

**Alesha Mehta**

## Ritualistic Explorations towards Kama in Autoethnographic Creative Practice

While I cannot recall the first encounter I had with the *Kamasutra*, I have certainly lost count of the number of times a white man at a bar would try and use it as a pick-up line. They would declare that I came from the land of acrobatic sex positions while stumbling and laughing, hoping I would reciprocate their sexual ideas about the *Kamasutra*. Their racist remarks crushed my cultural identity, which led me to feel disempowered; or, in other scenarios, I would use my voice and fight back only to be further insulted for not being able to take a joke. My perceptions of the *Kamasutra* had been tainted by the west and their exoticisation of it. Growing up, we did not speak of it in our home, and I did not know it even existed until the West told me it did. Now, as an early career researcher, I grapple with lived experiences related to my identity as I decolonise my perceptions on vedic philosophy through choreographic practice.

*Mukti Vidhi* (Liberation Ritual) is the title of my performance work that has culminated through doctoral research. The journey of decolonising my performance practice began in postgraduate research where I developed ritual as a choreographic method (Mehta & Foster-Sproull 2021). As a third-year doctoral student, I have unpacked my fragmented identity, questioned my belonging and found companionship through vedic philosophy and embodiments of the goddess Kali. The amalgamation of ritual, vedic philosophy, and my cultural heritage led me to *Mukti Vidhi*, which explores kama as a method for creative practice and recognises the entanglement I have with senses, nonhumans (objects), and more-than-human entities (Goddesses).

When I began my doctoral research, I discovered the purusharthas very early on. The purusharthas are a fourfold pathway to reach moksha (liberation), and include dharma (ethical wellbeing), artha (material wealth) and kama (pleasure) (Narayan 2010).

Through exploring the purusharthas, I learnt kama was an essential part of a vedic worldview that I was seeking to explore and understand. I must admit that kama caught me by surprise, and I began joking with my peers that I was researching the *Kamasutra*. I was embarrassed and ashamed because of the sexual reputation the *Kamasutra* had and continues to have and thought, how could I possibly engage with this as a choreographic method? This question led me towards a proposition: to understand kama in a decolonial way would mean reading the original translated version of the *Kamasutra*. Was it really just about acrobatic sex positions? If not, then what?



**Figure 1.** Sari maze from *Mukti Vidhi*, University of Auckland, 2023. Image: Shruthi Priya Balaji.

Kama in this research is understood through the *Kamasutra* by Vātsyāyana and translated by English orientalist Richard Burton, and through the research of scholars who engage with kama. Vātsyāyana was the first to write the *Kamasutra* and virtually nothing is known about him other than his name (Doniger 2003). In my research I have chosen to engage directly with the translated text for several reasons such as: resources, language barriers, availability and for the additional complexity of decolonising western understandings of vedic philosophy. Reading the translations of the *Kamasutra* is slippery terrain, and they are far from perfect and flawless; there are statements that are saturated with casteism, classism and are oppressive towards women. These statements have led me to explore risk and feminist rage to engage in politically charged acts in direct relation to the darker side of kama. This slipperiness can lead kama to fall out of my palms and push me back to the Western appropriation of it, but it also invites a sense of fluidity. A fluidity to move between perspectives, to dance with the philosophy, to consider the different ways it has been perceived and explored both in academia and through my lived experiences, and to explore the light and the dark, moving towards a

sense of wholeness. As I spent time with the *Kamasutra*, I began to undo the western belief of it being about “acrobatic sex positions” (Desmond 2011,18) toward “kama [as] the enjoyment of appropriate objects by the five senses of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting and smelling, assisted by the mind together with the soul” (Burton 1883, 16). This translation of kama led me to create choreographic activations from my senses to a practice that is decolonial, ritualistic, and in direct entanglement with sensorial objects.

In this practice, engaging with sensorial experiences begins through building a kama world to evoke memories, histories, and lived experiences (Ali 2011). This ritual involves adorning the Kenneth Myers Centre dance studio with fifty-two saris that belong to my mother, grandmother, and me. These saris are hung from the studio scaffolds, gently swaying with each step past them. Because of their delicate material and length, some of these saris have never been washed, which allows their fragrances to waft into the space. These saris carry the memories and DNA of my matrilineal bloodline with some over fifty years old, some original witnesses to my childhood, and some holding previous puja (ritual) energies. As I walk around the space, I smell fragrances of musk, baby powder, and sweet caramel as the perfumes on the materials entangle with each other depicting the intergenerational stories interconnecting in the space. I recognise the saris as protectors or entities that hold and protect the work through creating fluid, soft walls to surround the performance zone. A performance circle is created with tarot cards that have images of Kali Maa in her various embodiments, with some evoking a sense of darkness and the lightness. Four altars are placed in the space in relation to the directions associated with each element: water, fire, air and earth. On these altars are a single wisdom tooth, books, diaries, incense sticks, snake deities, lentils, rudraksha beads, a painting of a two-headed snake, anklets, and a microphone. Inside of the tarot circle is a mirror, chilli powder, a silver bowl, a bar gag, a flogger, and a skipping rope. These objects have arrived at different times during the process: some have arrived by chance, some arrived in relation to what was happening in my life during a particular moment (wisdom tooth), and others I am called to through their ‘thing power’ which is “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett 2010, 6). The adornment of the space can take up to four hours involving a bodily understanding of the labour that is required to decolonise choreographic practice and build a world that is shaped by cultural heritage. This building of a choreographic world considers the environment, senses, and the experience of choreographing the space as part of the work itself.

Within *Mukti Vidhi*, spatial design is a critical component of the choreographic practice shaped by the purusharthas and Daud Ali’s (2011) proposition of a kama world, which invites an experience of a sensorially charged space that interacts with each of our senses. In the early stages of my solo choreographic practice, I became aware of the connection I had to crafting and adorning a space through hanging saris on the scaffolds, building altars, and bringing objects that resonate with the work to visually connect to the conceptual ideas, my hopes, and to plant the seeds of a world I would like to see some day. This led me to understand that the objects and my position in this world are equal collaborators in the building of the choreographic landscape, where we both give and receive energy from and to each other. Within *Mukti Vidhi*, a world is crafted

where belonging may unravel through sensorial experiences of identity through sound, taste, smell, sight, and feeling. Laura Desmond states that the Kamasutra “is deeply concerned with this dynamic interaction between human subjects and the world around them” (Desmond 2011, 16). Desmond’s proposal led me to consider how these interactions might engage with objects through choreographic practice and, further, what this interaction might lead me to understand.



**Figure 2.** Altars from Mukti Vidhi, University of Auckland 2023. Images: Emma Cosgrave and Shruthi Priya Balaji.

Entangling the senses into *Mukti Vidhi* is a practice of world-building, which shapes how my choreographic practice unfolds. Building on previous movement practices, I invite specific scents to instigate a feeling of familiarity, sound to forge a connection to movement, and adornment to initiate a resonance to the environment through sight (Mehta & Foster-Sproull 2021). The senses are foregrounded to create the world that the work is situated within, and to understand how connections to objects can inform choreographic practice. Such an affinity with the objects of adornments unravels sensations within my body which steer the movement practice to different directions at any given moment. When I smell familiar scents, feel the textures around me and the memories attached to each object, sensations unravel. These sensations allow me to make creative decisions, as Sara Ahmed states “feminism begins with a sensation: with a sense of things” (Ahmed 2017, 21). Therefore, creating and curating a kama world that is activating each of my senses allows me to listen to the intuitive pushes and pulls in my body to make creative decisions.



**Figure 3.** Meditative Beginning from *Mukti Vidhi*, University of Auckland 2023. Image: Ravi Chand.

Activating the senses is crucial to the unfolding of my artistic voice as a South Asian woman in Aotearoa. These senses can communicate our relationship to the work, ideas, and questions that are unfolding within the process of choreographic practice. As I heighten my senses, I turn to the *Kamasutra*, which discusses four types of embrace between mutual lovers: touching, piercing, rubbing, and pressing (Burton 1883). Thinking about these embraces through choreographic practice acknowledges the ‘mutual love’ between the objects and me. In this way, my body and senses were ‘touched’ by the gentle wafts of the saris as I walked past them, how ‘piercing’ it was to enact laborious and endurance charged choreographic pursuits, and the ways my body was being ‘pressed’ into things and ways of being because of who others recognised me as. The discussions about embraces of mutual love, and the reflections on my lived experiences of being pressed into certain ways of being, propelled me to explore with the bar gag and flogger. These two objects allowed me to communicate my inner rage, wield momentary power, and explore injustices through politically charged imagery to pierce into the walls that have (op)pressed my body and cultural heritage.

To explore the flogger and bar gag, which are objects laden with sexual connotations alongside images of Kali, led me to feel fearful of the risk of appropriating my cultural heritage. This fear was embodied and communicated through my temperature increasing, sweat on my palms, nausea, a racing heart, a bodily experience of a sense of urgency and, sometimes, an amalgamation of all these sensations. Recentring a vedic practice of working from the senses led me to contemplate how my body was responding to creative activations and histories. These sensations led me to find other South Asian artists working with cultural heritage in contemporary ways. Here I think of

Tamil filmmaker Leena Manimekalai and her film *Kaali* (Xing 2023). Manimekalai's work disrupts the patriarchy in India by portraying the Hindu goddess Kali smoking in front of the pride flag (Soni 2023; Santasil 2022). Manimekalai evoked sensations in those who viewed her work, which led the Bharata Janata Party (BJP) to file a complaint with Delhi police against her (Santasil 2022). This silencing of Manimekalai's work led my sensations to shift in relation to Kali within *Mukti Vidhi*. The sweat on my palms, nausea, racing heart and sense of urgency began to communicate anger and a push which recognises the necessity to explore decolonial and feminist experiences of cultural heritage.



**Figure 4.** Flogger movement from *Mukti Vidhi*, University of Auckland 2023. Image: Shruthi Priya Balaji.

To work in a sensorially active way within *Mukti Vidhi* is to blur the boundaries between each of the senses to feel the bodily experience of being grounded in my identity. As stated in the Kamasutra: “kama is the enjoyment of appropriate objects by the five senses of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting and smelling, assisted by the mind together with the soul” (Burton 1883, 16). To work in this way took time; it took time to decolonise the mind, body, knowledge and space, as Mar (2016) outlines, and to uplift a ‘kama’ way of becoming with the work. During earlier explorations with kama as a philosophical and artistic lens, I often found myself bound to a linear perspective on pleasure. I would walk into the studio and feel overwhelmed by my desire to explore pleasure in my practice. Questions flooded my mind such as: What is pleasure? What is kama? Is it the acrobatic sex positions? If not, then what? I did not have the answers, and I felt I did not have the ‘right’ tasks to explore these provocations, nor did I have human collaborators to problem solve with. It was me, kama, and all the objects I could fit into my backpack.

Exploring choreographic tasks with objects as collaborators pushed me to engage with them through a lens that is not linear, but rather through one that is exploratory and comfortable with failure. Often, through the ways I have been conditioned by the west, by my cultural heritage, by patriarchy, I felt hesitant to act upon creative instinct. However, through shaping my practice with vedic philosophies, it has become easier to delineate when an artistic pull is instinctive and necessary for the work and when the mind is shaped by wider oppressive forces. During the second development of *Mukti Vidhi* I recall hearing the call to collect my saliva in a bowl during my performance and to mix it with vermilion to adorn myself with a Bindi. This became an act of giving part of myself (saliva) and part of my heritage (vermillion) to ritualistically experience



**Figure 5.** Kashmiri Laal Marchu (Chili) Powder Bindi from *Mukti Vidhi*, University of Auckland 2023. Image: Emma Cosgrave.

wholeness. Initially, I hesitated to mix my saliva with vermilion as it is sacred, often used in religious ritual and as adornment of gods and goddesses. I dismissed this creative act and continued working towards and with other provocations. Then, one afternoon as I was cooking dinner, in my open stainless steel spice container I saw the bright red chili powder, I jumped at the opportunity to explore my initial creative pull in a way that felt aligned with the *Mukti Vidhi* world.

In *Mukti Vidhi*, there is a moment of 'transformation' that is the accumulation of all creative acts to a final exploration. Prior to this moment of transformation in *Mukti Vidhi*, I scoop the chili powder and saliva mixture, place it onto my forehead, and lick the remainder off my finger. In the moments following, I feel heat in my throat which continues to my gut, I feel my forehead burn, I can smell the strong scent of chilli which reminds me of the mango atarnu (pickle) I have at home. This activation combines all my senses as it begins to unravel suppressed rage to bring it to the surface. The moment of transformation that follows is fuelled by the sensations of heat, burning, tingling, and the smells of spice as a catalyst for movement vocabulary to evolve into new terrains, empowering my position as a woman of colour within the institution. The collaboration between my saliva, the chili powder, and my moving body led me to experience my vedic worldview unfolding within my choreographic practice. Activating the senses and exploring cultural identity in my moving body are both crucial to feeling recentred within my identity.

As the objects entangle and create a world within the studio, I feel a sense of homeliness. I see my grandmother's sari to the right of me, I see my mother's sari in front of me, and my saris interwoven between theirs. Their perfumes linger within the threads of the material and lead me to feel their energetic presence in the space. Objects are placed around the space orienting me and planting seeds of hope to recenter my cultural heritage in my research. To work in a sensorially charged way by building a kama world recognises that I (the human) am not at the centre of the work, but I am in constant collaboration and interconnection with objects, Goddesses, and the world at large. Much of this practice was shaped in response to my undergraduate yearnings, a yearning to connect to my South Asian heritage and to feel empowered as a South Asian artist in Aotearoa. As explored in this piece, a kama world can decolonise the senses to create equity between them which could unravel new artistic concepts, heighten intuitive pulls, and deepen vedic philosophical understandings of being in the world. As we continue moving into a time where the digital is expanding at a rapid rate, world-building in choreographic practice can serve as a reminder of the ongoing potential of corporeal experiences and vedic philosophy to shape artistic practice and ways of becoming in a world of change.



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