Decolonising Dance Movement Therapy: A Healing Practice Stuck between Coloniality and Nationalism in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

After receiving an undergraduate degree in fine arts from Sri Lanka, I was looking for ways to incorporate my passion for dance with academic studies in a new direction. I was attracted to dance therapy and was almost admitted into a graduate program in that discipline. Although
I did not do my PhD in dance therapy, I had been exposed to various aspects of dance movement therapy and healing practices in the past. Between 2004 and 2020, I engaged in research projects on dance, performance and therapy with various North American scholars. I invited some of them to Sri Lanka and collaborated with them, and incorporated elements of the healing aspects of dance into the curriculum of the programme where I currently teach. Through my experiences, I was exposed to the benefits of dance movement therapy, and, at the same time, was able to be more critical of the use of these practices in postcolonial sites such as Sri Lanka. Now in 2021, while seeing the benefits that dance therapy can offer to Sri Lankans, I also see the potential danger if it goes in some problematic directions.

Since dance movement therapy in the modern sense is relatively new to Sri Lanka, there are different directions that it can take. I demonstrate here three of these potential directions: colonial, nationalised, and decolonial. Dance movement therapy, or DMT, becomes colonial given its history and orientation when it is introduced to a postcolonial site. However, an ethno-nationalist approach that tries to prove that such a thing existed in precolonial, traditional Sinhala rituals is also not helpful. In this article, I question both the colonial and the nationalised approaches in dance movement therapy in Sri Lanka and suggest that a decolonial approach is possible.

Currently, there is no single decolonial framework that can be universally agreed upon (and maybe there will never be). When I use the term ‘decolonising’ here, I am in agreement with the Puerto Rican thinker and scholar Ramón Grosfoguel. Like Grosfoguel, I use the term ‘coloniality’ to mark the ‘colonial situations’ – ‘the cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic oppression/exploitation of subordinate racialised/ethnic groups by dominant racialised/ethnic groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations’. Dance movement therapy in Sri Lanka creates colonial situations. I agree with Grosfoguel when he articulates decolonisation as ‘not an essentialist, fundamentalist, anti-European critique’, but a ‘perspective that is critical of both Eurocentric and Third World fundamentalisms, colonialism and nationalism’. Decolonis-ation involves addressing hierarchies of ‘racial, ethnic, sexual, gender, and economic relations’ between the colonised and the Eurocentric knowledge structures. Therefore, the first step towards decolonisation is to characterise the hierarchies and oppressive elements that stem from coloniality, even in postcolonial conditions. My critique of dance movement therapy does not end in coloniality. While critiquing the coloniality in DMT, I also question the attempts to nationalise it by glorifying the precolonial past.

2 Ibid, p 212
Dance Movement Therapy

In ancient societies, various performance elements were used for healing through festivals, ceremonies and various rituals. Dance, movement, music, storytelling and roleplaying have been used for healing purposes for many ages. However, it is only after the twentieth century that those healing practices have been framed more professionally as ‘therapy’ in the Global North. Dance Movement Therapy is a relatively new discipline and is a profession developed mainly in the United States initially, in the period since the 1940s.

Two major professional organisations claim authority for dance movement therapy in the US and the UK. In the United States, it is the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA), and they characterise their practice as ‘Dance/Movement Therapy’ (DMT). The ADTA defines dance/movement therapy as ‘the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of the individual, for the purpose of improving health and well-being’.4 The Association for Dance Movement Psychotherapy UK (ADMP), which evolved from the Association for Dance Movement Therapy (ADMT), claims the authority in the United Kingdom and uses the term ‘Dance Movement Psychotherapy’ (DMP). ADMP defines dance movement psychotherapy as ‘a relational process in which client(s) and therapist engage creatively using body movement and dance, as well as verbal and non-verbal reflection’.5 Both these organisations define dance movement therapy as a psychotherapeutic tool and have also established it as a profession.

Dance and Movement Therapy in Sri Lanka

The use of creative arts in a professional therapeutic manner is relatively new to Sri Lanka. As the drama therapist Tehani Chitty asserts, although traditional healing ritual practice existed in Sri Lanka, ‘it has now been formulated by the Western strain of psychology as well, which allows us to use it more explicitly as a form of therapy’.6 Among other creative art therapies, dance movement therapy is the newest for Sri Lanka, and individuals have begun to use it in a very loose manner over the last fifteen years. This includes the work that Venuri Perera, myself and others have been doing, separately, in using dance for individual and community wellbeing. For example, in 2009, when I was working with former child soldiers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), I used dance in workshops that promoted national integration. We were not doing this kind of

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work in a therapeutic framework, yet there is currently an interest among individuals in Sri Lanka (both foreign and local) in developing dance movement therapy as a profession and to have a licensing system as in the US.

Since Sri Lanka has a rich tradition of performing arts, therapists and researchers working with creative art therapies turn to traditional dance and rituals. Most of them are attracted to the low country dance tradition (or Ruhunu dance) that is primarily practised in the western and southern parts of the island. Yet this move to working with low country dance traditions has a colonial legacy. Colonial writers have characterised this low country tradition as a ritual dance tradition dealing with demons, devils and spirits. The colonial discourse of black magic, shamanism and exorcism has schematised this tradition as a devil or demon dance tradition. And even later researchers have also characterised these ritual dances as devil or demon dance practices. This discourse of devils, demons and exorcism has helped drama and dance therapists to find their tools and to articulate them into therapeutic practices. The therapists are not, however, attracted to Kandyan dance, the most popular dance tradition in Sri Lanka. Kandyan dance has been elevated as the national dance, and it is used for the national pride of the Sinhala, the majority ethnic group in the country. Its repertoires are generally refined and difficult to tweak for therapeutic purposes because of cultural and political reasons. The therapists do not seem to be attracted to the Tamil dance traditions in the country, and since I am more familiar with the dance traditions of the Sinhala people in Sri Lanka, I am focusing only on those in this article.
Coloniality in Dance Movement Therapy

When dance movement therapy is introduced to a postcolonial site, it carries colonial baggage with it. The history of the discipline of dance movement therapy in both the US and the UK has been influenced by Laban Movement Analysis (LMA), a highly structured movement analysis system developed by the Austro-Hungarian dance theorist Rudolf von Laban. Laban and his followers used LMA to characterise and understand human behaviours. I see the value of LMA as an attempt to analyse dance and human movements in general. However, an epistemic question arises when people use LMA to analyse the dance and movements of colonised cultures. As Grosfoguel claims, ‘the hegemonic Eurocentric paradigms that have informed western philosophy and sciences in the “modern/colonial capitalist/patriarchal world-system” for the last 500 hundred years assume a universalistic, neutral, objective point of view’. Therefore, dance movement therapists cannot understand, and try to provide solutions to postcolonial sites using systems of structured movement analysis that have been developed based on the realities of the Global North. Some of the tools and knowledge used in dance movement therapy are derived from Europe and the US, and it is extremely limiting when there are attempts to apply them cross-culturally; there is a failure to grasp the nuances of the postcolonial cultures.

Global political and economic structures re-enforce colonial relationships when they are introduced to postcolonial sites. Scholars have characterised how global governance operates by commodifying trauma, affect and emotion in the form of therapy. The global governance is the framework in which the Global North plays the dominant role, promotes rights, and sometimes offers therapy to achieve its goals. As Vanessa Pupavac, a scholar on international relations, asserts, global governance reconfigures rights as external interventions ‘on behalf of infantilised citizens to avert psychosocial dysfunction and support them in becoming good citizens’. According to her, these therapeutic interventions are ‘informed by Anglo-American social psychology’. This is a colonial approach, both at the epistemic and the practical levels. Thus, dance movement therapists, and various other creative arts therapy projects in Sri Lanka, approach their work through an Anglo-Eurocentric colonial framework: to assist the infantilised citizens in becoming good citizens.

The colonial power structure is re-established through the therapist–client dichotomy in dance movement therapy. In the US or the UK, the relationship between therapist and client is

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7 Grosfoguel, ‘The Epistemic Decolonial Turn’, op cit, p 213
9 Pupavac, op cit, pp 46–47
10 Ibid, p 56
straightforward and no hierarchy is maintained. However, when this dichotomy is introduced to a postcolonial site, such as Sri Lanka, it is charged with a colonial relationship and the relationship is no longer neutral. Some Euro-American therapists might genuinely want to take the side of the oppressed; however, as Grosfoguel reminds us, ‘the fact that one is socially located in the oppressed side of power relations, does not automatically mean that he/she is epistemically thinking from a subaltern epistemic location’. Therefore, in a postcolonial site, the relationship between therapist and client becomes hierarchical along the lines of expert vs incompetent, empowered vs disempowered, privileged vs underprivileged, authority vs powerless, superior vs subordinate, white vs brown/black and enunciate vs voiceless. In these contexts, the therapist, the expert (who are mostly white), becomes the voice, appears benevolent and sometimes hijacks the situation, leading to the local communities being more dependent on them. Because of this colonial relationship, Sri Lankan therapists require a form of ‘baptism’ from the organisations in the US or UK in order to be called professional therapists. I agree that having a licence can be helpful in maintaining professionalism, yet, when it comes through the US or UK, it can also create colonial relationships.

**Dance Education, Nationalism, Employability and Therapy**

Sri Lankans have been practising various healing rituals for centuries, and among these the practice of ritual dance still functions as a living tradition in the country. After independence from the UK, ritual and traditional dance did receive attention and was taught in Sri Lanka as a form of Sinhala national heritage. Since the 1950s, ritual dances have been ubiquitous in the dance curricula at both secondary school and university levels. As the anthropologist Susan Reed convincingly demonstrates, dance, particularly Kandyan dance, was elevated into a national dance of Sri Lanka by the ruling elites after the 1950s. These elevated traditional dance forms received renewed interest when they were introduced into public school and degree level curricula in the same decade. Since the pioneers who developed this were Sinhala nationalists, the curriculum included rituals that were only practised by the Sinhala people. Reed characterised this as a ‘ritual-based curriculum’. Even though dance as a discipline has various possibilities and capacities, since the 1950s it has been restricted in Sri Lanka to the teaching and learning of the ritual dance sequences of the Sinhala people.

Recently, however, with the emergence of the discourse on humanities education and relevance and employability, dance education has been highlighted. The ritual-based curricula of universities

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11 Grosfoguel, ‘The Epistemic Decolonial Turn’, op cit, p 213
13 Ibid, p 150
have produced graduates who have become dance teachers with ritual dance knowledge. But since recent governments have focused on STEM education and employability,\textsuperscript{14} ritual dance is beginning to lose its currency in the public education system. Currently, career opportunities are extremely limited for dance graduates in Sri Lanka. Preserving the tradition and showcasing national heritage is no longer enough to justify the importance of teaching and learning dance in public schools and universities. Dance curriculum developers, educators and university lecturers are now looking for ways to justify the importance of dance education in the country and the employability of dance graduates. In this context, dance therapy has become a buzzword in public schools, in universities, and in the Ministry of Education and the National Institute of Education.

Amidst the pressure for dance education to produce employable graduates, it seems that dance movement therapy does attract the attention of the public school curriculum in Sri Lanka. However, given the ethno-nationalist history of dance education in public schools, and its existing ritual-based curriculum, this could easily become a nationalising approach. In this nationalising dance movement therapy, traditionalist rhetoric would sound like ‘in our country, we practised dance therapy for thousands of years before the Westerners’, and similar statements in the field of dance education can already be heard. It is noticeable that some contributors to the ritual-based curriculum have begun to focus on the therapeutic aspects of Sri Lankan ritual dance. Although nationalists try to argue that Sri Lankans had been practising dance therapy for ages, the irony is that they had to be ‘baptised’ by Euro-American organisations in order to seek their licences.

On another front, some foreign and local researchers and practitioners draw parallels between Sri Lankan traditional dance rituals and the dance movement therapy used in Euro-American contexts. However, Waidyawathie Rajapaksa, a scholar of traditional dance, has a different view on this. The daughter of the famous Kandyan traditional dancer and drummer Amunugama Suramba, Rajapaksa embodies her family’s centuries-old knowledge of dance. According to her, what happens in dance rituals and in Western ‘psychotherapy’ or ‘therapy’ is very different.\textsuperscript{15} In particular, she highlights the difference between the roles of the people involved in dance rituals and in dance movement therapy. The relationship between the ritual priest and the receiver of the healing (āturayā) is very different to the relationship between the therapist and the client/patient in dance movement therapy.\textsuperscript{16} In dance rituals, āturayā, the receiver of the healing, is sometimes considered a patient. However, occasionally, he/she is the sponsor of the ritual and not considered a patient in the western sense.

\textsuperscript{14} STEM education focuses on science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Even if the countries that introduced the concept of STEM education are abandoning it, the Sri Lankan government has unfortunately only started implementing it recently.

\textsuperscript{15} Waidyawathie Rajapaksa, ‘Healing in Dance Rituals and Dance Therapy’, interviewed by Sudesh Mantillake, 8 December 2020

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid
Given the history of the country, which includes twenty-six years of civil war (1983–2009), ethnic nationalism has evolved into a monster in Sri Lanka. There is a great deal of mistrust among Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities. At the same time, there are efforts in various pockets of artists, scholars and activists who are attempting to collaborate among ethnic groups while also trying to heal themselves. Therefore, a nationalised dance movement therapy approach would not help as it can easily slip into ethno-nationalism, where the Sinhala majoritarian sentiment becomes the superior and the dominant voice. This can reproduce hierarchies and oppressive systems as problematic as the colonial approach.

Is a decolonial approach to dance movement therapy possible? Yes, I think so

I am not against dance movement therapy. There are moments when people need various kinds of healing. I am a dancer and a choreographer who works with my own body and with other bodies. Therefore, I know dance can heal individuals and communities, and I have witnessed the power of the healing aspect of dance in various contexts. However, in Sri Lanka, I see the danger of either the colonising or nationalising of dance movement therapy in the near future. Dance cannot heal
individuals or communities in postcolonial sites when it establishes colonial relationships. Therefore, we do not need colonial dance movement therapy (DMT) or dance movement psychotherapy (DMP). A fabricated nationalised DMT approach would also not be helpful. If there is an awareness of these two traps, dance and movement can be used for healing purposes in a more holistic, inclusive and non-hierarchical manner. This, I suggest, is what could be a decolonial approach to dance and movement as a healing practice. It is only this kind of approach that can facilitate some healing to postcolonial sites through dance and movement.

Terms such as DMT or ‘therapy’ also need to be rethought. Instead of ‘therapy’, a decolonial approach should articulate it as a collective healing practice. A decolonial dance movement healing practice should challenge the patriarchal epistemic systems, the experts speaking for the so-called voiceless, and the dichotomies such as expert–incompetent, therapist–client. Rather than structured movement analysis, the understanding should come through bodies and embodied experiences and local realities, and it should incorporate, where possible, indigenous knowledge systems.

A colonial or nationalised approach to dance movement therapy cannot address the real issues of postcolonial societies. While colonial DMT maintains a Euro-American superiority, a nationalised DMT can antagonise individuals and communities as it can be changed along ethnic lines. Both of these approaches may sit with the oppressed and soothe them. However, these approaches cannot address or even discuss the root causes of social issues such as poverty, hierarchy, privilege, injustice, discrimination and ethnic violence.

A decolonial approach to dance movement therapy should address the issues at an individual/personal level and connect them to structural issues and systemic oppressions. It should, of course, support individuals in dealing with their issues. However, we cannot ignore that most of those issues stem from oppressive systems. While supporting individuals to gain their personal peace, this approach should eventually lead to a more just society. Personal healing should lead to solidarity in the community, and among communities.

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