

Knotted: In(weave)—My Autoethnographic Inquiry Into Practice

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

"Knotted" was a video series engaged in an autoethnographic, practice-led research approach that served as a reflective exploration of my identity as an artist, researcher, and educator amidst a dynamically evolving social and cultural landscape. Engaging in performance art practice offers insights into the weaving of my narrative and subject formation as a South African Indian woman. I analyze contemporary culture, delving into human interaction, value systems, religious beliefs, and experiences. Employing narrative inquiry, I navigate the intersections between the rational and emotional self, clouded and filtered through memory and theories of explanation. Memory, as a temporal trajectory, not only encompasses lived experiences but also involves acts of structuring to make sense of these moments. Operating between the realms of potential occurrences and impossibilities allows me to redefine my role as an artist and researcher, drawing from the Indian aesthetic theory of *rasa* and Csíkszentmihály concept of flow. The immersive process of "arting" connects embodied states during a performance, to what I call a transcendental emotional moment (TEM). Thus, aligning with the philosophy of performance in motion with the transformative potential of *rasa* contributing to the making of culture and well-being. This practice becomes a meditation, aiding the reforming and becoming of my emergent self. "The Knotted" leaves traces in lived bodily interactions, captured in muscle memory and kinaesthetic contact, contributing to my identity formation and resilience. The series emphasizes the aesthetic versus anaesthetic embodied experience, revealing traces through movement in written records and lived encounters between bodies and art.

Keywords: *Rasa*, Practice-Led Research, Autoethnography, Identity, Performance Art

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Introduction

As I delve deeper into the intertwining realms of autoethnography, practice led research, and identity I find myself weaving the threads of these concepts together to unravel the intricate tapestry of human experience. Autoethnography provides a powerful lens through which to explore the lived experiences that shape our identities and inform our performances in the world. Through the interplay of *rasa*, I acknowledge the value of my humanness tied to my gender, and the value of my gender is culture-specific. *Rasa* is an Indian aesthetic theory conceptualized by Bharata in the *Nāṭyashāstra* around (2nd century BCE) meaning the ‘juice’ or essence, the aesthetic emotion in the visual and performing arts to invoke the emotions firstly in the artist then the audience. *Rasa* processes has steered some of enculturated elements, allowing the exploration of oneself as the inward journey to self-realization in the researcher’s¹ creative journey. I struggled to find a footing. This aspect of my identity raises many ‘what ifs’ and without the correct answers, sometimes I would feel emotionally and mentally suspended. In exploring the intersections of identity Belamghari (2020), performance and memory I aim to understand how they influence one another and how they contribute understand and explore the complexities of these intersections of socio- cultural spaces. The socio-cultural striated meaning and embodied knowing made me happier to integrate my writing, dancing, artmaking to Be(come) in academia. Becoming more resilient helped with a more shared inquiry of engaged practice, and continually shifting the mindset. As I engage myself as a participant in my research, and reflecting on a shadow on the water, the knots, the transparent fabric, bangles, bells, and other materials that I experimented with I take snapshots of the stillness. Framing my experience and the emotion, the mainframe zooms into a particular context. Applying the snapshots or framing added value clarification, the multidimensional world of a dancer/artist/researcher and how I engaged *rasa* and my understanding of emotions to subject formation during the process. My spiritual practices, such as mindfulness and meditation, have layered a significant role in shaping my identity. As I have delved deeper into these practices, I have experienced a sense of expansion, clarity and inner peace. These experiences have contributed to my overall well-being and have become an integral part of who I am. My spirituality is not just a set of beliefs but a lived experience that informs my identity and guides my actions. My journey of self-discovery, resilience and identity formation was through introspection, self-consciousness and cultivated by self-awareness and inner strength.

The Indian Aesthetic Theory of Rasa and Concept of Flow

Rasa explores the multifaceted nature of life through the aesthetic (mood, sentiment and emotion), the mystical (beauty of God, adoration) and metaphysical (essence of truth, reality, infinite bliss) experiences. *Rasa* can then be identified and “interpreted as a strong emotional experience exposed through particular structures, leading to an awareness of universally shared feeling culminating in delightful relish” according to Indian scholar Govind Keshav Bhat (1984, p. 19). Bharata identified eight fundamental emotions known as bhavas. The term “bhava” stems from the root “bhu” meaning to create and these latent emotions are inherent in every human psyche that surfaces into consciousness upon the stimulus (Menon, 2000). The three objective factors that collectively evoke *rasa* are *vibhava* that renders representation (words, gestures and internal feelings), *anubhava* (actual sensing through physiological effects) mainly occurring immediately and involuntarily, and *vyabhicaribhava*

¹ The ‘I’, ‘artist’ and the ‘researcher’ is used interchangeably throughout the text. The paper also draws from the authors PhD thesis as an inroad to greater discussion.

that encompass emotional elements that deepen one's emotional experience (Skiba, 2016). These nine basic emotions include *shringara*(love), *hasya*(comic laughter), *karuna*(grief, pity), *raudra*(anger), *veera*(courage), *bibhatsa*(disgust), *bhayanaka*(terrible), *adbhuta*(marvelous) and *ananda*(peace) (Adhikari & Saha, 2022). Giving experience a scientific focus in terms of *rasa* is to analyze it from an empirical point of view.

Flow is a psychological construct developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi according to Chilton (2013) linked to creativity and improves well-being that integrates action and awareness. The flow state is experienced when one is immersed in the creative process of making or 'arting'. During this process my mind made mental notes about the details such as ensuring the knots were tight enough to avoid coming undone. I realized that this deep immersion and embodied practice of conceptualization and making led to a new understanding of artistic practice and appreciation. By fitting together, the puzzle of 'enhancing, growing and experiencing to knowing' gained fresh insights into the nature of artistic expression. This suggests that embracing the natural flow of the creative process rather than trying to force a structured approach can facilitate a heightened awareness and appreciation of one's artistic practice.

Autoethnography and Practice-Led Research

Autoethnography provided further insight into my identity construction and my rationalization of why I am the way I am detailed and artistic representation of my acceptance of myself, and how the nodal points of my identity construction (Hiralal, 2013) effectuated healing and resilience. The total immersion and sincerity of becoming, engages a higher state of consciousness evolving, creating and, eventually, disseminating this knowledge through collaboration with oneself, students, fellow artists and the community at large. I engage with the six senses as an avenue to better understand this interrelationship of *Oneness* (God or divinity) and my identity subject-formation as an artist-researcher. However, it is necessary to get a sense of feelings and looking broadly at Damasio in Pontin (2014) who draws attention to the notion of the difference between feelings and emotions as the feelings highlights the cognizance of information that to a large degree remains latent, whilst emotions is the inward and, later, outward expression of activated feelings as they interface with personalised situational life-based experiences. It is also important to note that there is an automatic, body-mind-driven prepared set of actions, which can also, split seconds later. Such shaping is done following previous bodily experiences that have been mapped. Feelings are better reserved for the private, mental experience of the cycles of emotions. The experience is trapped in the muscle memory. In this way, emotions experienced become feelings realised, and this speaks to the body-mind neuro cycle in neurological processes of making meaning. *Rasa* provides me with strategies only for acquiring or appreciating towards the moment of being. These strategies lead to action and acts of doing (and, therefore, in the context of artmaking).

The use of the mobile phone video to capture the spontaneous creative process rather than a rehearsed presentation can be seen as a form of autoethnographic performance (Spry, 2001). While the video quality was low, this approach allows the artist to reflect and record their subjective experience of 'arting' in the moment. This shift away from a polished pre-planned presentation towards a more immediate embodied documentation of the creative process reflects the principle of autoethnography which emphasizes the self as 'other' (Talbot, 1995). By embracing the limitations of mobile phone, I was able to authentically capture the felt

experience of immersion in the creative act, providing insight into my artistic practice (Arnold, 2012).

Another integral component to understanding the interplay between *vibhava*, *bhava*, *anubhava* and *rasa* is the notion of how the mind-body-soul (feelings, emotions, experiences) is emerging and communicated into the world (Sundaram, 2014). Every artwork tells a different aspect of my life and, initially, I had not named any one of them because for a long time I felt as if I do not belong and do not have a personality or an identity of value. This however changed as I weaved the tapestry of my subject formation and mindful practices during the making of the performance or artworks incorporating *rasa* strategies. According to Sundarajan (2010), this experience and self-reflecting for an artist relates to something far more than the mundane conditions and trappings of daily life but moves beyond to transcendental contemplation. Sullivan (2006) links this thought to the artist as the role of the lived experience; “subjectivity and memory are seen as agents in knowledge-construction, and strategies such as self-study, collaboration, and textual critiques are used to reveal important insights” (p. 24). This I experienced as it encouraged the idea of how I am able to draw to the idea of the flow experience.

Knotted—In the Immersive Process of “Arting”

The range of work represents the journey, a process over the last four years. Some works convey more silence, others convey more activity but with a more subtle message to a hint or memory of silence.

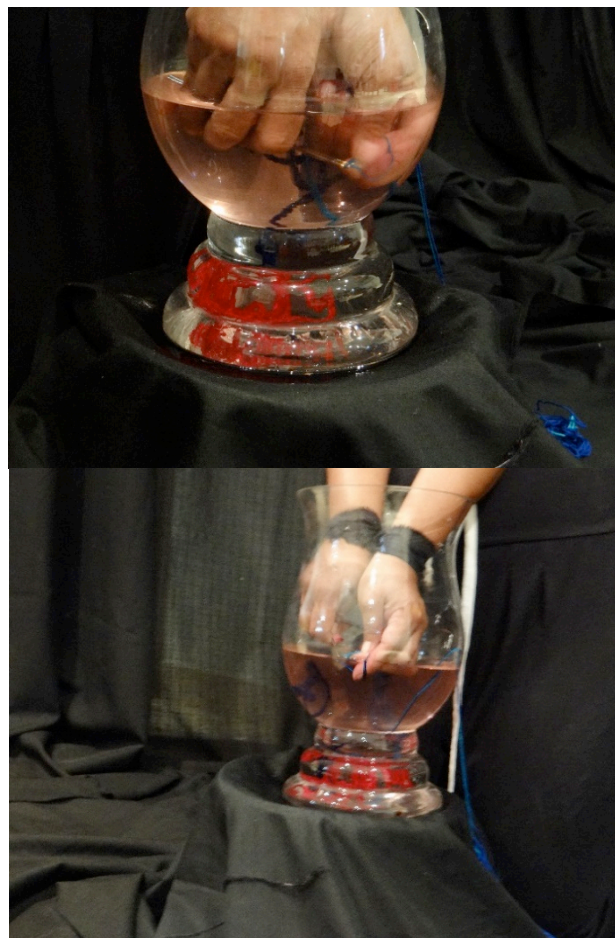


Figure 1: “Restraint” (Reshma Maharajh, 2019)

The artwork titled (Figure 1) "Restraint" serves as a powerful visual metaphor for the artist's experience as an Indian woman navigating the constraints and challenges of my sociocultural context. Through the strategic use of materials, the piece conveys the detrimental impact of limited space for self-expression on the artist's health and well-being. The glass vase symbolizes the visibility as a woman's constraints, while the black fabric represents the emotional emptiness and sense of suffocation felt by myself. The inclusion of water magnifies these feelings, as it distorts and obscures the view through the vase. The crochet cotton and needle on the other hand depict the attempt to create a safety net amidst the overwhelming sense of restraint and suffocation. The red and blue threads serve as a desperate plea, symbolizing the emotional entrapment and physical ailments experienced. The process of creating the artwork mirrors my lived experience. By covering a small pedestal with black fabric and placing a vase atop it, I set the stage for my performance. Clad in black pants, which tethered my surroundings and a white sari blouse, I poured water into a vase before embarking on the intricate task of crocheting knots with the cotton thread. The discomfort and the anxiety induced by the task reflected my fear of damaging the delicate vase, much like the fear of expressing myself freely in the socio-cultural context. The physical constraints of non-expression and non-agency have tangible consequences as I reflect on several health issues. These poignant moments underscore the profound impact of societal constraints on personal agency and enduring power of faith in times of adversity. Through the artwork I invite the viewer to engage with the complex interplay of visibility, constraint and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. By sharing my personal narrative, I hope to raise an awareness about the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies and the importance of creating safe spaces for self-expression and agency.

The reflections highlight the interconnectedness between the natural act of breathing, the consciousness of visualisation and the alignment of the body with its inherent presence and intimacy. The interweaving of physiological, cognitive and embodied experience serves as a gateway to exploring the concept of *rasa* emotions and the formation of identity and subjectivity. As I use flow as a framework for examining the multifaceted creative process that led to the visual, auditory and kinesthetics performance map. The map embedded the elements of time, space and the energetic body, revealing the complexity and the depth of the creative experience. In preparation for and during the pursuit of my creative endeavours, I consciously align myself with the energy of the universe by beginning with a moment of silence and deep breathing which reconnects my body, mind and soul. Subsequently I utilise the sound bowl to shift the vibration of the environment further facilitating my immersion in the time, space and bodily engagement required for the creative process. This holistic approach to the creative process grounded in embodied presence, energetic alignment and the interplay of sensory modalities suggest an understanding of the transformative potential of artistic expression. By embracing the natural flow of creativity and the interconnectedness of the physical, mental and spiritual realms, the creative practice becomes a conduit for personal growth, self-discovery and the exploration of the human experience. Drawing on aspects of my identity or areas of my potential subject formation, the intersections offer moments of exploration. Some of the ideas already speak to the potentialities of exploration as these ideas appear as discrete units.



Figure 2: “Gaath - The Knots” (Reshma Maharajh, 2019)



Figure 3: “Unshackling” (Reshma Maharajh, 2019)

My artworks (Figure 2) “Gaath - The Knots” and (Figure 3) “Unshackling” serve as a visual representation of my journey to break free from patriarchal norms and societal expectations, reclaiming ownership of my life on my own terms. These pieces symbolize my defiance against ideologies that once bound me to outdated ways of thinking, allowing me to find agency amidst the mental imprisonment I endured and ultimately liberated myself from. Over time, these artworks evolved into a unified performative piece, marking a complete circle from submission and suffocation to liberation.

Similar to the materials used in "Gaath - The Knots" and "Unshackling" utilize white organza, red paint, bangles, white string, and crochet cotton. These materials serve as a metaphorical journey from captivity to freedom, embodying the emotional and psychological aspects of my transformation to becoming more resilient. My bangles were broken, my *sindoor* (red colour powder) wiped off my forehead, my gendered trappings of marriage were put into the coffin to be incinerated with my husband's body, but the memories were there to eternally haunt me. I relived these moments in my quiet time as a showreel that played repeatedly.

Drawing inspiration from my own experiences of oppression within Indian-based patriarchy I reflect on the oppressive rules and rituals I was subjected to within the institution of marriage. As a mother, I contributed to enriching my family, yet as a widow and single mother, I faced societal scorn and ostracization. This would naturally fill me with a feeling of disgust and *rasa* helped me to engage the feeling on multiple levels. Firstly, I had to acknowledge the emotion I was experiencing then work through the pain as I engaged in the making process. Working with red ink and paint signifies abundance and prosperity and as a woman bedecks herself with all the ornamentation takes the role of the goddess in the home. However, as a widow I vehemently protested certain practices, for example Indian women in Indian society are not allowed to perform any of the funeral rites or the prayers of the deceased. I was told to follow scripture and tradition because I did not bear any sons to continue the lineage, but my heart and intuition said something else— daughters not important.

In "Gaath - The Knots", I explore the themes of marginalization, racial discrimination, gender bias which stifled my research pursuits the artwork serves as a *rasa* moment—a release of latent emotions. Using organza fabric adorned with red handprints, I explore the notion of purity, shame, humiliation, and invisibility stemming from my racialized and intra-Indian Otherness as I struggled to be seen and heard. Bangles tied to a knotted crocheted dome symbolize my liberation from the constraints of widowhood, while the dome itself represents the looming weight of societal judgment. The meticulous process of collecting bangles, purchasing materials, and crocheting the dome mirrors the *vyabhicharibhava* phase—a period of emotional and intellectual engagement that built resilience and tolerance. Each element, from the colourful bangles to the draped organza fabric, each with its own symbolic meaning, represents different facets of my identity and the societal norms I sought to break free from. Through this transformative process, which involves tying and untying knots embodies ultimately, this journey of self-discovery and defiance against societal constraints which was cathartic, allowing me to reclaim agency over my life and embody a sense of *ananda*—a state of bliss and contentment.

Understanding my artist 'self' during the creative process involves more than just exploring the individual identity. Rather, it is about comprehending the deeper levels of Being and Becoming that are inherent in the experience (Kudelska, 2000). This phenomenology of awareness allowed myself to enter and experience the transitional transcendental space, where I connected with the inner self and merge into a state of *Oneness*. The concept of *rasa* is central to my understanding of my artistic experience. *Rasa* can be understood as a 'taste' or mood of deep enjoyment that arises from the appreciation of an artwork. More importantly *rasa* is not dependent on formal knowledge about an artwork or explicit principles of philosophies in western art. *Rasa* is a vibration that emerges from within an individual enabling them to interact with the artwork in an emotional way to what refer to as TEM "transcendental emotional moment' when the boundary is transcended of one's own identity

merging with the artwork in a state of deep transformative engagement. The TEM is not about the subjective experience of the artist but a universal phenomenon that connects the artist, the artwork and the viewer in a sacred transcendent moment of artistic appreciation.

Identity Formation and Resilience

This sensitivity to observing and interpreting ourselves, or, better, finding ourselves, is inside the experience of 'self-identity'. Thus, the concept of identity, as described by Venn (2020, p. 43) is a knot in a network of intersubjective action and understanding, which implies transformation in the world, and is coupled with the material and the social self. Hermann Lotze (in Larlham, 2012) grounds the idea that "every movement which we execute, every attitude in which we repose, has its meaning rendered plain to us by the feeling of exertion or of enjoyment" (p. 225). When this feeling is kinesthetically experienced, it is one where "the world becomes alive to us through aesthetic enjoyment when one sympathetically expands on our sentience beyond the limits of the body and invests in our kinetic energy" (Lotze, 2012, p. 225). This ties into the authenticity and intimacy of the artwork as Pollock (2007) states "presenting something to the world or making something concrete can sometimes be the only way the real truth come(s) to be known" (p. 10), as *rasa* and meta representation help us make sense of our lived experience. As much as visual artists are able to represent an object or emotion, it will almost always be a *simulacra*—a shadow of the absolute truth. It is in our human nature to mimic anything as it is woven into the fabric of our lives that we can identify with from infancy to our senior years and it is from that mimicking that our learning takes place and understanding of our lived experience to a certain extent (Frost, 2021).

In keeping with Bauer (2011), the phenomenology of awareness is the awareness of Being and this can be meditative, and it focuses on the experience itself, which takes place in the here and now. This experience and self-reflection are far more than the mundane conditions and trappings of daily life and moves beyond transcendental contemplation to the TEM. I argue that this positionality fosters the seeming, being and becoming attributes that the artist explores through experiences. The artist thinks back, experiences now, and plans for the final creative output or artefact. Yet, in the 'now experience of making', the future image is continually re-visioned. I attribute learning about my identity as I engage forces at play in relation to my choice of objects, psychological energies and metaphysical relationships, which contribute to my subjective human understanding of my place within space (Hays, 2016). The medium of art and dance has taught me to see what an imperceptible dynamic layer identity in performance would otherwise be. Through my *rasa* experience the transcendental moment of experiencing myself once I have reached a platform of absolute acceptance, I am able to dissolve outdated aspects of myself and healthily reconstruct my subject formation from a platform of absolute independence, acceptance, and peace.

The material elements are propelled, and function based on the dictates of the mind, and intelligence within the boundary of my spiritual understanding the engine of the human form is the soul itself that informs sensory functionality but is not tangibly visible. I draw on each *rasa* as an emotional energy drawn from our life force, expressed and coloured by our desires to become accustomed to conditioning. The paradigm shift is the provocative shift and dislocates the compass needle. When we inhabit uncertainty, we enter a gap that we cannot see, translucent like water that we can feel, and a silence we try to understand.

Conclusion

In my self-analysis and subject formation, I have come to realise that I exist in a pool of the same ideological functions as other women, mothers, academics, artists and so forth. This realisation has made me understand that the struggles I endure are not in isolation, but rather a shared experience among those who occupy similar social positions and face comparable challenges. My identity and subject formation is no longer about sole character development by myself, for myself and of myself. Instead, it is a synthesis that gives rise to the metaphysics of *Oneness* between the self and the absolute, between humanity and divinity. In the context of artistic practice, this metaphysics of *Oneness* manifests in the relationship between subjectivity of the artist and the objectivity of the work, as well as between the ideal and the material form that emanates from the images.

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