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Matikor, Chutney, Odissi and Bollywood: Gender Negotiations in Indo-Trinidadian Dance

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Abstract

Four genres of Indo-Trinidadian dance—folk, film, chutney and classical—have opened spaces in which gender (as well as ethnic, national and class) identities are negotiated and chosen from an increasing variety of options. A women’s folk dance, matikor, brought by the early indentured Indians, represents resistance to the control of female sexuality. The survival and modern-day popularity of matikor highlights the importance of dance in Indo-Trinidadian women’s construction of identity in a diasporic setting. The importation of Indian (Bollywood) films to Trinidad opened up the realm of public performance for Indo-Trinidadian women, and dancing informed by Bollywood remains an arena in which women negotiate a plurality of both modern and traditional “Indian” roles. Chutney, a locally grown music and dance style, asserts female independence and self-determination through transgression of boundaries. Classical dance, despite appearances of conservatism, has created a new space for Indian women to gain respect and increased independence through mastery of classical forms. Changing attitudes toward women’s dancing within the last century provide an index of evolving gender ideologies within the Indo-Trinidadian community.
