileging male bodies as more 'ritually stable.' However, a key point to consider is the concept of fasting, where men and women collectively abstain from food to achieve a purified body. Nevertheless, the logic of a menstrual cycle being impure is evidently a

guise to allow men a platform rather than women. Participant 4 offered a more progressive view, but also seems to support the idea of the impurity that menstrual cycles inflict, and fear for the elders:

“I feel as though women can dance, they must not dance during their menstrual cycle and must observe the usual Kirtan fasting as we do. I want more women to dance to Nagara, but our elders are very strict.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

This statement reflects a generational shift. While acknowledging traditional restrictions, Participant 4 advocates for greater inclusion, challenging the rigid gender binaries that have historically governed Nagara. Butler’s (1990) theory of inclusivity and Halberstam’s (2012) work on gender fluidity support this call for reimagining sacred roles beyond binary constraints; however, it is not enough to override the power of the elders as custodians of tradition. I understand the inclusive attempt by participant 4; however, there is still a sharp resonance to ‘what the elders might think.’ Participant 3 noted:

“By removing women, the elders ensured that men retained dominance and authority over Nagara dancing.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

This critique highlights the political dimension of exclusion, particularly for young, knowledgeable, and queer dancers, who argue that men dominate the dance space. This assertion reflects the shift the dancer wishes to implement, but is hindered by the influence of religious, traditional, and elder perspectives. What is framed as ritual purity may also function as a mechanism of control, reinforcing male authority in cultural and spiritual domains. As Brickell (2005:36) argues, gendered exclusions in performance spaces often reflect broader patriarchal structures that marginalise women’s voices and limit the transformative potential of ritual, supporting one and not the other.

In summary, the exclusion of women from Nagara dancing is not merely a matter of tradition but a reflection of how gendered power is maintained within sacred performance. While some participants defend these practices as necessary for ritual sanctity, others challenge their validity, calling for a more inclusive and equitable reimagining of spiritual embodiment.

6.2.3. Ritual Embodiment as Gender Expansion

Nagara dancing within the framework of *Kirtan* operates as a sacred conduit through which gendered embodiment, devotion, and cultural continuity intersect. Rooted in *Bhakti* practice and ritual performance, *Kirtan* is not merely an expressive dance; it is a spiritual enactment, assembling what Turner (1969) describes as *communitas*, the affective bonds formed in ritual spaces. As Zubko (2019)

and Vatsyayan (2022) argue, dance in Hindu contexts serves as a site of divine invocation, where movement becomes a theological medium rather than an aesthetic display. *Kirtan* reflects this devotional logic, where dancers, often men, perform sacred femininity not as mimicry, but as ritual possession imbued with divine intentionality. Participant 1 affirmed this by stating,

“For Kirtan, I participate for various reasons. Some of us take vows, while others do it for joy and happiness, inviting people to become themselves spiritually when they are together.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

This devotional lens aligns with Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) concept of the lived body, where embodied ritual does not merely represent spirituality but enacts it as a phenomenological experience of becoming. Participant 1’s reflection provides a compelling insight into how spirituality is embodied, not just symbolically, but experientially. Their description of participating in *Kirtan* ‘for joy and happiness’ or through ‘vows’ reveals a multi-dimensional relationship to ritual: one that blends discipline, intention, emotional resonance, and communal invitation (Nair, 2014).

Merleau-Ponty’s (1945) concept of the *lived body* positions the body as the primary site of perception and meaning-making, not as a vessel separate from consciousness, but as integrally bound to it. When Participant 1 speaks of becoming oneself spiritually ‘when they are together,’ they’re describing something Merleau-Ponty (1945) would view as a phenomenological emergence, where being is co-constituted through bodily action, emotion, and intersubjectivity in a shared ritual space.

Linking this to ritual embodiment, we see *Kirtan* not just as musical devotion but as a practice where identity and spirituality are felt, shaped, and expressed through movement, rhythm, voice, and relational energy. The act of singing or chanting becomes a transformative moment, where the dancer or devotee doesn’t merely enact tradition but experiences a sense of becoming through ritual repetition. This aligns with theories that position ritual as not only symbolic but affectively generative, where devotion is understood through bodies in motion and connection as a form of ritual. Ritual transformation in *Kirtan* entails an intricate sequence of offerings, preparations, and bodily discipline. According to participant 1, women have a specific duty to fulfil when participating in the ritual.

This liturgical choreography reaffirms Kaeppler’s (2010) framework of movement as ritual semiotics and Bakka’s (2005) understanding of choreology as spiritual signification. The woman’s role might not be dancing; however, according to the nagara dancers, they have a necessary function for the men to embrace and embody the feminine divine. By initiating the ritual, femininity is reconfigured as both sacred and activating; her actions summon the divine through sensory offerings, enabling the male

dancer's transformation into the Goddess. By embracing feminine aesthetics under ritual prescription, the male dancer doesn't abandon masculinity but expands it through sacred femininity. Through this practice, performers enter a liminal space where traditional gender binaries are temporarily suspended, allowing for the construction of fluid identities within the ritual domain (Turner, 2017).

The ritual is equally shaped by spiritual labour, reflecting dynamic sites where normative gender boundaries are interrogated and reconfigured, particularly through acts of inversion and role disruption, as noted by Pollock (2010:148). This aligns with Butler's (1990) conceptualisation of gender as a performative act, shaped through culturally encoded bodily practices and sustained through social and ritual enactment. When ritual participants perform gendered expressions that deviate from traditional expectations, such as men adopting feminine gestures or women assuming masculine roles, these moments unsettle binary constructions. They affirm Merleau-Ponty's (1945) notion that the body is not passive, but a lived medium through which identity takes form and is continuously redefined. Participant 4, for instance, links ritual to aspirational devotion:

"I performed these rituals freely, yet I must admit that today's Kirtan does not follow the strict traditions of the past. People no longer fast as rigorously as they once did."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

This tension between tradition and transformation highlights what Turner (1982) terms *ritual reflexivity*, how participants negotiate sacred roles within changing social landscapes. Participant 1 detailed his bodily regimen, where the dancer must fast strictly, and no form of physical contact with a woman is allowed during the time. These rituals of abstinence, purification, and transformation align with Durkheim's (1912) view of ritual as a moral framework, constructing sanctity through discipline and separation.

Ritual embodiment also queers normative gender constructs without destabilising masculine identity. Rather than fragmenting selfhood, ritual dancing permits what Butler (2004) theorises as *gender contingency*: the emergence of alternative identities through culturally sanctioned performance. Participant 2 captured this expansion succinctly:

"I don't dress as a woman to attract attention, I do it to channel the divine, so others recognise me as a Goddess."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

By embodying sacred femininity, male dancers access spiritual depth, not gender confusion. As affirmed by Participant 4:

“On stage, I am not just a man. I am a person who is doing a dance that has been done for years as a tradition.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

Furthermore, these transformative acts of embodiment reaffirm masculinity through proximity to divinity. Participant 3 reflected that he feels like a man when he dresses as a woman. The participant's dressing as a woman is not an act of gender denial, but of gender affirmation. Rather than destabilising his masculinity, the ritualised enactment enhances his self-understanding of what it means to be a man. Phenomenologically, the body here becomes a site of epistemology: through feminine adornment and sacred movement, the participant experiences masculinity as relational and embodied. In essence, this statement illustrates that masculinity within Nagara is not diminished by feminine embodiment; it is deepened by it. Through sacred performance, the participant transcends binary norms and reconfigures manhood as a fluid, spiritually legitimated construct. His assertion highlights how ritual embodiment functions as an affirmation of selfhood rather than a loss of gendered integrity. This echoes McKenzie's (2001) claim that performance operates as a discipline of identity, regulated by tradition, which is enough to accommodate emotional and spiritual transcendence.

Ultimately, the ritualised embodiment enacted through *Kirtan* animates a theology of gender queering. Through synchronised drumming, sacred costuming, and purification rites, Nagara dancers enter a divine economy where gender becomes fluid, sacred, and devotional. In this sense, ritual embodiment is not a detour from masculinity; it is its sacred evolution. According to Kamath (2019), the body becomes a vessel, discipline becomes a form of power, and femininity, when inhabited through ritual, is a path to wholeness. This convergence of *Bhakti* (Misir-Hirallal, 2021), *Natyashastra* (Vatsayan, 1967; Nair, 2014), and gender performativity theories positions Nagara not merely as art, but as an embodied ontology, a rite through which masculinity touches the divine and is transfigured in its light.

Kirtan, as practised within Nagara, manifests not only as a sonic and performative offering but also as a metaphysical transaction between the dancer, deity, and community. Participant 1's account on *Kirtan*, which began when his grandfather observed it being done in a certain way, led him to explain further that one meaningful offering is enough. This attention to meaningful, singular offerings, such as a *Sari* or rice, aligns with Bakka's (2005) and Popa-Blanariu's (2015) emphasis on *ritual subjectivity*: the idea that symbolic acts carry more spiritual weight than abundance or material excess.

This performative subjectivity becomes even more potent in Participant 1's elaboration of how the dancer collects the *Sari* along with rice and salt, almost as if sitting on the mother's navel. This moment is emblematic of Turner's (1969) concept of *ritual embodiment* as a transformative process. Through this symbolic act, the dancer internalises the offering and becomes a living manifestation of the mother Goddess, merging gendered aesthetics, ancestral continuity, and divine presence.

This sacred embodiment queers normative masculinity within a devotional space. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, wherein identity emerges through stylised repetition, is activated here not in the secular realm but within the sacred. The male dancer, by embodying the mother Goddess, performs femininity as a spiritual authority rather than a social deviance by embodying the image of the Goddesses (Saraswathi and Lakshmi). Halberstam's (2012) work on *masculine performativity* helps further contextualise this dynamic, where the act of performing as the Mother Goddesses expands rather than diminishes one's masculine identity, generating what McKenzie (2001) might consider *ritual sovereignty*: the power to inhabit multiple gendered and spiritual states simultaneously, this theory perfectly aligns with the concept of embodiment as the Nagara dancers embody more than just one Goddess, whether symbolically or physically.

These acts of sacred performance hinge upon ritual discipline. Participant 1 insists that *Kirtan* must be observed in the traditional way and that younger dancers no longer fast in this manner. His tone conveys concern over the erosion of ritual seriousness, which Zubko (2019) warns is a result of the commodification of sacred performance. Fasting becomes an aesthetic practice, rooted in Durkheim's (1912) premise that ritual is a moral structure through which social cohesion and spiritual purity are sustained. The dancer's abstention from food, desire, and intoxication is not merely a tradition; it is the ontological scaffolding for sacred transformation. This aligns with Kaeppler's (2010) perspective on bodily movement as a ritually encoded discipline, where preparation is as vital as the dance itself.

Moreover, the intergenerational dimensions of fasting involve entire households, particularly women, fasting in solidarity with one another. Participant 1's reference to family members engaging in *week-long fasts* reinforces the collective underpinnings of *Kirtan*, where individual transformation is anchored in communal devotion and gendered devotion. Yet, the lamentation, "*but youngsters don't fast like this anymore*", signals what Shils (1971) would call *the dilution of charismatic tradition*: a fading connection between sacred repetition and spiritual efficacy. This loss speaks to a broader cultural tension, where ritual becomes vulnerable to formalism without substance.

In summary, the offerings, purification rites, and embodied gestures of *Kirtan* enact a form of ritual gender expansion, where masculinity is sanctified through its willingness to receive, nurture, and be

possessed by the divine feminine. Offerings are not merely symbolic, but rather, theological practices that render the male body ritually permeable, receptive, and transfigured. As such, ritual embodiment within *Kirtan* not only destabilises gender binaries but consecrates them, forming a sacred space that pulses with memory, discipline, and becoming. This now lays the foundation of the concept of masculinity and how it is navigated and maintained by Nagara dancers.

6.3. Navigation of Masculinity

The following section is not just an exploration of masculinity, but a navigation, a movement through, around, and sometimes against what masculinity is expected to be in the Nagara context. These themes are grouped because they trace a deliberate journey: from internal understanding, to ritual enactment, and then into contested terrain where masculinity is understood and reimagined in spaces traditionally coded as feminine.

Starting with how Nagara dancers articulate masculinity, we encounter perspectives shaped by culture, lineage, and personal negotiation. Their definitions rarely lean on abstract ideals; instead, they speak from embodied experience, from the feel of performing, chanting, sweating, belonging. This transitions into the second theme: masculinity through devotion and discipline, where ritual practice becomes a proving ground for what initiates the queering of gender. Here, gender is enacted through rhythm, posture, and sacred restraint. Masculinity isn't performed for dominance, it's offered through service, sacrifice, and spiritual rigour. The final theme inverts expectation in spaces feminised by care, aesthetic, or devotional softness. Some dancers reclaim masculinity not by rejecting femininity, but by coexisting with it. This reclaims manhood from the margins of rigidity, offering a more fluid and reflexive embodiment. In other words, it means that manhood is being freed from strict, narrow definitions. Instead of viewing masculinity as something rigid and unchanging, this reclaims it as flexible, expressive, and open to personal and emotional depth. It's a way of saying that being a man doesn't have to fit one fixed mould; it can also include softness, creativity, and devotion.

Together, these subsections reveal masculinity not as a destination but as a terrain of movement, contradiction, and meaning-making. They belong together because they map masculinity as lived: in relation to culture, ritual, and embodiment.

6.3.1 Masculinity as Responsibility, Discipline, and Care

The Nagara dancers' reflections on what it means to '*feel like a man*' reveal a complex and evolving understanding of masculinity that resists singular definitions and instead embraces a relational, ethical, and spiritually grounded identity. Their responses reflect a departure from hegemonic

masculinity as traditionally defined by dominance, emotional suppression, and heteronormative authority (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Instead, these men articulate a masculinity rooted in responsibility, discipline, care, and authenticity. These qualities emerge through their ritual practices and everyday interactions.

Participant 1's emphasis on *"how you carry yourself," "showing up for your family," and "not taking shortcuts"* reflects a masculinity grounded in moral accountability and ritual discipline. His understanding of manhood is performative in the sense that it is not inauthentic, but enacted through repeated, intentional behaviours that align with cultural and spiritual expectations (Butler, 1990). The integration of dance into his masculine identity, *"when I dance, that discipline, I feel like that's part of being a man"*, challenges the binary opposition between masculinity and softness, suggesting that sacred performance is not a departure from manhood but a deepening of it.

Participant 2's reflection similarly reframes masculinity as an internal ethic: *"stand by what I believe," "fast properly," "help others without expecting anything back."* These acts of self-discipline and humanity align with Connell's (1995) theory of gender relations, where Masculinity is always constructed in relation to femininity and other masculinities; it is relational, not autonomous. Ritual is a moral structure that binds individuals to collective values, especially in the construction of gender roles. His statement that *"being a man is about keeping your word"* positions masculinity as a form of ethical consistency rather than physical dominance. This resonates with Connell's (1995) notion of complicit masculinity, but reoriented through spiritual devotion and community service.

Participant 3's narrative offers a direct critique of hegemonic masculinity: *"I used to think being a man meant being strong, being quiet, being... not emotional."* His redefinition, *"being a man is having the courage just to be yourself"*, aligns with Halberstam's (2012) theory of gender fluidity and performative masculinity, which celebrates non-normative expressions of identity. His experience of softness and gentleness in dance does not undermine his masculinity; instead, it becomes a site of resistance against rigid gender norms. This performative courage, *"even when people judge or don't understand"*, is a powerful subversion of the stoic, emotionally distant male archetype as iterated by Connell (1995).

Participant 4's articulation of masculinity as *"presence"* rather than *"loudness"* further challenges dominant gender scripts. His emphasis on helping his mother, mentoring younger dancers, and respecting elders reflects a masculinity rooted in care, humility, and intergenerational responsibility. These values align with what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) describe as emerging configurations of masculinity that resist hegemonic dominance and instead prioritise relational ethics. His

uncertainty, *“I’m still figuring that out”*, also reflects the fluid and evolving nature of gender identity, supporting Butler’s (2004) argument that gender is not a destination but a continuous process of becoming.

Collectively, these narratives suggest that the dancers’ understanding of being a man is not defined by exclusion or hierarchy, but by inclusion, discipline, and spiritual alignment. Their masculinity is not threatened by ritual femininity or emotional expression; instead, it is affirmed through acts of devotion, care, and authenticity. This reconfiguration of masculinity within the sacred space of Nagara challenges the hegemonic model of masculinity. It offers a culturally embedded, spiritually resonant alternative, one that honours tradition while making space for transformation.

6.3.2. Masculinity as Devotion

The performance of Nagara dance reveals a reconfigured model of masculinity rooted not in dominance, but in spiritual discipline, ritual labour, and devotional integrity. Masculinity here is refracted through the lens of sacred duty, rendering it temporal, an obligation to uphold tradition, embody the divine, and submit to the rigours of preparation, performance, and post-performance purification. This aligns with Connell’s (1995; 2005) theory of *hegemonic masculinity*, which, while often associated with dominance, also accommodates culturally contingent rearticulations of authority and self-control. Within Nagara dancing, masculinity is expressed not through power over others but through adherence to devotional codes, bodily discipline, and moral accountability. Participant 1 exemplifies this ethos when describing his preparatory rituals before a *Kirtan* performance:

“In our house, we observe a different kind of fasting. Very strict! For example, the dancer must fast strictly, and no physical contact with a woman is allowed during the time. Even though I am married, my wife is not permitted to hand me my coat when I go out. Likewise, I make sure not to enter the kitchen as I get ready - any contact is considered a break of our ritual purity. My Mother used to stand by, ensuring that all of our protocols were followed correctly. We also have the ritual of applying ‘haldi’ water on our bodies before leaving the house for performances. When I return, the ‘haldi’ water and the lamp water are kept by the doorway, and regardless of what time it is, my Mother collects the lamp water to dispose of it and then gathers the ‘haldi’ water.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

This elaborates the process through which masculine identity is shaped by abstention, ritual restriction, and gendered spatial segregation. The body is not merely a site of display but becomes, as Durkheim (1912) proposes, a sacred vessel prepared through symbolic acts of separation and self-regulation. The dancer must abstain from pleasure, contact, and even nourishment to cultivate an

inner sanctum through which the divine can pass. Turner's (1969) concept of *liminality* is instructive here: the dancer, through fasting and abstinence, is suspended between the profane and the sacred, the masculine and the divine feminine.

These ritual preparations serve not only as individual acts of devotion but as enactments of culturally sanctioned masculinity. Not only does the ritual preparation include fasting and abstinence, but it also involves other practices, such as dressing and applying makeup, as well as the arduous process of wearing a *Sari*. Participant 4 articulates that the embodied fusion of physical rigour and spiritual aspiration requires a lot of work, especially with make-up, to transform from a male to a female appearance. Even tasks like pleating the *Sari* take effort; these efforts are categorised as religious labour as described by Banerji (2013). Banerji's (2013) analysis of religious dance resonates strongly with what I've encountered in the Nagara tradition. He describes the contradiction I've seen repeatedly: although the divine feminine is central to these performances, the actual labour of ritual, including choreography, its discipline, and its embodiment, is overwhelmingly carried out by men.

In my fieldwork, this same logic unfolded through participant narratives that justified women's absence as 'respect' or 'tradition.' But what Banerji (2013) points out, and what I argue through Butler's lens, is that this isn't just about gender roles; it's about performance as power. When male bodies are positioned as the only legitimate vessels of divine enactment, ritual labour becomes a mechanism that both honours and controls femininity. It stabilises masculinity not just as normal, but as sacred. Participant 2 similarly notes the temporal structure of the ritual discipline, where preparing for a performance has become a routine. This form of religious labour becomes a routine for the dancers, who are not shy when expressing how they 'get ready' for the event. This is often invisible and aestheticised onstage, and is a form of devotional discipline, echoing *Bhakti* philosophy's emphasis on physical surrender as a means of spiritual ascent (Pillai, 2022). It also reflects the framework of *embodiment* as discussed by Turner (1982) and Merleau-Ponty (1945), where meaning is generated not abstractly but through corporeal experience, initiating liminality, and queering masculinity.

Ritual thus becomes habitual, not spontaneous. As Connell (2005) suggests, masculinity is not merely performed episodically; it is inscribed through routine practices that mark belonging to a normative, honour-based structure. The Nagara dancers' repeated and voluntary submission to fasting, modesty, aesthetic discipline, and post-performance purification rituals reinforces a form of masculinity rooted in spiritual consistency rather than performative volatility. Participant 1 further describes this devotional labour as a lifelong commitment:

“I’ve made a crown, one every year, and during Navratri, a new crown would replace the old one. I remember all the effort, even using super glue for the decorations. But now, after turning 70, I feel I must retire, and I’ve stopped making things. I worry now if dancers have the same motivation I had.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

Here, devotional craftsmanship becomes a masculine virtue, echoing Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of *embodied culture*, in which accumulated ritual knowledge and artisanal skill confer social legitimacy. Making a dance prop requires effort and time, and the annual commitment of participant 1 speaks to his dedication to his art. However, his concern with youth preserving the ‘same motivation’ reflects a generational anxiety about the erosion of disciplinary masculinities and their replacement by performative spectacle (Zubko, 2019). His concerns align with how the newer dancers interpret the level of effort and dedication required to embody the art. Even in the conventional dance space, I share similar concerns and have noticed a shift in the efforts taken by young dancers. What emerges across these narratives is an iterative, embodied, and sacrificial form of masculinity, where changes are evident but continuity is allowed. This form is not shaped by proximity to power, but by proximity to Seva (selfless service), where the older dancers selflessly assist the younger dancers in adjusting to the physical demands required of a Nagara dancer. As Participant 3 summarises:

“Backstage taught me patience and care by fixing costumes, calming nerves, and cheering others on. Now, with my own children, I find myself doing the same, nurturing their dreams and helping them shine, just like we did before the curtain rose.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

Such acts of nurturance, often coded as feminine, are reclaimed here as disciplined masculinities; quiet, sustaining, and fiercely devoted. This hybrid masculinity, drawing equally from ritual austerity and backstage caregiving, contests Western hegemonic ideals of emotional stoicism and individualism (Anderson and McCormack, 2015). Ultimately, Nagara dancing ritualises masculinity as *discipline in devotion*. Fasting, make-up application, restriction of touch, and the aesthetics of femininity are not opposed to manhood but are reconfigured as avenues for expanding it. When embodying the Goddess, these dancers embody a new masculine ideal, choreographed not by brute force or conquest, but by presence, preparation, and sacred endurance. This form of masculinity nurtures a newly formed identity that extends beyond the ritual space.

6.3.3. Reclaiming Masculinity in Feminised Spaces

This theme examines how Nagara dance serves as a medium for performers to reclaim and redefine masculinity through active bodily expression. Traditional concepts of masculinity, which emphasise

strength and dominance, are reinterpreted in this performative context, where dancers engage their physicality to communicate vulnerability, power, and self-awareness. The study of this theme is integral to understanding how masculinity can be enacted and reimagined through embodied practices, addressing the research question of how Nagara dancers navigate their masculinity.

Drawing on Butler's (2015) theories of performativity versus performance, one might argue that these dancers actively construct and redefine masculinity through an embodied practice that transcends conventional gender roles. Likewise, the symbolic resonance of this offering aligns with Turner's (2017) concept of liminality, wherein ritual spaces allow performers to redefine their social identities and challenge established norms. The act of dancing becomes a transformative ritual, a dynamic process that forges a unique link between personal aspiration and collective cultural heritage. In providing this dual offering, the dancers not only honour traditional spiritual practices but also reimagine their masculine identity, blending ritual devotion with self-empowerment. Thus, Nagara dance emerges as an art form that fosters both individual spiritual growth and communal identity, reaffirming the fluidity and resilience of cultural expressions.

Anderson's (2009) inclusive masculinity further supports the dancer's narrative, highlighting that vulnerability, emotionality, and cross-gender performance can coexist within masculine identities, showcasing its multifaceted nature. Redefining what it means to be a man or masculine is a central aspect raised by the participants. Participant 1 specifically states:

"When I move to the rhythm of the Nagara drums, I feel like I'm understanding what being a man means for me, it's not about being tough; it's about being you, it's about knowing who you are being and also knowing what you are as an individual after the dancing."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

Rejecting traditional notions of toughness, the performer emphasises wholeness and individual identity as central to his understanding of manhood. The quote reflects the transformative nature of Nagara performance in shaping masculine identity, emphasising wholeness and self-awareness over traditional notions of toughness. Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of gender relations posits that masculinity is always constructed in relation to femininity and other submissive masculinities, making it relational rather than autonomous. This perspective illustrates how Nagara dance enables men to embody collective spiritual ideals while also discovering individuality beyond the ritual framework, fostering personal growth and self-awareness.

The redefinition of what constitutes masculinity and reclaiming what it means to be a man was also noted by Participant 1 (the eldest male dancer), who recalled how, in his early experiences, the pounding rhythm of the Nagara drums challenged him to rethink the rigid definitions of masculinity

he had grown up with. *"I was always told that a man must be tough",* he explained, *"but as soon as I began moving to that rhythm, I felt an inner shift, was reshaping what it meant to be a man in my own way".* He's challenging the idea that being a man means being tough. Through dance, he felt a shift, realising that masculinity can include emotion, softness, and spiritual depth. It's his way of reclaiming manhood by making it personal and expressive, not rigid.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Participant 3, who stated that Nagara dancing provides an outlet for embracing the divine, rather than focusing on a male or female aspect. The participant's reflection on his account of Nagara dancing highlights a redefinition of masculinity that embraces sensitivity and vulnerability, traits typically associated with femininity, as noted by Butler (2004) and Brickell (2005). It is essential to note that while the older Nagara dancers focused on embodying the Goddess, the younger dancers were more comfortable suggesting that Nagara dancing serves as a platform to challenge societal notions of masculinity and still be accepted. This was aligned with them being openly gay. Additionally, this resonates with the assertions of Kamath and Fluecker (2020), who state that Indian forms of dance, which include a sense of drag, openly defy gender norms. In this case, such performances are similar to Nagara dancing. This perspective challenges the dominant paradigm that equates masculinity solely with strength and endurance, suggesting that vulnerability and self-awareness are equally important aspects of masculinity. However, the statement raises questions about the separation of identity during performance and in personal life, implying a duality that may reinforce traditional distinctions between public and private selves, a concern also raised by Butler (2004).

Nagara dancers' understanding of masculinity contributes valuable insight into evolving masculine performativity in ritual contexts. Another aspect highlighted relates to the way male Nagara dancers feel about being referred to as women. Participant 1 stated:

Many people refer to us, men performing Nagara dance in a feminine manner, as 'Naachanya', but I believe this word is misunderstood. In my experience, people don't understand that 'Naachanya' is used only for a woman dancer. 'Naachwala' is the right word for a man who dances, even if he uses women's clothes or movements or not.

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

Thus, there is a distinctly specific terminology used to describe Nagara dancers. The response also emphasises that Nagara dancing involves a man dancing as a woman – the man does not become a woman. This is also highlighted by Kamath's (2019) concept of audience misrecognition and ritual legibility. Participant 1 also indicated that questions are sometimes raised about why men dress in ways typically associated with women during performances, asserting that despite the dress type, "we

remain 'Naachwala' because our identity within our homes is never changing, even when we do feminine things in public performances or ritual." This again reiterates that Nagara dancers are men.

There tends to be confusion that being a man or woman is related to how one dresses or their sexuality, as noted by Butler (2006). Nagara dancing embodies that one can dress as a woman or be gay (as in the case of two of the participants) and remain a man, thereby challenging notions of masculinity, as indicated by Butler (2006).

Participant 3 vividly remembered a performance early in his career, during which whispers arose in the audience, questioning his use of traditionally feminine movements. Instead of feeling diminished, he embraced his identity as a *'Naachwala'*, understanding that his performance, which artfully combined strength with delicate expression, was a complete celebration of his whole self. *"I learned that dancing doesn't take away my masculinity; instead, it expands it"*, the participant explained, further stating that *"by merging assertiveness with tenderness, I found a way to embody the better side of who I really am"*. His experience illustrates how Nagara dance allows male performers to transform conventional gender norms, using artistic expression as a means of reclaiming and enriching their understanding of masculinity.

The findings extend Butler's work by situating it within a non-Western, culturally specific context, challenging universalised notions of performative gender roles. Butler's (2004) theory of gender as performative argues that gender is not an inherent quality but rather a set of repeated actions and behaviours that produce the appearance of a stable identity. According to Butler (2004), these performances are socially constructed and reinforced over time, meaning that gender is something we continually create and re-create through our actions, rather than a fixed trait that we are born with. When applied to Nagara dance, this theory is vividly confirmed: dancers embody gender through carefully learned movements, costumes, and rituals. They are not merely expressing a pre-existing masculine or feminine identity; instead, they actively construct and negotiate their gender through performance. In the context of Nagara dance, gender performance is intricately intertwined with local traditions, religious practices, and cultural histories, providing unique frameworks and expectations that shape the dance.

This not only reinforces the idea that gender is performed, but it also highlights the diversity of expressions and the idea of power in shaping what is considered masculine or feminine. In this way, the study of Nagara dance enriches our understanding of performativity by demonstrating that the way gender is performed is deeply rooted in specific cultural narratives and practices. The theme highlights how embodiment in Nagara dance serves as a powerful tool to challenge rigid gender constructs, allowing performers to express masculinity in more fluid and culturally resonant ways.

Participant 1 further asserts, *“through Nagara dance, I feel connected to my roots and understand my role as a man in our community and mostly as a devotee to the Goddess”*. This reflection encompasses the dual function of Nagara dance as both a cultural and spiritual practice, emphasising its role in reinforcing personal and communal identity. From a research perspective, it highlights how traditional dance forms act as vessels for cultural heritage, connecting individuals to their historical roots and embodying the values that men are expected to uphold. Furthermore, the reference to devotion delineates the spiritual dimension of Nagara dance, aligning with the anthropological perspective that dance serves as a ritualised form of worship.

The transformation from male to female within *Kirtan* emphasises the fluidity of gender identity and its performative dimensions. By adopting attributes associated with Goddesses such as Saraswathi or Lakshmi, male performers channel divine energies, thus challenging rigid binaries and reinforcing the notion of gender as a sacred embodiment (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). These rituals demonstrate how masculinity can become adaptable, fostering inclusivity within religious frameworks.

Participant 3 stated: *“Transforming from a male to a female appearance requires a lot of work, especially with makeup. Even tasks like pleating the Sari take effort.”* This statement emphasises the intricate labour involved in adopting a feminine appearance for performances, highlighting both technical skill and symbolic significance. The tasks, such as applying makeup and pleating the *Sari*, depict a form of masking that enables the process of embodiment. This also showcases the performer’s dedication to authenticity and respect for the art form. This transformation extends beyond physical appearance, encompassing the cultural and spiritual aspects of the role. It reflects how traditional dance incorporates meticulous preparation to honour its heritage. Moreover, the process symbolises the performative nature of gender, aligning with Butler's (2004) concept of gender as an act rather than a fixed identity, enriching the expressive depth of Nagara dancing. Participant 3 further states:

“We usually have someone older or a woman to assist us quickly in the back to help with these details, and we manage it nicely. I'm so used to it now that I can handle it myself. It has just become second nature. I now help the newer dancers as they join the group.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

Participant 3 sheds light on the evolving relationship between masculinity and performance within the framework of Nagara dancing. The act of seeking assistance from older dancers or women to achieve feminine transformation underscores the collaborative nature of the dance space, where traditional gender roles intersect with performative ones. For male dancers, mastering skills like pleating *Saris* and applying makeup symbolises a departure from rigid notions of masculinity, embracing fluidity and

adaptability as essential aspects of their roles. This gradual mastery, as described, transforms these tasks into second nature, signifying the performers' dedication to redefining their masculine identity within cultural practice (Brickell, 2005). Male dancers who contribute to functions traditionally associated with femininity challenge established narratives of masculinity, demonstrating how performance can transcend societal expectations (Brickell, 2005). In this way, the dancers balance artistic integrity with the progressive redefinition of gender roles, where masculinity adapts to accommodate expressions traditionally tied to femininity.

The dynamic of adopting a unique way of preparation for performance not only reinforces personal identity but also deepens the notions of masculinity, emphasising its ability to adapt and remain culturally relevant. This transformation illustrates how dancers navigate traditional gender roles within the artistic space, challenging rigid binaries while embracing fluid expressions of identity. Participant 1 further observed that, in addition to embodying feminine traits on stage, the process also necessitates adopting the role of a nurturer. Reflecting on this, he remarked:

“Backstage taught me patience and care by fixing costumes, calming nerves, and cheering others on. Now, with my own children, I find myself doing the same, nurturing their dreams and helping them shine, just like we did before the curtain rose.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

The quote presents the concept of a nurturer, traditionally linked to traits such as patience, care, and support, within the context of backstage interactions and parenting. From a masculinity perspective, the act of nurturing challenges conventional notions of masculinity that prioritise strength, dominance, and detachment over emotional and relational labour. The acknowledgement of backstage care, such as “fixing costumes, calming nerves, and offering encouragement”, disrupts rigid gender binaries by embracing the nurturing role as integral to both professional and personal spheres.

As a nurturer, the individual fluidly transitions between the backstage environment and the role of a parent, applying skills of patience and support to foster their children's development. This adaptation illustrates how nurturing extends beyond traditional gendered expectations, fostering emotional connectivity and mutual empowerment, as explained by Butler (2006). Masculinity, in this context, is redefined as inclusive of nurturing qualities rather than being solely tied to traditional ideas of authority and resilience (Connell, 2005). This narrative emphasises the importance of deconstructing the stigmatisation of nurturing traits within male identities. Framing nurturing as an essential component of human experience allows for a more holistic understanding of masculinity, one that validates emotional labour and caregiving as powerful, transformative acts rather than markers of weakness or deviation from societal norms.

Connell's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity provides a framework for understanding how dominant forms of masculinity maintain societal power by subordinating other gender expressions, particularly femininity. Within the Nagara dance context, this dynamic is both evident and challenged, as the interplay between masculinity and femininity unfolds both on and off the stage. Traditionally, dance spaces often reflect hegemonic masculinity by positioning men as authority figures or dominant performers while relegating women to peripheral roles.

Over time, performers' autonomy in handling these transformations and their agency in reshaping cultural narratives have emerged. This dynamic illustrates how masculinity can evolve within artistic traditions, creating a space for fluid gender expressions while upholding respect for cultural norms. The performance becomes a collaborative act of both preserving and innovating tradition, enriching its future possibilities.

The reshaping of roles in modern Nagara dance challenges hegemonic masculinity's rigidity by embracing fluidity in gender expressions. This interplay between femininity and masculinity not only enriches the art form but also critiques and redefines power dynamics, illustrating how cultural practices can serve as sites for both continuity and transformation. Through these negotiations, Nagara dance demonstrates the evolving, context-dependent nature of hegemonic masculinity. By embracing fluid expressions of identity, performers resist rigid gender norms, showing how masculinity and femininity can coexist within cultural practices. This dynamic transition between male and female presentations not only highlights personal agency but also broadens the understanding of gender as a constructed performance. As the discussion moves into gender identities and sexualities, it is essential to examine how these evolving perspectives within Nagara dancing influence the lived experiences of individuals, fostering inclusivity and reshaping cultural narratives around identity and expression.

6.4. Duality, Sacred Labour, Sexuality and Misconceptions

Duality and identity integration, sexuality and misconceptions, and embodied vulnerability and sacred labour have been grouped because they deal with what's often left unsaid in ritual discourse: the intimate, the misunderstood, and the quietly radical. Each one reveals how Nagara dancers negotiate inner contradictions and external expectations, making the body a site where identity, spirituality, and stigma intersect, providing a more profound understanding of how masculinity is portrayed and navigated.

In exploring duality, participants discussed the tension between public religious personas and their private emotional complexities. Identity wasn't neatly compartmentalised; it was layered, firm in

understanding, and deeply felt. Sexuality and misconceptions emerged as a theme through participants' accounts of being misread, judged, or burdened with assumptions based on the aesthetic softness or performative grace of Nagara. These misconceptions revealed how deeply aware Nagara dancers are of their perceived. Yet rather than shy away, dancers engaged these misreadings, offering counter-narratives that reframed misunderstanding as miseducation.

The theme of sacred labour, where vulnerability is not a weakness but a spiritual commitment to the ritual act, where they have to prepare themselves through fasting, dressing up and performing. Participants spoke of physical exertion, ritual responsibility, and emotional exposure not as burdens but as embodiments of service. Their labour is devotional, and their commitment is unwavering. Because when softness, spiritual intensity, and gender fluidity converge in one body, it disrupts how ritual legitimacy is traditionally imagined. These themes are threaded together by one core insight: Nagara isn't just danced, it's lived. And that living involves constant negotiation of how masculinity is navigated.

6.4.1. Duality and Identity Integration

Nagara dancing reveals how sacred embodiment and everyday masculinity can coexist as part of a fluid and integrated identity. Participants shared that shifting between ritual femininity during performance and social masculinity in daily life did not cause confusion; it created clarity. This duality allowed them to stretch and affirm their masculine selves rather than disrupt them. Gender, as Butler (1990) argues, is constructed through repeated acts; in Nagara, these acts are not only performative but sacred, giving dancers space to embody multiple expressions of self. Within this framework, ritual practice becomes a means of expanding identity rather than dividing it. The transition between these roles, both on and off the stage, reflects a lived coherence in which the spiritual and the social flow into one another. As Participant 1 puts it, this movement is not just between costumes, but between ways of being.

“When I wear a Sari and make-up, I know I’m performing for the Mother... I am still a man, and I cannot take that away; me being a man is upheld by my wife and children.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

Here, the act of wearing feminine attire is not a negation of masculinity but a ritualised offering. The dancer's masculine identity is reaffirmed through familial roles and social recognition, even as he temporarily embodies the Goddess. This reflects Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) notion of contextual masculinity, where hegemonic ideals are reconfigured through culturally specific practices. The sacred space of Nagara allows for a temporary suspension of gender norms, but the return to

domestic life re-establishes masculine legitimacy. Participant 2 echoes this sentiment, describing the fluidity of his transformation by stating that ‘people don’t understand’ that they change into the embodiment of the Goddess with utmost respect. But when they are off stage, life continues, with them embodying the roles of brothers, fathers, and so on. The concern of people misunderstanding their role as men invokes hegemonic masculinity, precisely as theorised by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005). This isn’t just about being seen as ‘a man.’ It’s about measuring up to an ideal that demands strength, control, and visibility. The fear of being misread reflects how deeply their social standing demands recognition. Although the participants also highlighted these perceptions of being a man as a measure of themselves, it is interesting to note that this form of self-measurement speaks to how they would like to be perceived by others. So really, this concern isn’t just personal; it’s structural. It signals the very pressure that hegemonic norms exert on everyday expressions of manhood, aligning with how true the concept of gender being a social construct is.

This highlights the performative clarity with which dancers navigate their dual roles. The transformation into the Goddess is framed as an act of reverence, not a case of identity confusion. Individuals manage multiple roles across different social settings. In this context, the ritual performance becomes a sacred script, enacted with full awareness of its temporality and purpose. Participant 3 offers a more introspective view, highlighting the emotional resonance of this duality:

“Our movements are part of the Mother, but when the music stops, I go home, I take off the Sari, and I’m back to being just me. Both are real.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

This quote reveals a profound sense of identity integration. The dancer does not view his ritual persona as a mask, but rather as an extension of himself. Nagara dancing disrupts the rigid norms of econo-heteropatriarchy by offering a gender expression rooted in ritual fluidity, emotional depth, and spiritual legitimacy, where softness, adornment, and performative femininity coexist with culturally affirmed masculinity. Both the sacred and the secular identities are ‘real,’ coexisting within a single embodied experience. Butler’s (1993) phenomenology of the body supports this view, suggesting that identity is not fixed but lived through bodily engagement with the world. The dancer’s body becomes a site of multiplicity, where gendered and spiritual meanings are enacted and reconciled. Both the secular and sacred bodies have created a liminal space within the dancer, where temporality allows the dancer to project one or the other, depending on the space, while noting both at the same time. This duality has adjusted into a daily rhythm that the dancers embody.

The preparation for performance highlighted by all participants is not a departure from everyday life, but an extension of it. This aligns with Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, where ritual creates a threshold space that allows for transformation. However, in this case, the liminal becomes habitual, suggesting a sustained integration of dual identities. The phrase 'just another side of me' reflects a comfort with multiplicity, where the dancer's identity is not fragmented but layered. The participants' narratives collectively challenge binary understandings of gender and identity. Rather than viewing their ritual embodiment as a threat to masculinity, they frame it as a sacred responsibility that enhances their sense of self. This is particularly evident in Participant 3's assertion:

"Through Nagara dance, I feel connected to my roots and understand my role as a man in our community and mostly as a devotee to the Goddess. I feel like a man when I dress as a woman. People don't feel what I feel, and I don't care."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

This statement powerfully disrupts normative gender logic. The dancer's masculinity is not compromised by feminine performance; it is affirmed through spiritual connection and cultural rootedness. Halberstam's (2012) concept of performative masculinity is applicable here, suggesting that masculinity can be expansive, incorporating traits and expressions traditionally coded as feminine. The dancer's indifference to external judgment, 'people don't feel what I feel, and I don't care,' signals a self-assured masculinity grounded in ritual authority rather than social conformity.

In summary, the duality experienced by Nagara dancers is not a site of tension, but rather one of integration. Through ritual performance, they embody a sacred femininity that coexists with their everyday masculine roles. This fluid navigation is made possible by the cultural and spiritual frameworks that legitimise their transformation. Drawing on the theories above, it becomes clear that identity within Nagara is not singular but sacredly plural. The dancers do not oscillate between selves; they inhabit a continuum of being, where devotion, discipline, and duality converge. The focus of how this duality is seen and understood by society is most evident through the data, even though they claim not to be bothered about what people think of them, they know what people say and they choose to ignore it, however, these responses speak to the concepts of masculinity and also the dancers' understanding of gender and ritual dance.

6.4.2. Sexuality and Misconceptions

This theme examines how Nagara dancing, as a sacred ritual practice, serves as a site where gender and sexuality are both contested and reimagined. Drawing on the theological principle that divinity transcends human binaries, the embodiment of the Goddess in Nagara performance challenges rigid

constructions of masculinity and femininity. These performances do not merely imitate femininity; they ritualise it, queering normative gender roles while simultaneously reaffirming spiritual devotion. The tension between sacred intent and public perception reveals how Nagara dancers must constantly negotiate their identities within a cultural framework that often conflates gender performance with sexuality.

Participant 2 stated that some men mistakenly assume that they are women and that there are always moments in which they have to correct them. This reflects the persistent misreading of ritual performance through a heteronormative lens. Butler's (1990) theory of performance versus performativity helps explain the difference between performance (deliberate) and performativity (which is innate). In this case, the dancer's embodiment of the Goddess is misread as a declaration of feminine identity, prompting inappropriate behaviour from male spectators. This misrecognition is shaped by hegemonic masculinity, which, as Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue, positions non-normative gender expressions as subordinate or deviant. The dancers' need to assert boundaries and clarify identity illustrates the fragility of masculinity when confronted with gender fluidity in sacred spaces. Participant 2 further explains:

"If a man genuinely wants to dance with you, that's okay on occasion, not all the time. Simply put, if you join in the dance, then I'm happy to dance with you."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

In addition, Participant 1 asserted:

"Most men who attend our performances respect us as dancers, but there are some who drink alcohol and misbehave with us; we don't like that."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

These reflections complicate the discourse on gender and performance. While Butler's (1990) framework explains how gender is enacted through social interaction, these quotes reveal the nuanced ways in which dancers distinguish between respectful engagement and boundary violations. The conditional acceptance of dancing with male audience members reflects a negotiation of sacred space, where consent and intention matter. Kamath (2019) also highlights how ritual performance in South Asian contexts often blurs the lines between gendered embodiment and social expectation. Socially, a man dressed as a woman may adjust to the normative view of gender, but in a sacred space with a ritual attached to this phenomenon, it is seen as acceptable. This contradiction forms the basis for discussing how gender is truly portrayed within Nagara dance.

Halberstam's (2012) concept of performative masculinity is also relevant here, as it allows for a masculinity that is not threatened by softness or grace but is instead defined by self-awareness and control, which can be disrupted when spectators impose secular or sexualised readings onto sacred acts. Moreover, the conditional acceptance of male participation in dance emphasises the tension between divine embodiment and human social constructs. While the dancer seeks to maintain the sanctity of the ritual, the audience's gaze often imposes heteronormative assumptions that reduce the performance to gender impersonation. This dynamic reveals the difficulty of sustaining a non-sexual, transcendent ideal of the divine in a context where gender and sexuality are tightly policed. The dancer's experience becomes a site of resistance, where sacred embodiment challenges the binary logic of gender and reclaims space for fluid identity within ritual frameworks. Participant 3 indicated:

"I dress as a woman not to entice, but to embody the divine in a form that people must know I am a Goddess."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

This statement aligns with Butler's (1990) notion that gender is not an essence but a performance shaped by cultural and ritual codes. In this context, the dancer's attire is not a costume but a sacred signifier, invoking the presence of the Goddess. Turner's (2017) theory of ritual embodiment supports this interpretation, suggesting that religious performance allows practitioners to transcend individual identity and channel divine energy, but in the same breath, liminally queer masculinity. Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theory of temporal masculinity is also relevant, as it highlights how ritual performance can reconfigure dominant gender norms by allowing men to embody femininity without compromising their masculine identity. In this case, a man who is comfortable dressing as a woman and wants to publicly be known as a living embodiment of the Goddess, which challenges the general understanding of masculinity.

Participant 3 further iterated: *"When I dance with straight men, it is not fuelled by sexual attraction but by a shared commitment to our art."* He further explained: *"Our movements are a sacred dialogue that expresses respect, purity, and mutual understanding."* These reflections reinforce the idea that ritual performance is a collaborative act rooted in devotion rather than desire. In my understanding, the quotes above suggest that a line needs to be drawn when performing, which includes not dancing to attract, but to dance with the utmost respect, respect for oneself and the person one dances with. Popa-Blanariu's (2015) theory of choreological semiotics helps explain how movement functions as a sacred language, conveying meaning beyond verbal expression. Participant 3 emphasises 'sacred

dialogue,' challenging the assumption that gendered embodiment must be sexualised, instead framing it as a form of embodied theology. In contrast, Participant 1 stated:

"In that space, we honour the beauty of the tradition without forgetting our true selves. Our performance can be meaningful and is not moved by desire, even when we look at women in the audience, we focus on our dances and not attraction to the audience, whether men or women."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

Participant 1 shows how Nagara dancing blends tradition with self-awareness. By focusing on the dance rather than desire, even when noticing the audience, he emphasises spiritual discipline over distraction. The performance becomes meaningful because it honours the ritual while staying true to one's inner values. This perspective reflects an ascetic view of performance, where desire is bracketed in favour of spiritual focus. While Butler (1990) would argue that all gendered acts are socially constructed and interpreted, this quote suggests a deliberate effort to separate sacred embodiment from eroticism. However, as Halberstam (2012) notes, for queer performers, desire can be an integral part of identity and expression. Popa-Blanariu (2015) also cautions against divorcing art from affect, arguing that emotional and erotic dimensions enrich rather than diminish performance. A more inclusive approach would recognise that desire and devotion are not mutually exclusive but can coexist within sacred performance, offering a profound understanding of masculinity and embodiment.

Participant 2's declaration: *"I don't dress as a woman to attract men, I do it to for the prayer, so others know me as a Goddess,"* reinforces the theme of sacred embodiment. Zubko (2019) emphasises the spiritual intentionality behind such performances, suggesting that the religious aspect must take precedence over any other feeling involved in the dance. Participant 3's statement, *"When I dance as an offering to the divine, I don't feel bound by being a man or anything else, I feel free,"* further illustrates how ritual dance enables the transcendence of gender binaries. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that such practices challenge hegemonic masculinity by allowing for alternative expressions of strength, grace, and devotion. However, the notion that these dancers are explicitly stating that the dance is an offering or veneration to the Goddess speaks to the grounding that they perform with; they know what they're doing, they understand why they're doing it, and most importantly, they know how to do it.

These findings suggest that Nagara dancing offers a unique space for exploring gender fluidity within a sacred context. Halberstam's (2012) theory of performative masculinity and Williams's (2011) work on the drag of masculinity note that, in most cases, such forms of gender fluidity are not supported

within all of the secular spaces. Ritual performance expands the boundaries of masculine expression and allows men to dress as women without intentionally pointing out the queered nature of the performance. However, Western frameworks often locate gender fluidity in secular or subcultural spaces. In contrast, Nagara dancing demonstrates that religious dance can also serve as a powerful site of identity negotiation and transformation. The theological belief in a non-gendered divine allows Nagara dancers to embody a broad spectrum of identities, challenging traditional constructs of masculinity and femininity.

Among the participants, two are openly gay, bringing unique perspectives shaped by their identities and their ability to challenge traditional norms of masculinity through the fluidity of performance. The other two dancers identify as heterosexual, yet their involvement in portraying feminine divine figures also allows them to explore dimensions of gender and spirituality outside societal expectations. Together, their experiences speak to the inclusive and transformative potential of this sacred environment, where individual identity and collective artistry are deeply intertwined. Nagara dance ritual spaces often function as transformative arenas where heteronormative constructs of masculinity are questioned, and alternative identities are embraced. These spaces provide a safe and affirming environment for queer performers, promoting inclusivity and fostering creative expressions of masculinity that diverge from traditional societal norms. This theme sheds light on how Nagara dance becomes a platform for challenging and expanding the boundaries of masculinity, as noted earlier. Participant 1 further indicated that the embodiment of the goddess must be maintained:

“I change my appearance to look as closely as I can to the Goddess. Embodying the Goddess is my main goal, and by doing this, I forget my essence of being a man, I become her and she becomes me, there is no in-between, but I am still a man and I cannot put into words the feeling.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

The statement aligns with Butler’s (1990) concept of citationality, transcending traditional gender binaries through ritualised expression. This profound connection is described as a merging of identities where the dancer becomes the Goddess, and she becomes him, illustrating a blurring of boundaries that challenges societal constructs of masculinity (Brickell, 2005). Despite this transcendence, the performer remains grounded in his male identity, highlighting the fluidity of self-expression within a sacred framework (Halberstam, 2012).

Queer identity theories, including Butler’s (1990) citationality, speak to the dancer’s adoption of ‘embodying the Goddess’ during *Kirtan* as an expression of this theory, challenging essentialist views of gender while maintaining his male identity. Halberstam’s (1998) perspectives on gender fluidity celebrate such non-traditional expressions, showing how performative empowerment transcends

binary gender labels. The intersection of masculinity and queer theories in this context reveals an evolving narrative of male identity, emphasising inclusivity and resistance to rigid societal norms.

By embodying 'womanhood' through performance, the dancer redefines masculinity, viewing it not as contradictory but as an extension of his self-expression. This duality embodies the transformative power of gender fluidity and dance. Participant 1 further explained:

"They think that because I do this, I am a gay or want to attract men. They don't see the truth of what we do as Nagara dancers; they don't know I am a married man with grandchildren. But there are gay men who do perform, you can tell."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

These quotes emphasise the societal judgment faced by Nagara dancers, particularly in public spaces, where gender performance is often misinterpreted. Butler's (1990) concept of performativity versus performance provides a framework to analyse this misjudgment. The dancer's attire and movements challenge rigid binary gender norms, prompting misconceptions about his identity and sexual orientation. Additionally, cultural studies highlight how sacred contexts, such as *Kirtan*, shield performances from prejudice by framing them within tradition and spirituality. In contrast, public events expose dancers to societal biases shaped by stereotypes and limited understanding. Acknowledging diverse identities within Nagara dancers, the quote reveals the tension between personal identity and external perception. This narrative calls for cultural education and broader acceptance of gender fluidity, urging society to move beyond surface judgments and appreciate the artistry's more profound significance. Participant 4 (the youngest in the focus group and openly gay) also shared his personal experiences regarding Nagara dancing misconceptions:

"Once, after a performance, someone approached me. They asked me why I do this type of dance, only gay men do these things. They didn't call me bad names, but I know, being a Nagara dancer, one can't even think of being gay. Me being a man. I stood my ground, not in anger, but they needed to know why I did this."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

The quote highlights the societal challenges faced by male Nagara dancers, shedding light on gender stereotypes and misconceptions that persist in society. The dancer recounts being questioned about his participation in a dance form stereotypically associated with a particular sexual orientation, reflecting a broader societal tendency to equate specific art forms with rigid gender roles and identities, thereby marginalising those who deviate from these norms (Butler, 1990). However, the dancer's response demonstrates resilience and a commitment to self-expression. By 'standing his ground', he not only defends his personal choices but also challenges the audience's preconceived notions. His non-confrontational approach emphasises the importance of addressing stereotypes with calm assertiveness, fostering understanding and dialogue (Halberstam, 2012). This narrative further

reveals the cultural stigmatisation faced by male dancers in traditionally feminine-coded art forms, emphasising the need for greater inclusivity and recognition of individual agency within the arts (Zubko, 2019).

By focusing on embodying the goddess and her divine power, the performer experiences spiritual empowerment and liberation, thereby reinforcing Butler's (1990) notion of performativity versus performance as a tool for self-expression and resilience. Misconceptions arise from a lack of understanding, where cultural practices are misjudged through biased lenses (Butler, 1990). The individual combats societal stereotypes by emphasising the spiritual and cultural significance of the dance, rather than submitting to external judgment. Additionally, the dancer's assertion of tradition and divine connection challenges rigid ways of perceiving Nagara dancers, asserting the value of individuality within cultural frameworks (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Halberstam, 2012). This perspective underscores the resilience of performers in preserving sacred practices while reconfiguring societal interpretations of masculinity and cultural identity.

As noted in studies of queer performance and religious praxis, rituals enable performers to navigate and subvert societal constructs of gender and sexuality, aligning with Halberstam's (2012) concept of performative masculinity. This dynamic empowers individuals to reclaim agency, fostering acceptance and redefining cultural norms through spiritual legitimacy.

6.4.3. Embodied Vulnerability and Sacred Labour

The theme of embodied vulnerability and sacred labour emerges as a powerful lens through which to understand the physical, emotional, and spiritual demands placed upon Nagara dancers. While much of the discourse surrounding masculinity in ritual performance focuses on transformation, discipline, and gender fluidity, this theme draws attention to the often-overlooked labour that underpins sacred embodiment. This labour is not merely physical; it is affective, aesthetic, and devotional. It is through this labour that dancers not only prepare their bodies for ritual performance but also negotiate their identities, sustain cultural memory, and transmit spiritual meaning. The participants' narratives reveal that sacred embodiment is not a passive state but a deeply embodied process that requires endurance, care, and vulnerability. These dimensions are best understood through the theoretical frameworks of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty, 1945), ritual performance (Turner, 1969), and gender performativity (Butler, 1990), all of which converge to illuminate how sacred labour becomes a site of masculine reconfiguration. Participant 1, the eldest dancer, offered a poignant reflection on the physical toll of performance:

"I've been doing this thing for decades now, nothing really is difficult, but my age is catching up to me now, I need assistance now and then."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

This statement, while brief, encapsulates the intersection of ageing, ritual commitment, and embodied masculinity. Butler's (1993) phenomenology of the body posits that the body is not merely an object but a lived experience through which the world is encountered. For Participant 1, the ageing body becomes a site of both limitation and legacy. His need for assistance does not diminish his masculine identity; instead, it reframes it through humility, interdependence, and the continuity of tradition. His vulnerability is not a weakness but a testament to the longevity of his sacred labour, reinforcing Connell's (2005) assertion that masculinity is not fixed but negotiated through time, context, and embodied practice. Participant 2's account further illustrates the aesthetic and emotional labour involved in sacred performance:

"Backstage, everything is very busy and hectic. I take a long time to put on make-up because after I shave, I have to put extra make-up to cover the marks. With the make-up, I was terrible."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

This quote reveals the intimate, often invisible work that precedes the public ritual. The act of shaving, concealing, and applying make-up is not simply cosmetic; it is a ritualised preparation that transforms the male body into a vessel for the Goddess. Kaepler's (2010) theory of choreological semiotics helps us understand this process as a form of sacred coding, where each gesture, adornment, and movement carries symbolic weight. The vulnerability expressed in Participant 2's self-deprecating tone, 'I was terrible', signals a learning curve that is both technical and emotional. It is through this vulnerability that the dancer cultivates a deeper connection to the ritual, embodying Butler's (1990) notion of performativity as a repeated, intentional act that constructs identity through embodied practice. Participant 3's reflection shifts the focus from individual preparation to communal care:

"Backstage taught me patience and care by fixing costumes, calming nerves, and cheering others on. Now, with my own children, I find myself doing the same, nurturing their dreams and helping them shine, just like we did before the curtain rose."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

Here, sacred labour extends beyond the self to encompass mentorship, emotional support, and intergenerational transmission. This aligns with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of complicit masculinity, where men who do not embody hegemonic ideals still participate in sustaining masculine norms through relational practices. However, in this context, the relationality is not

complicit in patriarchy but subversive of it. The backstage space becomes a site of masculine tenderness, where care, patience, and emotional presence are not feminised traits but sacred responsibilities. This redefinition of masculinity through care work challenges the binary logic of gender roles and affirms Halberstam's (2012) argument that alternative masculinities can emerge through practices of vulnerability and nurturance. Participant 4's account reinforces the physical demands of transformation:

"Transforming from a male to a female appearance requires a lot of work, especially with make-up. Even tasks like pleating the Sari take effort."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

This statement foregrounds the labour of gender embodiment, where the act of becoming the Goddess is not effortless but painstakingly constructed. The pleating of the *Sari*, the application of make-up, and the transformation of posture and gesture are all acts of sacred labour that require discipline, skill, and emotional investment. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity is particularly relevant here, as it emphasises that gender is not a natural expression but a stylised repetition of acts. In the context of Nagara, these acts are not only gendered but also sacralised, transforming the dancer into a ritual vessel. The labour involved in this transformation is both physical and metaphysical, reinforcing Turner's (1969) concept of liminality, where the performer enters a threshold state that suspends ordinary identity and enables spiritual transcendence.

What emerges across these narratives is a shared ethic of devotion, where sacred labour is not instrumental but affective. The dancers do not perform for applause or recognition; they perform as an offering. This ethic is particularly evident in the intergenerational dynamics described by Participants 1 and 3, where the act of helping younger dancers is framed not as an obligation but as an honour. The backstage becomes a sacred space in its own right, where masculinity is expressed through mentorship, emotional support, and aesthetic preparation. This challenges dominant narratives of masculinity as stoic, autonomous, and emotionally distant, offering instead a model of masculinity rooted in care, vulnerability, and sacred responsibility.

Moreover, the physical and emotional demands of Nagara dancing are not viewed as burdens, but rather as rites of passage. The effort required to transform, to embody, and to perform is understood as a form of spiritual discipline that affirms the dancer's commitment to the Goddess and the community. This aligns with Durkheim's (1912) theory of ritual as a moral framework that binds individuals to collective values through shared practices. In this case, the shared practice is not only the dance itself, but also the labour that precedes and follows it, including fasting, dressing,

mentoring, and emotional preparation. These acts constitute a sacred economy of effort, where the value lies not in the outcome but in the intention and devotion behind it.

The theme of embodied vulnerability and sacred labour reveals how Nagara dancers reconfigure masculinity through acts of devotion, care, and transformation. Their narratives challenge hegemonic ideals by foregrounding the emotional, physical, and spiritual work required to embody the divine. Through the theoretical lenses of embodiment, performativity, and ritual theory, it becomes clear that masculinity in this context is not diminished by vulnerability but deepened through it. The sacred labour of Nagara dancing is not only a performance of gender but a ritualised expression of identity, community, and spiritual belonging. It is in the backstage chaos, with trembling hands applying makeup, quiet mentorship, and aching bodies, that masculinity is reimagined—not as dominance, but as devotion.

6.5. Performance, Community and Mentorship

The themes of sacred performance versus spectacle, collective identity and community, and mentorship, kinship and nurturance are grouped in this section as they speak to the relational heart of Nagara, asking how religious dance sustains, interprets, and reimagines masculinity. Each subsection offers a different lens into what holds this tradition together and gives it depth: not just rhythm and ritual, but people, care, and legacy.

In examining the tension between sacred performance and spectacle, participants revealed the tension between devotion and display. Nagara, when performed with intention and reverence, becomes a conduit of spiritual experience. Yet the same movements, when recontextualised for public stages or festivals, risk being emptied of their ritual potency. This theme examines how dancers establish boundaries, determining what is sacred, what is communal, and what is for display. Mentorship, kinship, and nurturance then step behind the scenes, into the spaces where knowledge is passed, not always formally, but through affection, correction, memory, and trust. Here, Nagara is sustained not by institutions, but by relationships. Participants spoke of mentors who nurtured not only technical skill but emotional and cultural belonging, revealing a pedagogy grounded in care.

Finally, collective identity and community ties it all together. Dancers don't perform in isolation; they move with and for others (other dancers and audience members). Through practice, rehearsal, and ritual gatherings, a shared language is formed. This isn't just about individual expression; it's about communal alignment. Together, these themes capture Nagara as a living tradition shaped by devotion,

intimacy, and social spirit, a dance that doesn't just convey meaning, but builds community through it. These communal notions also drive the understanding and interpretation of masculinity.

6.5.1 Sacred Performance vs Spectacle

The theme of Sacred Performance vs Spectacle explores the tension between devotional intent and aesthetic display within Nagara dancing, particularly as it evolves in contemporary South African contexts. While Nagara dancing is rooted in sacred ritual and spiritual embodiment, participants' narratives reveal growing concerns about its transformation into a form of entertainment. This shift raises critical questions about authenticity, ritual integrity, and the commodification of sacred practices. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Turner's (1969) *communitas* and liminality theory, Zubko's (2019) analysis of ritual dance aesthetics, and Butler's (1990) concept of performativity vs performance, this section examines how dancers negotiate the boundary between sacred embodiment and performative spectacle. The participants' reflections reveal a profound ambivalence: while they embrace innovation and creativity, they also express anxiety over the dilution of spiritual meaning in favour of visual appeal and widespread influence. Participant 1's reflection captures this tension with clarity:

"Some of these dancers today are behaving very badly. They are tarnishing my reputation. I cannot agree with or accept such behaviour, as it is not true to the behaviour of Nagara dancers. These groups involve people who don't know what to do when they dance, and that's why the communities mock us."

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

This statement reveals a concern not only with individual conduct but with the collective image of Nagara dancing. The phrase "tarnishing my reputation" suggests that sacred performance is not only a personal act of devotion but a communal identity that must be protected. Turner's (1969) concept of ritual as a structured, liminal process that fosters *communitas* is particularly helpful in this context. When dancers deviate from ritual codes, they risk disrupting the collective spiritual experience and undermining the moral authority of the performance. Participant 1's critique reflects a desire to preserve the sanctity of Nagara as a ritual practice, resisting its reduction to entertainment. Participant 2 echoes this concern, stating:

"The dancers today don't have discipline in performance, they don't know how to match movements, rituals, or respect for tradition. They are using the dance in ways for fame. They only like entertainment or personal gain rather than the true meaning of Nagara dancing. They do not respect elders. They want to be better."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

This quote highlights the perceived erosion of ritual discipline and intergenerational respect. The reference to “fame” and “personal gain” suggests a shift from collective devotion to individual recognition, aligning with Zubko’s (2019) critique of ritual aesthetics in contemporary Hindu performance. Zubko argues that when sacred dance is aestheticised for public consumption, its ritual function is compromised. The dancer becomes a performer, the audience becomes a consumer, and the sacred becomes spectacle. Participant 2’s lament about the loss of ‘respect for tradition’ reflects a broader anxiety about the commodification of sacred labour and the marginalisation of elder authority within the ritual hierarchy. Participant 3 offers a more nuanced perspective:

“It feels like the essence of the dance is being taken over by modern influences. It’s very scary because this might replace other traditional dances, which we will not allow. Bollywood movements are very exciting, but we can’t have it in everything, you know. We need to be original by carrying what our forefathers taught us.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

This statement acknowledges the appeal of innovation, ‘*Bollywood movements are very exciting*’, while simultaneously drawing a boundary around what is acceptable within sacred performance. The fear that modern influences might “*replace*” traditional forms speaks to the fragility of cultural memory and the urgency of preservation. Zubko’s (2019) notion of ritual choreography as a form of embodied memory is relevant here. When dancers abandon traditional gestures and rhythms, they risk severing the link between performance and ancestral lineage. Participant 3’s emphasis on “*what our forefathers taught us*” underscores the intergenerational transmission of sacred knowledge, positioning Nagara as a living archive of diasporic identity. Participant 1 deepens this critique by distinguishing between sacred embodiment and superficial mimicry:

“This is what happens when the true significance of a Nagara dance is misunderstood by a dancer. A pure Nagara dancer, like us, and the rest of us in the group, respects the traditions and the meaning behind the dance. There’s a fine line between honouring Nagara and simply dressing up as a woman without understanding its religious and essence.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

This quote highlights the semiotic depth of ritual performance. The act of “*dressing up as a woman*” is not inherently sacred; it becomes sacred only when embedded within a framework of ritual intention, spiritual discipline, and cultural knowledge. Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity versus performance helps unpack this distinction. While gender is always performed, not all performances carry the same cultural or spiritual weight. In the context of Nagara, the performative act must be anchored in a devotional purpose to be recognised as sacred. When this anchoring is lost, the performance risks becoming spectacle, an aesthetic display divorced from its ritual roots.

The participants' concerns about spectacle are not merely conservative reactions to change; they reflect a more profound anxiety about the loss of ritual coherence and spiritual depth. As Turner (1982) notes, ritual performance is a form of social drama that reaffirms communal values and cosmological order. When the performance becomes fragmented, incoherent, or overly individualised, it loses its capacity to generate *communitas* and instead becomes a site of social disintegration. Participant 1's fear of being mocked by the community reflects this breakdown: when sacred performance is misread as spectacle, it invites ridicule rather than reverence, undermining the dancer's spiritual authority and social legitimacy. Yet, not all participants reject change outright. Participant 3 acknowledges the need for creativity:

"We all now want to see more creativity. So we help each other, we try to learn from the elders, as they don't just want the same movements they've seen before. If we don't add something new, they say we lack originality, but that helps us."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

This quote suggests that innovation and tradition are not mutually exclusive. Instead, the challenge lies in balancing aesthetic evolution with the integrity of ritual. This aligns with Bakka's (2005) theory of choreology, which emphasises the need for both technical precision and cultural resonance in dance performance. Participant 3's emphasis on learning from elders while experimenting with new movements reflects a dialogical approach to tradition, one that honours the past while engaging the present. Participant 4 offers a more effective account of this balance:

"When I dance with men, I feel like we're working together to create something beautiful, a balance of energies that honours the Goddess."

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

Here, the focus is not on spectacle or tradition per se, but on the relational and spiritual dynamics of performance. The "balance of energies" suggests a sacred choreography that transcends aesthetic categories, rooted instead in collective intention and divine invocation. This perspective reframes the debate: the issue is not whether Nagara should evolve, but how it grows, and whether that evolution remains tethered to its sacred purpose.

The theme of Sacred Performance vs Spectacle reveals a complex negotiation between tradition and innovation, devotion and display, ritual and representation. The participants' narratives reflect a shared commitment to preserving the sanctity of Nagara dancing while grappling with the pressures of modernity, visibility, and aesthetic change. Through the theoretical lenses of Turner's ritual theory, Zubko's ritual aesthetics, and Butler's (2015) theoretical performativity, it becomes clear that sacred

performance is not defined solely by form, but by intention, context, and communal resonance. When these elements align, Nagara dancing remains a powerful site of spiritual embodiment and cultural continuity. When they diverge, it risks becoming a spectacle, visually compelling but spiritually hollow. The challenge, then, is not to resist change, but to ensure that change deepens rather than dilutes the sacred.

6.5.2. Mentorship, Kinship, and Nurturance

Nagara dance fosters a profound sense of camaraderie and brotherhood among its participants, serving as a space where male dancers cultivate relationships that extend beyond conventional notions of competition. This dynamic reflects Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) theory of hegemonic masculinity, wherein masculinity is not solely defined by dominance but also through collaborative and supportive networks led by hierarchy and patriarchy.

Within Nagara performances, dancers engage in collective rituals that reinforce their sense of belonging, emphasising unity over individual rivalry. Through shared experiences, mentorship emerges as a key aspect of this practice, allowing experienced dancers to guide and support newcomers, further solidifying their role within the tradition. Nagara dance requires disciplined coordination and embodied expressions that reaffirm masculine identity within a ritualistic framework. The repetitive enactment of movements and gestures contributes to the construction of masculinity, demonstrating how physical performance serves as both a cultural affirmation and a personal evolution. By engaging in communal dance practices, men navigate the boundaries of masculinity, redefining them through artistic expression rather than rigid societal expectations. Ultimately, Nagara dance becomes more than a cultural performance - it functions as a medium through which masculinity is collectively reimagined and strengthened. Participant 2 stated:

We're not just dancers; we're brothers. We support each other on and off the dance floor. Once we change into our outfits, we become sisters, and when we are done, we have a drink and call each other brothers.

Participant 2 (11 November 2023)

This quote encapsulates the fluid interplay between masculinity and femininity within the Nagara dancing context, challenging traditional gender norms through the transformative nature of performance. The reference to shifting identities from "sisters" during the performance to "brothers" afterwards illustrates how performers adopt both feminine and masculine traits, depending on the social and artistic demands of the dance. This transformation highlights gender as performative, aligning with Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity, where identities are shaped through repeated behaviours within specific contexts.

In Nagara dance, the embodiment of femininity, through costumes and gestures, enables male performers to transcend rigid definitions of masculinity. Simultaneously, the return to “brotherhood” signifies their alignment with communal solidarity, maintaining traditional masculine bonds. This duality critiques hegemonic masculinity as described by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), revealing its adaptability while fostering inclusivity within cultural frameworks. Nagara dance thus becomes a space that redefines gender identities through artistic and spiritual expression. Participant 4 reflects on his backstage experiences, emphasising the supportive environment fostered by the elder dancers, as discussed earlier. He commends their nurturing approach in addressing mistakes and their readiness to provide guidance and assistance, demonstrating a culture of mentorship and collaborative growth within the dance community:

“Backstage, everything is very busy and hectic. I take a long time to put on makeup because after I shave, I have to put extra makeup to cover the marks. With the makeup, I was terrible”.

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

The quote reflects the intersection of masculinity and gender performativity in performance spaces. Butler’s (1990) theory emphasises how repeated practices, such as makeup application, construct gender identity. The participant’s struggle with makeup highlights the negotiation of masculinity within artistic performance, aligning with Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Participant 4 further states:

“We have the elder dancers to help us quickly backstage to hold things while we get everything in order, especially with Saris. I’m so used to it now that I can manage on my own without much assistance, but I still look to my elders for a final check before I go on stage.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

The above quote highlights the structured hierarchy present in backstage dynamics, where elder dancers exercise authority and guidance, controlling the space to ensure efficiency and order amidst the chaos. This reflects Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity, in which senior figures assert dominance through mentorship and regulation, thereby reinforcing a hierarchical structure within traditionally male-dominated spaces. Their role extends beyond logistical assistance, such as holding costumes and aiding with *Saris*, providing mentorship and fostering discipline among younger dancers, and maintaining the continuity of established norms. By performing the final checks, elders assert their position as custodians of tradition and quality, ensuring that performance standards align with cultural expectations. Halberstam’s (2012) notion of alternative masculinities further contextualises these dynamics, illustrating how authority within artistic spaces is performed through both discipline and guidance rather than overt displays of dominance. This control

underscores the transmission of knowledge and reinforces their authoritative role in sustaining cultural practices while shaping the evolving expressions of masculinity within Nagara dancing.

The concept of teamwork is fundamental to the development of Nagara; however, this is challenged when examining how dancers navigate loyalty within the highly competitive Nagara groups that have emerged over time. Participant 1 explained the main issue surrounding the loyalty of dancers:

“The Nagara groups started to form, but they didn’t fully understand the importance of unity. Look at us - we’re a team sitting here together, working as one. We rise together and remain united. But they didn’t get it. They created groups by pulling one person from here, another from there, and so on. That’s where the problems began. Members had loyalty issues; some came from other groups. This is how the conflict started. You see, my group is fully committed.”

Participant 1 (11 November, 2023)

This quote highlights the intersection of masculinity and the rigid social structures within Nagara dance communities, particularly emphasising themes of loyalty, unity, and control. From a masculinity perspective, the assertion of group solidarity reflects a traditional masculine ideal rooted in strength, discipline, and collective identity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). The emphasis on “working as one” and “remaining united” aligns with hegemonic masculinity, where cohesion and mutual loyalty within a male-dominated space serve as markers of dominance and authority (Halberstam, 2012). However, the formation of fragmented groups, described as assembling individuals from various origins, challenges this structured ideal. Conflicting loyalties among members disrupt the rigid framework that the speaker associates with masculinity. The tension created by such fragmentation highlights the challenge of upholding traditional masculinity within evolving dance communities, echoing broader discussions on masculinity as both socially constructed and performative (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

The emphasis on “direct members, fully committed” further reinforces the rigid nature of Nagara dance communities, where adherence to structure and exclusivity safeguards cultural and social hierarchy (Halberstam, 2012). This reveals how masculinity within these spaces is tied to notions of control and order, resisting flexibility to preserve traditional values. Ultimately, the quote reflects the complex negotiation of masculinity within such cultural frameworks, where the balance between unity and individuality is constantly tested through performative expressions of identity.

The journey of a Nagara dancer is often a testament to resilience, passion, and dedication. Performances and interaction shape their identity not only as artists but also as individuals. Yet, the

spaces they navigate, whether backstage, on stage itself, or in the broader community, are filled with challenges and choices that define their growth.

Such movements may allow performers to diversify their skills, yet they also risk fragmenting ties essential for sustaining tradition and mentorship (Halberstam, 2012). This dynamic reflects the broader discourse on cultural transmission, where dancers navigate between innovation and adherence to established dance practices (Zubko, 2019). The presence of stable, direct group memberships offers a framework for guidance, continuity, and shared values. Ultimately, this interplay between tradition, mentorship, and individual ambition stresses the importance of social structures in the preservation and development of Nagara dance. By maintaining disciplined hierarchies, performers uphold both technical mastery and cultural heritage, ensuring the sustainability of this art form within evolving communities.

Within the context of Nagara dancing, community dynamics and shared traits play a pivotal role in sustaining tradition and fostering unity. The collective effort among dancers, through mentorship, shared rituals, and mutual support, highlights the interconnectedness of their identities. Connell's emphasis on the relational aspects of gender is evident as masculinity is negotiated collectively rather than individually, blending loyalty, discipline, and mutual care. The dancer's unity becomes a mechanism through which dancers reconcile the rigidity of traditional frameworks with evolving dynamics, ensuring both cultural continuity and adaptability. This aligns with Connell's (2005) emphasis on relational aspects of gender but extends the conversation by examining collective rather than individual negotiations of masculinity. The theme ultimately highlights how communal practices within Nagara dance nurture non-hierarchical, supportive masculinities.

The reception of Nagara dance by audiences and fan communities plays a critical role in shaping the performance's cultural significance and the dancers' identities, as alluded to earlier. Audience engagement not only validates the art form but also influences how performers adapt their styles and narratives to maintain relevance. Reception varies across different social groups, ranging from deep admiration for its traditional roots to evolving expectations for innovation in dance technique and presentation. The interactions between dancers and their fan base highlight the dynamic interplay between performance, identity, and communal recognition (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Nagara dancers often express how the reactions from audiences contribute to their sense of purpose and dedication to the craft. Participant 3, who has been dancing for a decade, noted the increasing demand for modernised interpretations:

“People now want to see more creativity. They don’t just want the same movements they’ve seen before. If we don’t add something new, they say we lack originality.”

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

This response reflects Butler’s (1990) concept of gender performativity, which emphasises how identities - both individual and collective - are constructed through repeated actions and interactions. The pressure to innovate in response to audience expectations suggests that Nagara dance remains a fluid and evolving practice rather than a static tradition. The relationship between performers and their fan base also extends beyond the physical space of performance. Social media has emerged as a vital platform for dancers to connect with their audiences and expand their reach. Despite growing acceptance and support, performers sometimes encounter resistance, particularly when preconceived notions of masculinity shape audience reception. Participant 2, a traditionally masculine dancer, shared an experience where a male spectator questioned their participation in an art form perceived as feminine:

“Someone told me that men shouldn’t be wearing things and moving like this - it’s not what men do. But the truth is, my dance has always been about skill and expression, not about proving what a man is. Other shows show men as men and women as women, but Nagara is different.”

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

This illustrates Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) argument on masculinity as a socially constructed and contested identity. While hegemonic masculinity often prioritises dominance and rigid gender roles, performative spaces like Nagara dance challenge these assumptions, allowing men to express themselves beyond traditional expectations. In contrast, some audience members actively celebrate the performative duality in Nagara dance. As audience expectations shape performance styles, dancers increasingly adapt to maintain relevance while preserving tradition. These changes are influenced by various socio-cultural and economic factors, demonstrating how Nagara dance continues to evolve within a dynamic interplay of community and collective identity.

6.5.3. Collective Identity and Community Belonging

The practice of Nagara dancing is not only a sacred ritual but also a profoundly social and relational act that fosters a collective identity and a sense of belonging within the community. For many of the participants, the ritual space becomes a site of shared meaning, where individual expressions of devotion are woven into a communal tapestry of cultural memory, spiritual continuity, and gendered solidarity. This theme explores how Nagara dancers construct a sense of belonging through shared ritual labour, intergenerational mentorship, and performative kinship. Drawing on Melucci’s (1989)

theory of collective identity, Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas*, and Claridge's (2020) relational dimension of social capital, this section examines how Nagara dancing cultivates a collective ethos that transcends individual identity and affirms cultural rootedness within the South African Indian diaspora.

Melucci (1989) defines collective identity as a process through which individuals recognise themselves as part of a group through shared experiences, emotional investments, and symbolic practices. In the context of Nagara, this process is enacted through the embodied repetition of ritual gestures, the shared labour of performance preparation, and the mutual recognition of spiritual purpose. Participant 2's notable reflection captures this affective dimension of collective identity:

"We're not just dancers; we're brothers. We support each other on and off the dance floor. Once we change into our outfits, we become sisters, and when we are done, we have a drink and call each other brothers."

Participant 2 (11 November, 2023)

This quote reveals a fluid kinship structure that transcends binary gender roles and affirms a shared ritual identity. The oscillation between "brothers" and "sisters" reflects a performative collectivity, where gendered embodiment is not fixed but relational, shaped by the sacred context of the performance. Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas* is particularly relevant here, as it describes the spontaneous, egalitarian bonds that emerge in liminal ritual spaces. In the context of Nagara, *communitas* is not only experienced on stage but also backstage, where dancers support, affirm, and care for one another. This shared vulnerability and mutual recognition form the basis of a collective identity that is both spiritual and social in nature. Participant 3 expands on this ethos of collaboration and intergenerational learning:

"We all now want to see more creativity. So we help each other, we try to learn from the elders, as they don't just want the same movements they've seen before. If we don't add something new, they say we lack originality, but that helps us."

Participant 3 (11 November, 2023)

This statement highlights the dialogical nature of tradition within Nagara dancing. Rather than viewing tradition as static, the dancers engage in a dynamic process of negotiation, where innovation is encouraged within the bounds of ritual integrity. Melucci's (1989) theory supports this view by suggesting that collective identity is not a fixed essence, but rather a process of shared meaning-making sustained through interaction, negotiation, and symbolic practices. In this case, the dancers' collective identity is forged through the co-creation of performance, where elders and younger

dancers collaborate to sustain and evolve the ritual form. This process affirms belonging not through conformity but through creative participation. Participant 4 offers a more effective articulation of this belonging:

“When I dance with men, I feel like we’re working together to create something beautiful, a balance of energies that honours the Goddess.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

This quote highlights the spiritual aspect of collective identity, where the act of dancing serves as a shared invocation of the divine. The “balance of energies” suggests a sacred choreography that transcends individual ego and affirms a collective purpose. Claridge’s (2020) relational dimension of social capital is proper here, as it describes how shared identity fosters unity, solidarity, and mutual support. In the context of Nagara, this relational capital is not only emotional but also spiritual, grounded in a shared commitment to honouring the Goddess through embodied devotion.

Participant 1’s reflection on mentorship further illustrates the communal ethos of Nagara, where the emphasis is on rootedness, continuity, and the moral economy of belonging. The concern is not merely about technical skill, but about the loss of relational depth and spiritual grounding that occurs when dancers move between groups without cultivating lasting bonds. Claridge (2020) asserts that belonging is cultivated through sustained investment in group norms, values, and obligations. For Participant 1, collective identity is not only about shared performance but about shared commitment—a relational contract that binds dancers to one another and to the sacred tradition they uphold.

The participants’ reflections also reveal how collective identity is shaped by diasporic memory and ancestral continuity. The narrative situates Nagara dancing within a broader historical trajectory of migration, displacement, and cultural preservation. The drum becomes a symbol of continuity, linking past and present, homeland and diaspora. Melucci (1989) emphasises that collective identity is sustained through shared narratives, symbols, and rituals that anchor individuals within a larger social and historical framework. +/In this case, the Nagara drum is not merely an instrument but a vessel of memory, a tangible link to ancestral devotion and diasporic resilience.

The transformation of Nagara into a “family business” reflects the adaptive strategies of diasporic communities, where sacred performance becomes a means of cultural survival and economic sustainability. Yet, even within this commodified context, the dancers maintain a sense of sacred purpose, affirming that their collective identity is not reducible to market logic but remains rooted in

spiritual intention. Collective identity is enacted through care work, mentorship, and emotional presence. The backstage becomes a sacred space of relational labour, where masculinity is expressed not through dominance but through nurturance and support. This challenges hegemonic models of masculinity and affirms a more inclusive, relational understanding of gender within the ritual context. Participant 4 further affirms this sense of belonging:

“I feel like I belong when I’m with my group. We all know what we’re doing, and we help each other. It’s not just about dancing, it’s about being part of something bigger.”

Participant 4 (11 November, 2023)

This statement encapsulates the essence of collective identity as described by Melucci (1989): a sense of “being part of something bigger” that transcends individual performance and affirms communal purpose. The dancer’s sense of belonging is not abstract but grounded in shared practice, mutual support, and spiritual alignment.

The theme of collective identity and community belonging reveals how Nagara dancing functions as a site of shared meaning, spiritual solidarity, and cultural continuity. Through the theoretical lenses of collective identity, *communitas*, and social capital, it becomes clear that Nagara is not merely a performance but a communal ritual that binds individuals to one another and to a larger diasporic legacy. The dancers’ narratives affirm that belonging is not a passive state but an active process of participation, care, and co-creation. In the sacred space of Nagara, masculinity is not asserted through isolation but affirmed through relationality, ritual labour, and collective devotion. This collective identity, forged through rhythm, memory, and mutual recognition, becomes a powerful source of resilience, meaning, and spiritual kinship in the lives of Nagara dancers.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter aimed not only to interpret but also to honour the complexity of lived experience by weaving participant narratives through a robust theoretical framework. Through four interconnected thematic groupings, I explored how diasporic Hindu masculinity is constructed, expressed, contested, and carried through the embodied practice of Nagara dance. From the ritual labour that frames masculinity as discipline and devotion, to the subtle negotiations within feminised spiritual spaces, the dancers revealed that gender in this context is not rigid, but responsive as a product of both sacred inheritance and personal meaning-making.

This chapter has examined the lived experiences of Nagara dancers through a critical engagement with themes of masculinity, ritual embodiment, gender performativity, and cultural continuity. Drawing on

the participants' narratives and grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Butler (1990), Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), Turner (1969), and Halberstam (2012), the discussion has demonstrated that Nagara dancing is far more than a performative tradition, it is a sacred, embodied practice through which identity, devotion, and community are continually negotiated and redefined.

The act of dancing Nagara was revealed to be more than a spiritual offering or cultural practice—it was a site of becoming. Masculinity was not simply declared; it was performed, discussed, refined, challenged, and reclaimed. Participants engaged sacred labour with vulnerability, countered misconceptions with embodied clarity, and drew on mentorship and community to sustain tradition with care and intention. They showed us that identity doesn't live in fixed categories, but in the motion between them. The dancers' reflections reveal a masculinity that is not hegemonic, rigid, or singular, but one that is relational, contextual, temporal, social and spiritually grounded. Their understanding of manhood is shaped not by dominance or emotional detachment, but by discipline, care, and ritual responsibility. Through fasting, aesthetic labour, and the embodiment of the Goddess, these men articulate a masculinity that is fluid yet anchored in cultural and spiritual legitimacy. This challenges dominant gender scripts and affirms the possibility of alternative masculinities rooted in vulnerability, service, and sacred performance.

Chapter 6 also exposed the politics of exclusion and symbolism, particularly in relation to women's absence from Nagara performances. This contradiction, in which feminine divinity is revered but feminine embodiment is denied, raises critical questions about authority, legitimacy, and gender equity within ritual spaces. The exclusion of women from Nagara dancing, while historically justified through discourses of ritual purity, reveals the gendered boundaries that continue to shape access to sacred spaces, giving men the spotlight to shine as the embodiment of the Goddess, giving another nod to male dominance. Yet, the younger participants' critiques of these exclusions signal a generational shift, one that seeks to reconcile tradition with inclusivity. This tension between preservation and transformation highlights the dynamic nature of ritual and enforces the need to examine how cultural practices can both reflect and resist patriarchal structures.

The chapter also highlighted the tension between sacred performance and spectacle, particularly in the face of modern influences and aesthetic shifts. While some participants expressed concern over the dilution of ritual meaning, others embraced innovation as a means of sustaining relevance. This dialectic reflects the dynamic nature of cultural performance, where authenticity is not static but continually negotiated through intention, context, and community consensus.

Finally, the theme of collective identity and community belonging emerged as a powerful thread throughout the discussion. The dancers' sense of brotherhood, mentorship, and shared spiritual labour affirms Turner's (1969) concept of *communitas* and Butler et al's (2011) concept of gender performativity. In the sacred space of Nagara, individual expression is never isolated; it is always in relation to others, to tradition, and the divine.

In summary, this chapter has demonstrated that Nagara dancing is a site of profound cultural, spiritual, and gendered significance. It is a space where masculinity is reimagined, where ritual serves as a form of expression, and where community is both performed and preserved. The dancers' voices challenge us to think beyond binaries and to recognise the transformative potential of sacred embodiment in shaping more inclusive and expansive understandings of identity and belonging.

With these interpretive insights in hand, the final chapter of this thesis will shift towards reflection, synthesis, and recommendations. It will revisit the research questions, assess how they have been addressed, and consider the broader implications of this study for gender theory, ritual practice, and diasporic Hindu identity. It will also highlight areas for future research and offer personal reflections on the journey, both academic and embodied, that this thesis represents. The dance continues, but our inquiry begins to find stillness.

7. CHAPTER 7 – Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

Building directly on the interpretive synthesis of Chapter 6, this chapter pivots toward consolidation, bringing together the embodied reflections, thematic tensions, and narrative arcs explored throughout the study. Chapter 6 offered a rich interpretive lens into how masculinity functions in the ritual space: not as a singular identity but as a choreography of diasporic memory, ritual embodiment, and women Nagara dancers; navigation of masculinity; duality, sacred labour, sexuality, and misconceptions; and performance, community, and mentorship. The data illuminated that masculinity in Nagara is not performed in isolation but through deep relational ties to lineage, group loyalty, aesthetic reverence, and emotional vulnerability. Through my role as both dancer and researcher, I bore witness to masculinity in motion, stretched between reverence and reinvention.

Chapter 7 marks the culmination of these insights, where the findings are distilled into sharper thematic focus while remaining attentive to lived nuance. Drawing on participant narratives and my reflexivity, this chapter articulates how Nagara dancing emerges as a contested yet sacred terrain, a space where masculinity and femininity converge, where queerness is neither denied nor simplified, and where religious performance serves as a refuge, discipline, and relational pedagogy.

What follows is a rhythm of closing movements. I begin with a precise articulation of the study's findings, organised into three interrelated axes: *the duality of masculinity and femininity*, *Nagara as a queer form of dance*, and *religious performance as a safe space*. These findings live through the voices, gestures, and stories shared by participants.

This chapter also offers recommendations, drawn from thematic threads that emerged during focus groups but fell outside the primary analytic scope. These include the historical exclusion of women from Nagara, generational tensions between tradition and innovation, and the role of folklore, freelancing, and Bollywood aesthetics in shaping contemporary ritual practice. I argue that these omitted threads are not marginal but deferred, as they are essential for future scholarship in diasporic Hindu performative traditions.

Finally, I reflect on the journey of writing this thesis, not as an endpoint but as a choreography of theory, sweat, and tenderness. The process was never linear; it required me to strike a balance between critical distance and devotional closeness. As the curtain closes on this study, I offer not just a conclusion, but an invitation: to see Nagara as a living archive of gender, memory, spiritual labour, and becoming.

7.2. Findings

The number of participants involved in this study provided an ideal set of data to support the finding that there is a deep duality between femininity and masculinity. There is a sense in which Nagara dance queers the notion of gender. This study reveals that Nagara dancing functions not only as a devotional ritual but also as a dynamic site of gendered negotiation, cultural memory, and spiritual belonging.

A critical reflection on the methodological choices of this study is essential, given that the insights were drawn from a single focus group discussion with four experienced Nagara dancers. The aim was not statistical generalisation but rather the elicitation of rich, situated narratives of lived experience. The format of the focus group created a dynamic space for co-construction of meaning, where participants could affirm, contest, and deepen each other's accounts of ritual embodiment, gender negotiation, and spiritual expression. This collective exchange, albeit from a small sample, proved invaluable in realising the relational and intersubjective dimensions of Nagara practice, which may have remained less visible in individual interviews. However, the group setting may have introduced dynamics of hierarchy or deference, especially given the strong emphasis on mentorship and respect for seniority in Nagara communities. These dynamics may have shaped which perspectives were voiced most strongly and which remained unspoken.

The methodological approach of this study, anchored in phenomenology, interpretative analysis, and reflexive thematic analysis, shaped not only the kinds of knowledge produced but also the epistemological framing through which Nagara dancing is understood. By privileging lived experience and embodied testimony, the study foregrounded dancers' own interpretative authority over their practices, rather than reducing ritual performance to textual or doctrinal analysis. This emphasis produced knowledge that is intimate, affective, and intersubjective, demonstrating how gender and spiritual identities are negotiated not in abstract categories but in the visceral labour of dance, ritual enactment, and collective memory. The focus group format amplified these dynamics by allowing dancers to co-articulate their experiences, weaving a communal narrative that reflects the relational character of Nagara itself.

Methodologically, this contribution to scholarship in Gender, Religion & Health is made in three distinct ways. First, it demonstrates the value of phenomenological and embodied approaches for studying ritual practices that are simultaneously gendered and spiritual. Where studies of religion have often privileged doctrinal or institutional perspectives, this research highlights how gender is performed and reconfigured through embodied devotional practice. Second, it highlights the

importance of ritual embodiment for wellbeing and resilience, as participants described the temple stage as a site of emotional safety, relational care, and mentorship. These findings resonate with broader debates on the intersection of spirituality, gender identity, and psychosocial health. Third, the reflexive integration of my positionality into the analysis underscores the ethical and epistemic stakes of studying minority religious practices within diasporic and postcolonial contexts. By making visible how methodological choices (such as a small focus group, interpretative analysis, and reflexive positioning) shaped the narrative that emerged, the study offers a model for how qualitative inquiry can attend to both vulnerability and agency in gendered religious practices.

This approach, therefore, extends methodological scholarship by illustrating how small-scale, interpretative, and relationally oriented studies can generate knowledge that is both deeply situated and theoretically generative. It challenges the dominance of universalist framings of gender or health in religious studies, instead demonstrating that embodied ritual practice is a fertile site for rethinking masculinity, femininity, and wellbeing within the South African Indian Hindu diaspora. In doing so, it affirms that qualitative methodologies are not only descriptive but also transformative—recasting ritual performance as a lens through which to theorise the entanglements of gender, religion, and health in plural societies.

Drawing from extensive thematic analysis in Chapters 5 and 6, the findings articulate how South African Indian Hindu male dancers navigate embodied masculinity within a context shaped by ritual aesthetics, diasporic transmission, and socio-cultural expectations. Three key thematic axes emerged: the duality of masculinity and femininity, Nagara as a queer form of dance, and religious performance as a safe space, each foregrounding how identity is reconfigured through movement, discipline, and relational labour.

7.2.1 Duality of Masculinity and Femininity

Participant narratives point to a profound fluidity between masculine and feminine embodiment within Nagara practice. Rather than opposing poles, these gender expressions operate in sacred reciprocity, challenging Western binaries and recontextualising masculinity through ritualised femininity. Male dancers, through their costumes, gestures, and devotional choreography, embody goddesses such as Saraswati with reverence and intention. One of the most notable quotes encapsulates the notion of understanding the idea of being a man and also the knowledge of who they are embodying.

Importantly, such enactments were not perceived as compromising masculine identity, but rather as enhancing it. Participants consistently described this transformation as spiritually fulfilling and ontologically expansive, where masculinity was affirmed through ritual precision, aesthetic vulnerability, and emotional resonance. This duality is lived reflexively. Dancers navigate both the ritual and domestic spheres, maintaining traditional masculine roles within their families while embracing a more symbolic femininity in their performances. Another standout quote that portrays the qualities of feminine and masculine as temporal forms of embodiment is noted in the following quote.

Drawing on Butler's (1990) performativity and Merleau-Ponty's (1945) phenomenology of the body, this finding suggests that masculinity within Nagara is a relational construct, ritually encoded, communally affirmed, and contextually fluid. Moreover, mentorship from elder dancers facilitated this transition, embedding femininity within masculine pedagogy and disrupting gender-essentialist framings of authenticity and strength.

7.2.2 Nagara as a Queer Form of Dance

Nagara dancing operates as a queer choreographic form, not solely due to participants' sexual orientation, but through its capacity to transgress heteronormative aesthetic and affective codes. The usage of the term 'queer' is used as a verb, to disrupt, to change, or to reimagine. Nagara dancing does just that; there is no normative notion of gender when observing the performance. The performance allows for expressive ambiguity, stylised softness, and gender disruption within sacred legitimacy. Queer-identifying dancers, especially younger participants, noted that Nagara provided a space for affective play and spiritual expression, where traditional constraints were loosened under the weight of divine invocation.

Yet, this queering was delicately negotiated. Participant 3, one of the queer participants, finds 'being free' in a religious space to be a uniquely liberating experience for queer people. Therefore, Nagara dancing can be viewed as a safe space for gender expression, free from societal judgment. Nagara, as both a dance form and ritual enactment, challenges the restrictive norms of econo-heteropatriarchy by elevating emotional vulnerability, sacred femininity, and fluid embodiment as sources of masculine legitimacy. In this space, gender is not governed by productivity or dominance, but by devotion, relational care, and aesthetic grace. The performance enables dancers to inhabit identities that defy capitalist and patriarchal frames, asserting that masculinity can be tender, expressive, and spiritually grounded without compromising cultural respect or authority. Through rhythm and ritual, Nagara becomes a choreographic resistance to systems that marginalise non-conforming masculinities.

The description of performing normative masculinity offstage to retain social legitimacy while embracing gender fluidity within the ritual domain. Dancers recalibrated visual and behavioural cues to align with ritual expectations while subverting them subtly through flamboyant stylisation or emotive generosity. The result is a choreography of negotiation: Nagara enables queer embodiment, but often in temporally and spatially bounded ways. This finding resonates with Kamath's (2021) exploration of drag in South Asian ritual contexts and Halberstam's (2012) notion of performative masculinity rooted in subversion and joy. This confirms the findings that Nagara dancing is a space that invites men (without judgment of their sexuality) to perform as the living embodiment of the Goddess.

7.3.3 Religious Safe Space

The third thematic thread highlights Nagara as a spiritually insulated performance domain, where gender non-conforming embodiment is protected under the theological rubric of devotion. Participants described the ritual space as one of emotional safety and expressive legitimacy. Here, aesthetic femininity was not stigmatised; it was sanctified. Within the sanctified boundaries of ritual performance, dancers felt authorised to deviate from social expectations without fear of retribution. Femininity, when framed as devotional labour, gained communal acceptance that would be otherwise withheld in secular contexts.

This sense of safety, however, was circumscribed by tradition and elder authority. Ritual purity discourses, often tied to caste, gender, and moral codes, regulated who could perform, how, and under what terms. Nevertheless, dancers embraced the sacred liminality of Nagara, identifying the ritual as both sanctuary and subversion. The interplay of affirmation and surveillance created a delicate ecology of performance, where identity could be temporarily expanded while still contained.

Participants also located masculinity within relational and emotional practices backstage, costume sharing, mentorship, fasting guidance, and recasting masculine strength as care, presence, and self-discipline. The ritual, therefore, not only queers gender expression but also rescripts masculinity as nurturance and spiritual accountability.

Together, these findings demonstrate that Nagara dancing in the South African Hindu diaspora constitutes a choreographic space where masculinity, femininity, queerness, and sacred performance converge in transformative ways. Far from being a static tradition, Nagara emerges as a living archive of embodied gender, affective negotiation, and ritual reimagination.

7.3. Recommendations

While the primary aim of this study was to interrogate how masculinity is embodied, queered, and negotiated through Nagara dancing, the focus group session naturally yielded a broader constellation of themes eg: the generational motivations for participating in Nagara dancing. These reflections, though not central to the analytical framework of gender performativity, masculinity and ritual embodiment, offered rich cultural, historical, and ritual insights that merit future scholarly attention.

Several participants shared emotional personal accounts of ancestral memories, community traditions, and the cultural evolution of the Nagara dance in South Africa. These narratives illuminated topics such as: The story of how women performed Nagara before being excluded, with examples of female performers, the deep narratives that Nagara dancing uses while performing, stories of *Santusi Das*, and other folkore based music, the lack of loyalty to Nagara groups indicating their shift to freelancing, the influence of Bollywood causing generational shifts where participants noted tensions between tradition and contemporary aesthetics, prompting reflections on authenticity, creativity, and evolving masculinity.

While this study deliberately focuses on queered embodiment and the disruption of hegemonic masculinity within performance, the omitted themes offer fertile ground for cultural, historical, and ethnographic inquiries. Future work may examine Nagara dancers as agents of communal memory, ritual economy, and spiritual transmission, adding depth to South African Indian diasporic scholarship.

7.4. Personal Reflection

Writing this thesis has felt less like completing a document and more like choreographing an experience, one stitched together by sweat, vulnerability, and academic rigour. From the very start, this wasn't just an intellectual pursuit; it was devotional, embodied, and deeply personal. I stepped into this project not only as a researcher but as a dancer who knows firsthand the sensation of becoming something else, of donning a *Sari* not as a costume, but as a conduit.

Through the voices of Nagara dancers, I was reminded that masculinity is not a still life; it's a moving body, sometimes adorned in gold, sometimes fasting in silence, and sometimes fixing another's costume backstage without anyone noticing. I witnessed men who dance to remember their grandfathers' migration stories, who fast for forty days and still show up with *kohl*-lined eyes ready to channel the divine. I saw masculinity that nurtures, that softens, that transforms without apology.

There were moments, many in fact, when I wrestled with the similarities to my own dancers, who shape their experiences into religious acts, especially when we perform at temple events. The tension between tradition and queerness, between reverence and exclusion, between devotion and disobedience has all resonated with my lived experience as a dancer. Navigating those spaces was enlightening, and my sense of empathy also assisted the conversation with the dancers. Sometimes I felt like I was pirouetting along the discussion, trying to affirm all their responses and highlighting the spiritual gravity of this practice. But those affirmations became my choreography; they guided my footwork and forced me to articulate questions that mattered.

As someone who has both danced and theorised, I learned that the body has its own language. It speaks in ways that theory must learn to listen to. *Kirtan* taught me that masculinity isn't lost when you perform femininity, it's found, stretched, and consecrated. Each ritual, each offering, each moment of backstage panic and ecstatic possession was part of a larger rhythm, one that transcends binaries and expectations. Frankly, if masculinity had a rehearsal schedule, Nagara would be its warm-up: rigorous, fluid, and never quite finished.

This thesis has taught me that sacred embodiment doesn't care for categories. It asks only for presence, for sincerity in movement and meaning. My aim was never to prove a theory but to dance beside it, and maybe whisper a few truths it hadn't considered. I wanted to capture the complexity of men who wear *Saris* and still go home to their wives and children. And if I'm honest, I wanted to honour the younger dancers, the queer, curious, courageous ones, who show up not just to perform but to reimagine what performing means.

So here I am, at the final bow. Not quite ready to exit the stage, but ready to exhale. I've written this thesis the way I dance: sometimes off-beat, sometimes with flair, and always trying to mean it. If there's one thing Nagara taught me, it's that truth lives in the moment when the music starts and your body decides to trust what it knows. That's where masculinity expands. That's where ritual begins. And maybe that's where scholarship gets to dance, too.

7.5. Conclusion

Throughout each chapter, I have traced the rhythms of Nagara dancing not only as ritual choreography but also as a living archive of gendered experience. The findings drawn from both thematic interpretation and embodied testimony underscore a critical truth: Nagara is not performed in isolation; it is inhabited, contested, and continually rewritten through acts of devotion, aesthetic labour, and identity negotiation.

In mapping the duality of masculinity and femininity, the study shows that gender within ritual is not bifurcated, but braided. Participants dance between roles, brother and sister, father and devotee, without contradiction, enacting a masculinity that is emotionally generous, relationally grounded, and spiritually expansive. Their bodies are not symbolic vessels but sites of meaning-making, where softness becomes strength and femininity becomes a pathway to sacred masculinity.

As a choreographic practice, Nagara invites its dancers to queer not just gender but belonging. The performance queers timelines, roles, and expectations, allowing participants to embody the divine feminine without forfeiting masculine legitimacy. The ritual space, by framing gender expression as a spiritual enactment, becomes a liminal refuge, an in-between space where ambiguity is celebrated rather than judged. In this way, Nagara offers dancers a temporary sanctuary from normative scrutiny, while also reminding them of the boundaries they must still negotiate outside the temple walls.

Perhaps most profoundly, the study reveals that Nagara dancing is never merely repetition; it is a reimagination. It is tradition translated through new hands, new garments, and new negotiations. It is the elder who worries about dilution, and the younger dancer who finds liberation in remixing a step. It is the backstage whispers, the hand-adjusting of a *Sari* fold, the mentoring without hierarchy. These small gestures stitch a collective performance of masculinity that resists domination and embraces care.

In closing, I return not to theory, but to embodiment. Nagara taught me that tradition is not what we preserve, it's what we dare to translate. It lives in the bodies that choose to dance differently, to remember defiantly, and to reimagine tenderly. If this work has held space for those dancers, for their grace, their grit, their truths, then this thesis has moved exactly as it was meant to.

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9. ANNEXURES

9.1. Annexure I: Consent Forms

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL For research with human participants

INFORMED CONSENT RESOURCE TEMPLATE

Note to researchers: Notwithstanding the need for scientific and legal accuracy, every effort should be made to produce a consent document that is as linguistically clear and simple as possible, without omitting important details as outlined below. Certified translated versions will be required once the original version is approved.

There are specific circumstances in which witnessed verbal consent may be acceptable, and circumstances in which HSSREC may waive individual informed consent.

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: _____

Greeting: Dear _____

My name is Mr Nicoshe Ramdhani from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Religion, Philosophy, and Classics. My contact details are as follows:

Cell: [REDACTED]

Work: 031 260 7488

Email: RamdhaniN1@ukzn.ac.za

You are invited to participate in a study examining the research on Nagara dancing as a ritual dance. The aim and purpose of this research is to understand how men who participate in Nagara dancing navigate their lives through their experiences and reflections. The study is expected to enrol approximately 12 Nagara dancers. The research process will involve, firstly, a focus group and secondly, if needed, a one-on-one follow-up interview with selected Nagara dancers. The duration of your volunteered participation is expected to be between 60 and 90 minutes.

If at any stage you wish to withdraw from the research for any reason, you are free to do so. Debriefing sessions will be provided by the UKZN Support Service after each focus group and interview session, if required.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.
(Approval Number: HSSREC/00004771/2022).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions, you may contact the researcher at (RamdhaniN1@ukzn.ac.za) or the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES and SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is voluntary, and participants may withdraw at any point. Participants will be removed from the study if they exhibit vulgar or violent behaviour toward other participants or the researcher.

All information obtained from this study will not be posted on social media or other online platforms; the information will be strictly kept confidential and will only be used to produce a thesis for a Masters dissertation.

CONSENT (Edit as required)

I _____ have been informed about the study titled *Queering Masculinity: Engaging the performance and meaning among Nagara Dancers in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal* by Nicoshe Ramdhani.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I understand that participating in the study involves sharing my personal experiences and reflections as a Nagara dancer, without expressing the views or positions of any organisations or dance companies I am affiliated with.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.

If I have any further questions/concerns, or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher on _____ or RamdhaniN1@ukzn.ac.za.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers, I may contact Mr Nicoshe Ramdhani at _____ or RamdhaniN1@ukzn.ac.za.

HUMANITIES and SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview/focus group discussion YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness

Date

9.2. Annexure II: Focus Group Discussion Protocol

(FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION PROTOCOL)

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS – Nico Ramdhani

1. Welcome the participants to the focus group
 - Introduction of the researcher (Nico Ramdhani).
 - Introduction of other persons assisting me with the study.
 - An introduction to the study will be provided in detail to establish rapport with the participants.

2. Establish ground rules
 - Creating a safe space.
 - Foster a sense of community among the Nagara dancers.
 - Rules need to be firm but not overly restrictive in their responses.
 - Ensure that there is no judgment among the participants and create an environment of support in case controversial topics arise from the responses.

3. The participants will then introduce themselves.
 - Each participant will introduce themselves.
 - They will also state their ages and the length of time they have been participating in Nagara dancing.
 - This step will continue to build rapport, and each participant's name must be pronounced correctly.

4. Main Questions begin
 - When did you decide that you wanted to become a Nagara Dancer, and what motivated you to become a Nagara Dancer?

- Describe what a Nagara dancer does and why it is done that way. What qualifies a Nagara dancer to perform Kirtan?
- What does Nagara dancing mean to you as an individual?
- From your perspective, what is the importance of Nagara dancing as a religious practice?
- How do you think you are perceived as a Nagara dancer by the audience? What is the worst thing someone has told you about being a Nagara dancer?
- Besides the body (biological) make-up of yourself, what makes you a man?
- Masculinity refers to the attributes and roles typically associated with men. How do you maintain your masculinity as a Nagara dancer, both during and after your performance?
- How do you manage the two personas you assume? You as a man and 2. As a Nagara dancer, how do you think people view you after Nagara performances?
- How do you change from embodying the Goddess to being a man and vice versa – head of households to Nagara dancers, etc?
- As a nagara dancer, how different do you feel when you are around other men?
- When you embody the Goddess, what emotions do you feel through the performance?

5. Wrap up final thoughts.

- I will need to try to end off all responses amicably.
- Each person will be asked to share their thoughts and feelings after the discussion above.
- They will be reminded of debriefing sessions that can be arranged for those who need them.
- They will all be thanked for participating.

9.3 Annexure III: Individual Follow-Up Interview Protocol

(INDIVIDUAL FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL)

Individual Follow-Up Interviews – Nico Ramdhani

1. Welcome

- Introductions (both researcher and participant)

2. Main Questions

- Let's discuss how Nagara dancing has evolved since you began.
- Could you elaborate on the significance of Nagara dancing to you personally?
- Could you provide more information on what motivates you to be a Nagara dancer?
- What was the reception of Nagara dancers like, and how has it changed over time?
- Can we further elaborate on you as an embodiment of the Goddess and you as a natural person?
- What does it mean to be a man before and after the ritual performances?
- How do you think your family and friends perceive you as a Man and then as an embodiment of the Goddess?
- If Nagara were not religious, would you still participate, and why?

3. Reviewing informed responses and requesting a more detailed response
 - This is where I will highlight the most informed responses to the questions within the focus group and ask for a more detailed response.
 - There will be no time restraints in this interview; therefore, the participant will feel free to give lengthy responses.

4. Final remarks
 - Participants will be asked about their feelings towards the interview and will be reminded of the debriefing sessions that can be arranged after the interview.
 - The researcher will thank the participant.

9.4 Annexure IV: Ethical Clearance Letter

HSSREC application (Queering Masculinity: Engaging the performance and meaning among Nagara Dancers in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal. , (HSSREC/00004771/2022)) Ramdhani, Nicoshe (212544493)

NB:

Please click on **Edit** on the top right of the screen to view the full information and make changes to the application. If there is no edit button visible to you, you may be unable to edit the application as it is may be with someone else at the moment.

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Type of ethics review: HSSREC application

Title: Queering Masculinity: Engaging the performance and meaning among Nagara Dancers in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal.

Date of approval: 24/11/2022

Principal Investigator:

Ramdhani, Nicoshe (212544493) - School Of Rel Phil & Classics (Ended)

List all sites in which the project will be carried out i.e. geographic location (e.g. KwaZulu-Natal) and type of place (e.g. name of hospital, clinic, schools, community, animal research facility, conservation areas etc). the project will be carried out i.e. geographic location (e.g. KwaZulu-Natal) and type of place (e.g. name of hospital, clinic, schools, community, conservation areas etc).:

Two Nagara groups from Verulam, Kwa-Zulu Natal.

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256	Student papers	Manchester Metropolitan University on 2012-12-14	<1%
257	Student papers	Manchester Metropolitan University on 2018-04-12	<1%
258	Publication	Mark B. Salter, Can E. Mutlu. "Research Methods in Critical Security Studies - An I...	<1%
259	Student papers	New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling on 2019-03-26	<1%
260	Publication	O'Reilly Michelle, Archard Philip, Kiyimba Nikki. "Qualitative Health Research - A ...	<1%
261	Publication	Peter Aggleton, Rob Cover, Carmen H. Logie, Christy E. Newman, Richard Parker. ...	<1%
262	Publication	Rebecca Rowe. "Children's Literature and Culture - An Introduction", Routledge, 2...	<1%

263	Student papers	Regenesys Business School on 2025-05-15	<1%
264	Publication	Swati Parashar, Élise Féron, Catia Cecilia Confortini. "Routledge Handbook of Fem...	<1%
265	Student papers	The University of Manchester on 2012-04-29	<1%
266	Student papers	The University of Manchester on 2024-11-12	<1%
267	Student papers	The University of Manchester on 2025-01-15	<1%
268	Student papers	Tilburg University on 2025-06-13	<1%
269	Student papers	Universiti Sains Malaysia on 2025-01-20	<1%
270	Student papers	University College London on 2023-12-14	<1%
271	Student papers	University of Abertay Dundee on 2024-11-11	<1%
272	Student papers	University of Cambridge on 2024-07-15	<1%
273	Student papers	University of Cambridge on 2025-06-23	<1%
274	Student papers	University of Durham on 2012-03-15	<1%
275	Student papers	University of East London on 2022-02-20	<1%
276	Student papers	University of Essex on 2025-04-23	<1%

277	Student papers	University of KwaZulu-Natal on 2012-11-09	<1%
278	Student papers	University of KwaZulu-Natal on 2013-08-22	<1%
279	Student papers	University of KwaZulu-Natal on 2013-11-17	<1%
280	Student papers	University of KwaZulu-Natal on 2018-03-19	<1%
281	Student papers	University of KwaZulu-Natal on 2022-01-25	<1%
282	Student papers	University of Leicester on 2021-05-04	<1%
283	Student papers	University of Liverpool on 2018-02-11	<1%
284	Student papers	University of Newcastle on 2025-02-27	<1%
285	Student papers	University of Southampton on 2011-03-12	<1%
286	Student papers	University of Western Sydney on 2010-06-10	<1%
287	Internet	arro.anglia.ac.uk	<1%
288	Internet	au-east.erc.monash.edu.au	<1%
289	Internet	cdr.aws.openrepository.com	<1%
290	Internet	curve.carleton.ca	<1%

291	Internet	d-nb.info	<1%
292	Internet	digital.library.unt.edu	<1%
293	Internet	dspace.library.uvic.ca:8080	<1%
294	Internet	e-space.mmu.ac.uk	<1%
295	Internet	eprints.lancs.ac.uk	<1%
296	Internet	etd.uwc.ac.za	<1%
297	Internet	theses.bham.ac.uk	<1%
298	Internet	ijcf.ksc.or.kr	<1%
299	Internet	ir.library.oregonstate.edu	<1%
300	Internet	irep.ntu.ac.uk	<1%
301	Internet	ntnuopen.ntnu.no	<1%
302	Internet	open.library.ubc.ca	<1%
303	Internet	openrepository.aut.ac.nz	<1%
304	Internet	ore.exeter.ac.uk	<1%

305	Internet	par.nsf.gov	<1%
306	Internet	pure.manchester.ac.uk	<1%
307	Internet	pure.royalholloway.ac.uk	<1%
308	Internet	radar.brookes.ac.uk	<1%
309	Internet	repository.ar-raniry.ac.id	<1%
310	Internet	repository.essex.ac.uk	<1%
311	Internet	repository.lib.fsu.edu	<1%
312	Internet	research-repository.griffith.edu.au	<1%
313	Internet	rgu-repository.worktribe.com	<1%
314	Internet	surface.syr.edu	<1%
315	Internet	ulspace.ul.ac.za	<1%
316	Publication	James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinities and Camouflaged Politics - U..."	<1%
317	Student papers	Rhodes University on 2024-05-06	<1%
318	Student papers	University of Essex on 2025-07-07	<1%

319	Student papers	ICTS on 2024-12-18	<1%
320	Publication	Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, Tamara Shefer, Marinette Grimbeek. "Routledge In...	<1%
321	Student papers	New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling on 2023-07-04	<1%
322	Student papers	Roehampton University on 2021-08-12	<1%
323	Publication	Sherianne Kramer. "Female-Perpetrated Sex Abuse - Knowledge, Power, and the ...	<1%
324	Student papers	Tata Institute of Social Sciences on 2024-03-19	<1%
325	Student papers	Technological University Dublin on 2023-07-26	<1%
326	Student papers	University of Cape Town on 2016-08-08	<1%
327	Student papers	University of Sunderland on 2023-12-07	<1%
328	Internet	dx.doi.org	<1%

9.6. Supervisor Contract

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES



MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN SUPERVISOR AND CANDIDATE

The relationship between a supervisor and a candidate for a research degree is one of mentorship. A supervisor should advise on the structure of the degree, direct the candidate to relevant sources and materials, and may suggest better forms of expression. However, in the end, the thesis/dissertation must be the candidate's own work.

CORRECTION OF STYLE AND GRAMMAR

A completed thesis/dissertation must be satisfactory as regards form and literary expression. Although the supervisor will point out any passages in the thesis/dissertation which are stylistically poor or which are grammatically weak, it is not possible for a supervisor to correct significant numbers of language errors. A student may, if necessary, and at his or her own cost, employ a copy editor at his or her own cost to proofread the thesis and correct blemishes of style.

PLAGIARISM

A candidate may not include in the thesis/dissertation any quotations from another writer, or adopt substantial ideas from another writer, without acknowledgement and without reference to the source of the quotation. Direct quotations must be indicated by the use of quotation marks. Plagiarism will result in the thesis and degree being failed.

MAXIMUM PERIOD ALLOWED FOR COMPLETION

Masters: A Masters degree undertaken on a full-time basis should be completed in 4 semesters. There is a maximum of 8 semesters.

PhD: A Doctoral degree undertaken on a full-time basis should be completed in six semesters. There is a maximum of 12 semesters.

Permission of the Board of the College is required for extensions beyond these periods and will only be granted in special circumstances.

EXPECTATIONS OF SUPERVISOR AND CANDIDATE

Projected date for the submission of the research proposal? 17 June 2022

Will the candidate be expected to attend group seminars? Yes - Monthly

Approximate frequency of such seminars

How often will the candidate present written work? E.g. monthly, quarterly, etc Weekly

How often will the supervisor and the candidate expect to meet? e.g. monthly, every two months, etc. Weekly

Approximately how soon after submission of written work may the candidate expect comments from the supervisor? A week to 10 days

See overleaf for additional provisions.

Any other special provisions agreed on?

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26 August 2022 Dr CL Muslim

Candidate

Signed



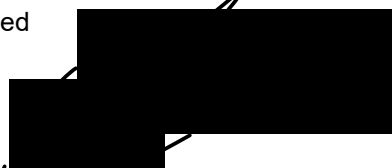
Name: (print)

Nicoshe Ramdhani

Date: 15 June 2022

Supervisor

Signed



Name: (print)

Prof. Charlene van der Walt.

Date 26 August 2022.

NOTE:

The supervisor's consent is required in order to submit the completed thesis for examination and no thesis will be accepted by the College for examination without the supervisor's approval. The supervisor must see the final version of the thesis before submission. A candidate may, if he/she wishes, insist on submission without the supervisor's consent, but this fact will be noted in the supervisor's report.

A) Duties and Responsibilities of the Postgraduate Student

Student's postgraduate training consists mainly of the following activities performed under the guidance of the supervisor:

- a) Reading books/scientific articles and possibly attending lectures to obtain the necessary background for successful research in the chosen field.
- b) Research (depending on the discipline this can be field work, laboratory work, computer work, or pencil and paper research).
- c) i If the student is studying on campus: regular meetings with the supervisor to discuss and plan the

research, and to report on progress, OR

- ii If the student is not studying on campus: regular communications with the supervisor, typically by email, to discuss and plan the research, and to report on progress. In this case it is the responsibility of the student to make sure that contact is maintained.
- d) Collection of the research data.
- e) Presentation of the results and conclusions in a scholarly written manuscript (which typically becomes a chapter of the dissertation/thesis or a research publication).

While initially the student performs these activities following detailed instructions by the supervisor, it is expected that the student, as work progresses, gains increasing independence, in particular with regard to a), b), d), and e).

The research leading to a postgraduate degree starts with planning the research and committing this plan to paper in the form of a research proposal of at most 500 words, which had to be submitted with the student's application. An additional, more detailed research proposal is required. Whilst the supervisor may determine the research topic in consultation with the student, the research proposal is written by the student in consultation with the supervisor. Length and detail of this proposal will depend on the discipline and topic of study. Student and supervisor should keep a copy of the proposal, as it might serve as an indicator of how much work has to be done to complete the project.

In most schools there is an expectation that postgraduate students work as student demonstrators for undergraduate courses. These expectations should be clearly indicated to the student before s/he registers for the degree. Unless there are strong reasons motivated to the Academic Leader Research or Dean and Head of School, a full-time student should not work for the School for more than 8 hours per week.

Studying for a postgraduate degree is a full-time job. It is typically expected of a full-time student to spend at least 40 hours per week, 49 weeks per year, on the project. The basic rule 'what you put in is what you get out' applies.

The ultimate responsibility to find accommodation, to ensure timely registration and to secure sufficient funding for study fees, accommodation, subsistence, transport and other expenses, and possibly obtaining visas, lies with the postgraduate student. However, students should approach the supervisor about the possibility of them applying for a bursary or scholarship. International students must approach the International Office to get assistance with accommodation.

Students must lodge a backup of all data, results and notes with the Supervisor or ensure that they regularly update their notes and results to a pre-determined School folder.

Students who fail to complete or withdraw from the degree are obligated to return equipment lent/given to them to aid their research or to assist with the completion of the degree.

B) Responsibilities of the Supervisor

As mentioned under A) one of the key activities during postgraduate studies is regular meetings between student and supervisor. A supervisor has to make himself/herself available for such meetings. If the supervisor is absent from UKZN for an extended period of time, he/she has to make provisions for either a co-supervisor or a colleague to assist the student, or continual contact by email.

The role of the supervisor is not to provide help with the collection of actual research results. The supervisor should provide guidance to the student, such as giving advice as to which scientific literature is likely to be relevant for the project, which scientific methods and techniques are appropriate and perhaps demonstrating such techniques, and what kind of equipment is available. The supervisor should also give guidance as to how information should be collected and later, in the writing up of the dissertation/thesis, how results are analysed and presented in a scholarly way.

As a complementary part of the postgraduate training, the supervisor should facilitate a doctoral student's exposure to regional conferences or workshops in the field of study and assist in raising funds for conference/workshop fees, subsistence, travel expenses, etc. The supervisor should also facilitate arrangements for doctoral students to present a paper or a poster at an international conference if he deems it beneficial for the student and if funds are available.

Field trips that are essential for the project are to be arranged by the supervisor.

The supervisor has to submit an annual progress report on the research to the College of Humanities, as prescribed by the College rules.

Should the project require ethical clearance from the university or any other kind of permit (for example for collecting indigenous plants), then it is the supervisor's responsibility to obtain these. However, the student has to assist in preparing the necessary documentation.

The supervisor has to bring the relevant safety rules to the student's attention and it is the responsibility of the student to meet all safety regulations. The supervisor should also clarify co-authorship of papers with the student and co-supervisors.

C) Dissertation/Thesis

Students are advised to write up their results as their research progresses, typically in the form of chapters of the dissertation/thesis or articles for publication in appropriate peer-reviewed journals. The supervisor will advise on how to go about the writing-up. The supervisor will read chapters handed in by the student and give feedback within a reasonable time. It is, however, not the supervisor's job to proofread chapters.

The College rules allow for different formats of theses; for example, a thesis in form of a monograph or a collection of research papers to which an introductory chapter and final discussion is added. The decision on the format of the thesis is made by the supervisor in consultation with the student.

The university rules for plagiarism apply.

The student is strongly advised to submit her/his dissertation/thesis only after having received approval from the supervisor. Should a student submit without approval of the supervisor, then this will be indicated to the College Office in writing to safeguard the supervisor(s) academic reputation.

Once the dissertation/thesis has been examined, and if it is passed subject to corrections as specified by the examiners, it is the student's responsibility to make these changes and hand in the corrected dissertation/thesis to the College Office. The supervisor has to verify that the changes have indeed been made.

Should parts of the dissertation/thesis be published, then the supervisor in consultation with the student will decide which authors appear on the paper, and in which order. In this decision, the supervisor will take into account the contributions of the co-supervisor, student, and possibly third parties, to the part of the project that is to be published. A supervisor may publish results obtained by a postgraduate student without consulting the student if within one year of submission of the dissertation/thesis no attempt has been made by the student to publish the results or to extend the research leading to these results.

If the student is bound by a confidentiality agreement, for example with a sponsor, then it is the student's responsibility to make sure that the agreement is honoured.

Legal opinion must be sought regarding the matter of intellectual property, particularly in terms of Supervisors who are funded by external Organisations but have a student needing to withdraw.

D) Facilities Provided by the School

In order to allow the student to work on their project successfully, the School must undertake to provide the student with basic infrastructure such as desk space, computer and internet access, and (not necessarily free) use of a photocopier. Further facilities, such as equipment and laboratory space that the School or Supervisor commits itself to providing are to be specified on a separate sheet and attached to this memorandum as an appendix.

E) Running and Travel Expenses

Should the project require use of expensive equipment, then it should be specified on a separate sheet who is responsible for these expenses. This sheet should be attached to this memorandum as an appendix. If a field trip or attendance at a conference by the student is planned, it must be clearly indicated to the student which expenses will be covered by the supervisor. This indication should be given well in advance, and in the form of either an oral agreement or, preferably, a signed agreement between supervisor and student.

F) Collegiality

Student and supervisor should treat each other with respect and dignity. In the interest of the research project, student and supervisor should keep each other informed about any activity relating to or relevant for the project. It is unacceptable for either party to submit results of the research project for publication or to present them at a conference without prior consultation with the other party.

G) Time Frames

Student and supervisor should agree on time frames for different phases of the project, these time frames should be reviewed at least annually. When setting these time frames, supervisor and student should be mindful of the fact that, according to Department of Education guidelines, a Master dissertation is expected to be completed within two semesters, and a PhD thesis is expected to be completed within four semesters.

H) Conflict Resolution

Should there be a conflict or disagreement between supervisor and student which cannot be resolved by the parties involved, then either party can approach the Academic Leader Research or Dean and Head of School (or the College Dean of Research if the Dean and Head of School is one of the conflicting parties) about the conflict. The Dean and Head of School (or College Dean of Research) will then either arbitrate or choose a senior academic of the School not involved in the conflict to arbitrate. The arbitrator's decision is final and cannot be appealed.