

**THE NIGHT SHE WENT DANCING
OR, A REIMAGINATION OF SATYAJIT RAY'S
PRATIDWANDI (1970)**

YUXIN CHEN

B.A. Candidate in Art History
Columbia University, Class of 2023

She didn't need to turn around to know what was outside of her room. Even at night, the house felt like a furnace in July. She kept the door ajar, but the stuffiness in her room clung around her body with malicious intent, refusing to make an exit. As she lay in bed and faced the cracks in the white-plastered wall, she could picture her mother in that terrible white dress, still standing in the hallway, not unlike a piece of plaster on the wall that had begun to peel off.

"They've brought disrepute to my daughter," she heard her mother's voice, "really, it is better to die than to live like this..."

So Siddhartha was back, she thought nonchalantly. All had become part of the routine. Open the door—tread across the floor scattered with fractured tension (careful, unless you want your feet slit)—walk past your mother who started droning as if on cue—retire to your fortress of magazine pages and too thin a quilt—wait for the droning to start again when your brother returned from his never-successful job hunt. Nightly she danced the dance.

She danced the dance nightly since mid-February. The dance studio was in an office building on the outskirts of Calcutta, a third-floor unit once used for storage by a pharmaceutical company. She had to squeeze past the deserted cardboard boxes in the stairway every time she climbed up. The room was too cramped, with a musty smell and an odd layer of grease on the mirror. She loved it there.

Fatima, a girlfriend from college, told her about the place when she was one week into working for Ananta Sanyal. "You need to go out more, Sutapa," she said. "Try to have a little fun once in a while," she said. "Dance can take your mind off of things," she said, "it will do you good."

In the dingy restaurant that served subpar Chinese food, she looked across the table at Fatima. Fatima had some thick volumes of textbooks poking out of her canvas bag and some ink stains on her knuckles. They must be from that statistics lecture.

She looked at Fatima and thought, *this could have been me. I could have been you. I would have done so much better if I were you. You could have been me, if your father too passed away, if you too had an elder brother in medical school, if your mother too deemed his education a priority, and yours a redundancy.*

She promised Fatima that she would check out that dance place on the next day.

That was winter, which felt like decades ago. Now she found herself in front of the dance room mirror, an hour after she got off work, five bus stops away from Mr. Sanyal's office, the third time this week, the tenth time this month. She stared at her reflection, slightly distorted by the layer of grease.

Then the music started. She swayed to the music, and the floorboard creaked.

The floorboard creaked as Siddhartha stepped into her room. He never knocked, not tonight or any night.

"I went to your boss's house today," he announced to the back of her head, "I told him that you will not work anymore because you've been feeling the strain. I said that every day you return after nine and you might have a breakdown anytime. He said that he had nothing to say about it if you really felt that way. He also said that you are a smart, hard-working girl."

She couldn't help but laugh. His sentences swung back and forth between truth and lie, a tick paired with a tock, a lighter piece on top of a darker one as per the suggestions in her fashion catalog. Yes, Siddhartha did go to her boss's house today—Sanyal phoned home earlier in the afternoon and asked if she had indeed been struggling, with a tone of concern tinted by condescension. No, she would not stop working—she refused to surrender the thing that had been forced into her hands. Yes, she did return after nine every night, but it was the only thing that kept her from a breakdown. No, Sanyal wouldn't be fine with her quitting—who else would listen to his pathetic rant about his pathetic wife? Yes, Sanyal did compliment her every now and then, but not before he called her "doll" and rest his hand on her shoulder, sometimes her thigh.

On the page of the fashion catalog that she was reading just then, they said, *wear a lighter piece on top of your dark-colored staple clothes to create a layered look. They said, if styled wisely, the clothes that we recommend can conceal the not-so-slim parts of your body.*

She let her giggles die down and turned around. As she looked straight into her brother's eyes, she knew all too well the parts of the story that he had left out, the bad figure underneath all the layering. She knew where to press.

"How did your interview go?" she asked.

Promptly, a sheen of sweat materialized on Siddhartha's forehead. He fidgeted in the chair and edged away from the bedside lamp. At that moment, she couldn't help but think of the French windows in Mr. Sanyal's house. Sunlight would pour straight through the grand expanse of glass, and even the smallest thing could be seen. She wondered how Siddhartha must have looked in that well-lit room, on the beige sofa, an unemployed elder brother asking the boss to sack his sister, the only breadwinner in the household.

"Do you think I'm joking with you?" Siddhartha seemed properly angry now. "His wife came to our house tonight and said so many things... Does that mean nothing to you? Nothing at all? I swear, I swear that if that Sanyal dares behave badly

with you I will give him a thrashing myself... Are you not able to believe it? Sutapa, do you not believe it?"

"Sutapa, do you not believe it? Do you believe me now?" Siddhartha was dragging Badal by the collar, "Mom warned you against it. I warned you to stop seeing him. I warned him to stay away from you, I did. You two left me no choice."

Sutapa stood at the door of Badal's place and looked at the scene in front of her. Both men were covered in bruises. She was certain that Badal had a dislocated jaw. Her brother's heavy breathing and Badal's pitiful wheezes punctured the silence in the hallway time and again like a bad stapler. She was supposed to be on a date in exactly twenty minutes and she had put on her earrings and satin dress. A spring breeze blew through the hallway and she felt cold around her shoulders.

She first met Badal when he moved into a neighboring house on her street. Every time she left for work in the mornings, Badal would sit on the windowsill and whistle to her, his two long legs dangling in the air. It took her a whole month to finally overcome her nerves, look up, and meet his eyes. He gave her a beaming smile in return.

Letters started coming in shortly afterward. From the childlike writing, she learned that Badal was of the same age as she. He didn't go to college—his family couldn't afford it. His father was an electrician, and Badal learned a trick or two from him. Right now, he worked as a temp, fixing radios and bathroom lights in the downtown area.

She made sure to let Badal know that she had a broken radio herself the next day she walked past his window. Badal paid her house a visit the day after.

It was a warm Saturday afternoon in March. Her mother was taking a nap. Siddhartha was at his friends'. Sneakily, Sutapa invited Badal into her room and showed him the radio in question.

After some tinkering, the radio sizzled back to life. "I adjusted the antenna, it should be good as new," Badal whispered, then grinned, his white teeth showing.

An Elvis Presley song was playing. Badal wasn't leaving, and Sutapa didn't ask him to. They sat side by side on the bed, one tapping his feet, the other humming under her breath.

As the song drew to a close, Badal stood up, somewhat reluctantly. "I will see you tomorrow, Sutapa," he said. And she nodded with a smile.

When the whole family gathered around the table that evening, her mother grabbed the ladle, halted for a few seconds, and dropped it back into the big bowl with a loud noise.

"You brought someone home today, didn't you, Sutapa? I saw him leaving. It was that good-for-nothing vagabond from down the street... I don't see how you would fall for it, Sutapa. He knew nothing except for teasing girls. It was such a disgrace to our family name..."

Sutapa wondered exactly what was left in their family name. When Father was still alive, when the tea business wasn't yet bankrupt, they did have a sizable income and general respect attached to their family name. Now Father was buried under a tombstone, their tea estates were put into liquidation, and her own salary was the only thing that kept them from being thrown out of the house by the landlord. Their family name was a radio with a splintered antenna, and her mother was still holding it desperately in the air, trying to catch a signal.

She did not let her mother's words deter her and started going out with Badal shortly after. Her mother threw her disapproving glances when she returned. Siddhartha sometimes tailed them when they were out. She paid them no mind.

Five joyful weekends later, Sutapa found herself at Badal's door, looking at the two men in front of her. Badal's house was dimly lit. When the door was thrown open, it was as if a streak of limelight shined through. She saw two unhappy sitters for an unhappy portrait, stuck in the confines of the doorframe, ready to be captured by a mechanical eye.

The following week, she learned that Badal was captured by police for running an unlicensed business and engaging in "rowdiness." She knew too well who tipped the police. She wanted to scream, but she kept her mouth shut.

Tonight too she wanted to scream but she kept her mouth shut. Siddhartha was still fuming, still waiting for her to give some sort of response to his accusations.

Sutapa got up from her bed, walked past her brother, and stood in front of the mirror. Her bedroom mirror was smaller than that of the dance room, but it was much cleaner, without any dust or grease stuck on the surface. Through the mirror, she felt that she, too, could see the smallest things. She saw the backside of Siddhartha's head. A lock of his hair was not smoothed and poking outwards. All of a sudden, the whole conversation that she was having, the whole memory that she was recalling, the whole house where she was living, felt absurd to her.

"Brother, how will it be if I get into modeling?" she asked.

That seemed to throw Siddhartha out of kilter. "Modeling?" he seemed genuinely confused.

"It's a good profession. It pays well. These days quite a lot of people are doing it."

"Suppose they ask you to wear some ridiculous outfit?"

Aren't we all wearing some ridiculous outfit? She thought, aren't we all trying to be something that we are not? You with your out-of-practice ingratiation in the job market. Mother with her out-of-style insistence on her "aristocratic background." Me with my out-of-town dance classes that kept me until 9 o'clock, where I'm most at myself, where I can almost, almost convince myself that it was okay even if I cannot be someone else.

"What's wrong with that? I have a bad figure anyway."

Siddhartha stood up. His confusion visibly slipped to frustration. Sutapa caught his arm just as he was about to burst out of the room. “Calm down, brother. Follow me to the terrace,” she said, “I want to show you something.”

A single light bulb hung above the terrace. In the open air, the stuffiness was no more. The sweat on her skin had all but evaporated, leaving behind a hint of coolness on her collarbone. Sutapa stepped into the patch of light on the cement ground with bare feet and imagined that she was on the hardwood floor, surrounded by mirrors. For the second time that night, she threw herself into the dance moves.

“I’m learning dancing,” she announced.

“When?” Siddhartha asked.

“In the evening, after office.”

Siddhartha went quiet again.

As Sutapa twirled in the darkness, the nighttime cityscape and Siddhartha’s face alternated before her eyes, Siddhartha with his knitted brows and pursed lips, the city with its tens of thousands of windows, each an emotionless eye.

After a long stretch of silence, Siddhartha opened his mouth. “You’ve changed.”

At that very moment, Sutapa thought of so many things. She wanted to say so many things. *Do you remember, brother, she thought, how we used to spend the Puja holidays in Deoghar? We were so little then. I was six and you were seven. We went to chase a bird on the first day we arrived. Do you still remember? Some birds were making the most beautiful sounds. We hadn’t heard anything like it. I grabbed you by the arm and we clambered through the woods on the little hill. It was then that I had a bad fall. The slope was slippery after the rain, and I tripped. When I got myself back onto my feet, my dress was all messed up and I was covered in mud and leaves. Can you picture that? Do you remember what I did? I screamed. I threw a terrible, terrible tantrum. A flock of birds was startled and took flight from the canopies. Gone was the chance of finding that mystery bird.*

Do you remember what you did back then, Siddhartha? I bet you do not. You lay on the muddy ground right beside me, you rolled around, you laughed and you squeaked. I understood that it was your way of telling me that it was alright. It was alright to take a fall. It was alright to come out of it all dirty and unseemly. It was alright to scream, to vent, to hurl your fury like a rock.

In the many years that followed, more than once I wanted to scream as I did back then. But I am no longer six. I wear a sari instead of a frock. What I’ve gathered is that I’ve already passed the stage where it was permissible to scream when I felt like it. In the end, I am the one in the glasshouse, I am the one in the limelight, I am the one in front of ten thousand windows, ten thousand emotionless eyes. And when I scream, people would point at me. They would talk.

And instead of joining me in my wordless fury, brother, you would just purse your lips and frown at me as I scrambled in the mud. What was it that sealed your mouth and bound your limbs? Was it guilt? Was it pity? Was it your superiority intermingled with inferiority? Was it fear of acknowledging that I, too, can take everything from you, if I so choose?

“Everyone changes,” in the end she simply said, “you’ve changed too.”