



THE EVOLUTION OF NEGATIVE CHARACTER ROLES IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

K.Kiruthi

*Research Scholar,
Department of Music and Fine Arts,
Vels Institute of Science, Technology &
Advanced Studies (VISTAS),
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.*

Dr.Lalitha Santhanam

*Assistant Professor,
Department of Music and Fine Arts,
Vels Institute of Science, Technology &
Advanced Studies (VISTAS),
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.*

Abstract

This study examines how antagonistic characters have evolved within Indian classical dance traditions, where they function as essential elements of narrative, symbolism, and aesthetic expression. Rather than being limited to depictions of evil, these roles represent conflict, emotional tension, and moral opposition, helping to structure the dramatic arc of performance. Drawing on the theoretical foundations of the Nāṭyaśāstra and Abhinaya Darpana, the paper explores how abhinaya, mudras, body language, costume, makeup, music, and rhythm are used to create recognizable antagonistic identities. The study compares the representation of such characters in Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Odissi, Mohiniyattam, and Yakshagana, showing that each form preserves a shared classical vocabulary while developing distinct regional aesthetics. It also considers how these characters reflect social values, mythological memory, and cultural attitudes toward power, desire, pride, and disorder. Over time, antagonistic roles have moved from

strictly codified traditional portrayals to more nuanced and interpretive performances, while retaining their classical dramatic function. The paper argues that the evolution of negative character roles reveals both continuity and adaptation in Indian classical dance. Their study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Indian dance communicates emotion, ethics, and cultural meaning through embodied performance.

Keywords: Antagonistic characters, Indian classical dance, evolution, abhinaya, Nāṭyaśāstra, Abhinaya Darpana, symbolism, aesthetics, and performance.

Introduction

Indian classical dance is a highly structured art form in which movement, expression, and symbolism work together to convey narrative meaning. Within this system, antagonistic characters play a crucial role by creating contrast and intensifying emotional experience. They are not only “negative” figures, but also artistic devices through which



conflict, morality, and dramatic tension become visible.

The study of these characters is important because it connects performance practice with classical theory. Texts such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* provide the aesthetic and technical basis for portraying emotion and character, while regional traditions give these principles distinct visual and expressive forms. This paper focuses on how antagonistic roles have developed across time and how they continue to shape Indian classical dance.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on Indian classical dance shows that character portrayal is closely tied to narrative, aesthetics, and embodied expression rather than to realism alone. Studies on the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* explain how *rasa*, *bhava*, gesture, and movement create the foundation for character construction in classical performance. These texts are especially important for understanding antagonistic roles because they provide the theoretical base for stylized opposition, emotional contrast, and symbolic representation.

Research on Bharatanatyam highlights how mythological storytelling and expressive *abhinaya* shape the performance of moral conflict and character differentiation. In Kathak, scholarship and cultural commentary show that dancers often portray multiple characters within a single performance, using movement quality, posture, and rhythmic design to distinguish virtuous and villainous

figures. This makes Kathak a useful form for studying the shifting performance of antagonistic identities.

Kathakali has received particular attention in studies of gesture, makeup, and costume, since its character system is highly codified and visually explicit. Research on this form shows that antagonistic characters are not secondary but structurally central to the drama, with facial color, body stance, and rhythmic intensity working together to communicate negative traits. Similar symbolic strategies appear in Yakshagana and other narrative dance-drama traditions, where villainous figures are made visible through distinct performance codes.

Broader work on Indian classical dance also emphasizes questions of identity, social meaning, and transformation over time. These studies suggest that antagonistic characters are not fixed templates but living forms that evolve with changing audience expectations, performance contexts, and aesthetic preferences. However, much of the literature remains form-specific, and there is still limited comparative research on the evolution of negative character roles across multiple Indian classical dance traditions. The existing literature, therefore, establishes three important points. First, antagonistic characters are deeply rooted in classical theory and performance practice. Second, their portrayal depends on symbolic codes such as gesture, costume, rhythm, and makeup. Third, comparative studies across traditions are still relatively underdeveloped, making the topic significant for further academic inquiry.

Research Aim

To analyze the evolution, representation, and aesthetic significance of antagonistic characters in Indian classical dance.

Objectives

- To define the meaning and concept of antagonistic characters in Indian classical dance.
- To classify the major types of negative characters.
- To examine performance techniques used in their portrayal.
- To study their symbolism and aesthetics through classical texts.
- To compare their representation across major classical dance forms.
- To understand their social and cultural significance.
- To trace the evolution of antagonistic characters over time.

Hypotheses

1. Antagonistic characters are essential to the dramatic structure of Indian classical dance.
2. Their performance depends on symbolic and codified expressions rather than realism.
3. Costume, makeup, music, and rhythm strongly shape audience interpretation.
4. The portrayal of negative characters has evolved while preserving classical principles.
5. Different dance traditions use distinct methods to represent antagonistic roles.

Meaning and Concept of Antagonistic Characters in Indian Classical Dance

Antagonistic characters are figures that oppose the hero, disturb harmony, or represent destructive forces. In Indian classical dance, they may appear as demons, arrogant rulers, jealous figures, deceptive advisors, or other conflict-driven roles. Their purpose is not only to oppose the central character but also to deepen the emotional and moral meaning of the performance.

These roles are shaped by classical aesthetics rather than realism. They embody emotional states such as anger, greed, pride, and cruelty, which are transformed into performative expression through gesture and rhythm. In this sense, antagonistic characters become part of the artistic language of the dance.

Classification of Antagonistic Characters

Antagonistic characters may be classified as:

- Mythological demons and demonesses.
- Tyrannical kings and rulers.
- Deceptive or manipulative advisors.
- Passion-driven characters dominated by anger, pride, or desire.
- Feminine antagonists such as jealous or destructive figures.
- Comic or secondary negative roles.

This classification helps identify how different traditions build character through narrative type and visual coding. Kathakali, for example, uses distinct makeup categories to separate noble, heroic, and villainous types.

Characteristics of Antagonistic Characters

Antagonistic characters are typically marked by aggression, arrogance, deceit, domination, or uncontrolled emotion. Their emotional expressions often contrast sharply with those of heroic or divine characters. This contrast allows the audience to recognize conflict immediately and to experience the dramatic tension of the story.

Their features are often externalized through sharp movement, tense posture, intense facial expression, and forceful rhythmic accents. In many traditions, the visual design of the role communicates character even before action begins.

Performance Techniques

The portrayal of antagonistic characters relies on several performance elements. **Abhinaya** communicates the inner state of the character through expression and gesture, while **mudras** clarify actions and narrative meaning. Body language is often angular, forceful, or expansive to show dominance or menace.

Costume and makeup are especially important in traditions such as Kathakali and Yakshagana, where color and facial design create immediate character identification. Music and rhythm also reinforce dramatic energy; strong percussion patterns may signal conflict, battle, or moral tension. Together, these techniques produce a complete aesthetic image of the negative character.

Symbolism and Aesthetics

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* establish the classical principles through which emotion and character are represented in Indian performance. In these texts, performance is not merely imitation but an aesthetic transformation of feeling and action. Antagonistic characters therefore, function as symbolic forms that make ethical and emotional conflict visible.

Their aesthetics are based on contrast, exaggeration, and stylization. The negative character is not only a narrative opponent but also a bearer of *rasa*, generating dramatic experience through tension and resolution. This symbolic system gives Indian classical dance its distinctive depth and richness.

Representation in Dance Forms

In **Bharatanatyam**, antagonistic figures often appear in mythological scenes and are expressed through clear abhinaya and rhythmic precision. In **Kathakali**, negative characters are highly developed through specialized makeup, costume, and acting conventions, making it one of the strongest traditions for villain portrayal.

In **Kuchipudi**, antagonistic roles are often rendered through narrative dance and expressive dialogue. **Kathak** emphasizes storytelling, where negative figures may be portrayed through mime, rhythmic footwork, and dramatic gesture. **Odissi** and **Mohiniyattam** tend to present such roles in more lyrical and restrained forms, while **Yakshagana** uses bold costume, dialogue, and music to create powerful antagonistic imagery.

Social and Cultural Significance

Antagonistic characters are important not only for performance but also for cultural transmission. They help preserve mythological stories, moral values, and traditional concepts of justice, duty, and disorder. Through them, dance becomes a medium for social reflection and cultural memory.

These characters also reveal how Indian society interprets power, desire, and conflict. Their performance can reflect community values as well as changing ideas of identity and morality. As a result, they remain relevant to both traditional and contemporary audiences.

Evolution of Antagonistic Characters in Classical Dance

The evolution of antagonistic characters shows a movement from fixed classical coding toward more interpretive performance styles. Early forms emphasized strict typology, symbolic color, and codified expression. Over time, regional innovation, stage modernization, and audience change have introduced greater flexibility in presentation.

Even so, the essential function of these roles has remained stable. They continue to create tension, reveal contrast, and support the dramatic design of the performance. Their evolution therefore, reflects continuity within adaptation.

Discussion

The analysis shows that antagonistic characters are central to the language of Indian classical dance. They are not marginal or

secondary figures, but essential components of narrative structure and aesthetic communication. Their portrayal depends on the integrated use of gesture, expression, costume, music, and rhythm.

A comparative view across dance forms reveals both shared classical principles and distinct regional aesthetics. This demonstrates the richness of Indian classical dance as a system that combines textual theory, visual symbolism, and embodied storytelling.

Conclusion

The evolution of negative character roles in Indian classical dance reveals the enduring importance of antagonistic figures in performance, symbolism, and aesthetics. These characters create conflict, intensify emotion, and give moral and dramatic structure to the dance. Guided by the principles of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpana*, they transform opposition into artistic expression.

Their study shows that classical dance is not only a system of movement but also a system of meaning. Antagonistic characters preserve cultural memory, enrich narrative depth, and demonstrate the flexibility of tradition across time and region. Therefore, they remain vital to understanding Indian classical dance theory and practice.

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