

Fecha de recepción: 20 mayo 2018
Fecha de aceptación: 15 septiembre 2018
Fecha de publicación: 31 diciembre 2018
URL: <http://oceanide.netne.net/articulos/art11-6.pdf>
Oceánide número 11, ISSN 1989-6328

Transnational Cartographies of Resilience in Contemporary Britain: Historical Transformations and Migratory Challenges in Akram Khan's Productions (2011-2016)

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RESUMEN:

Akram Khan, bailarín y coreógrafo británico de ascendencia bangladeshi, representa la identidad británica en el panorama actual de los Estudios Culturales de Reino Unido incorporando su propia trayectoria de diáspora. Las producciones coreografiadas por Khan proponen resiliencia como una forma de romper con viejos patrones de control y dominación para experimentar una transformación histórica y una evolución que es paralela a su lenguaje artístico y su propia tipología de experiencia migratoria. Con el objetivo de demostrar que Khan entiende el concepto de resiliencia como agente "trans-sistémico" y de "oposición" (Coleman, 2017; O'Brien, 2015) más allá de proclamas neoliberales. En este artículo se analiza como Khan representa su propia experiencia de diáspora en *DESH* (2011), la manera en la que ofreció una relectura a los atentados del 7 de julio de 2005 en Londres en la ceremonia de inauguración de los Juegos Olímpicos de la ciudad en 2012 con la pieza "Abide with Me" y cómo denunció y subvirtió las estructuras transnacionales de discriminación por género en las producciones "Dust" (2014) y *Until the Lions* (2016).

Palabras clave: Akram Khan, estudios culturales, diáspora, identidades transnacionales, resiliencia

ABSTRACT:

Akram Khan, British dancer and choreographer of Bangladeshi descent, has represented British identities incorporating his testimony of diaspora in contemporary British Cultural Studies. Khan's productions describe resilience as means to break from old systems of control and domination to experience a historical transformation and evolution that is corollary to that of his own artistic language and typology of migration in British contemporary history. In order to confirm that Khan understands resilience as a "trans-systemic" and "oppositional" force (Coleman, 2017; O'Brien, 2015) instead of merely accepting neoliberal proclams of fear and separation, I analyse how he represented his trajectory of diaspora in *DESH* (2011), how he offered a new reading for the 7 July 2005 bombings in the London Olympics Opening Ceremony with "Abide with Me" (2012) and how he denounced and subverted the transnational structures of gender discrimination in both "Dust" (2014) and *Until the Lions* (2016).

Keywords: Akram Khan, cultural studies, diaspora, transnational identities, resilience

1. INTRODUCTION¹

Akram Khan (London, UK, 1974) is a British dancer and choreographer born into a Bangladeshi family in London. His dance style combines the traditional Northern Indian dance form of kathak with the extensive vocabulary of movements of contemporary dance. Khan was awarded the Laurence Olivier Prize as Best Solo Dancer for *DESH* (2011), gained international fame with the segment "Abide with Me" (2012) commissioned by Danny Boyle for the Opening Ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics, and redefined British identities in the segment "Dust" (2014), a piece he choreographed for Tamara Rojo's *Lest We Forget* (2015) to commemorate the centenary of the end of the First World War. Khan started his career when he was only thirteen years old and toured with Peter Brooks' production of *Mahabharata* (1987-1989). He is currently hailed as being the creator of his own dance vocabulary, which is an "eloquent confusion of styles" (Jaggi, 2010), inspired by classical Indian forms and contemporary dance language in the tradition of dance pioneer Shobana Jeyasingh.

As a director, choreographer and lead dancer, Khan has portrayed issues of identity, Britishness, nostalgia and South Asian mythology in works such as *Zero Degrees* (2005), *Sacred Monsters* (2006), *Bahok* (2008), *Gnosis* (2009) and *Vertical Road* (2010). More recently, he has choreographed and produced *Until the Lions* (2016), a rewriting of an episode of the *Mahabharata*, and *Xenos* (2018), hailed as one of the most imaginative dance productions in the UK (Razzall, 2018) and dealing with issues of war and xenophobia during WWI—issues that could also be transposed to the Brexit context.

This article differs from previous studies (Mitra, 2015; Cools, 2015; Diego Sánchez, 2017) that have proclaimed Khan to be a committed citizen and an artist of the diaspora space (Brah, 1996) who represents fluid identities (Bauman, 2004; Pérez Fernández, 2009), and will instead explore Khan's representation of resilience in his productions between 2011 and 2016. It will argue that Khan defines resilience as a way to break away from old colonial systems of control and domination, enacting a historical transformation and evolution through his own artistic language and the articulation of his own pattern of migration to Britain.

2. RESILIENCE IN CULTURAL STUDIES: ADAPTATION, MODIFICATION AND OPPOSITION

Resilience is a key term to understand in the context of a modification of the world and/or a human provoking a transformation, an adaptation or a revolution of both people and systems of governance. The classical definition of resilience was coined within the field of Ecocriticism by C. S. Holling in "Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems" (1973) and referred to the property of materials by which they accumulate energy under stress and deform, but go back to normal once the pressure exerted on them has disappeared. Tony Jupiter, in an article published on *The Guardian* entitled "Will 2012 be the year of the R word" (2011), focused on the possible usage of the term to address a change from sustainability to resilience in the area of Sustainable Business, to guarantee social enablement and change, not hopelessness and stillness. These theoretical implications were inherent in Marianne Hirsch's definition of resilience as a tool "[to] mobilize our work as humanities teachers and scholars in the interests of connective engagement and political intervention" (2014: 333). The connective engagement that Hirsch recognizes matches with the collective emphasis that Peter Hall and Michèle Lamont identify in the group performance of resilience as "the capacity of groups of people bound together in an organization, class, racial group, community, or nation to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges to it" (2013: 2). My point here is that an analysis of resilience allows us to assess if the natural and human modification that has facilitated survival involves a neoliberal commodification of individual persistence, or a transformative existence that involves an alteration of the order of things inherent to subsistence. In other words, does resilience entail a static change or a revolution that allows real transformation?

Neoliberal discourse has adopted the former, arguing that the modifications which guarantee survival should always promote a return to a "middle ground" (Hogget, 2001: 33). This resilience can be seen in the national and political discourses employed by states and the corporate world after Lehman Bros bankruptcy (2008) and the ensuing international economic crisis. The systemic and individual recovery involved a process of absorbing the adverse conditions and adapting to them. There was no transformation implemented

by states, but a mere acceptance. The resilient structures of the patriarchal and capitalist strategies of neoliberal discourse maintained their strength and so banks, energy companies and heads of state nurtured a politics of precarity (Butler, 2004; Khair, 2016) that citizens had to assume and accept. Questioning was not allowed and *bouncing back* resiliently was not possible under those terms.

However, there have also been socialist discourses that have praised a "renewal [and] re-organization following disturbance" (Folke, 2006: 256). This reform aims to ignite a "transformation", "revolt" and "renewal" (O'Brien, 2015: 191, 195), and understanding of culture and life as a "trans-systemic" compound (Coleman, 2017) and an escape from the traffic of fears imposed upon human beings (Ahmed, 2004; Fraile Marcos, 2019). Under these terms, a transformative and socialist interpretation of resilience would instrument a change towards a third way of considering resilience; modifying itself in order to survive. This reading stands in direct opposition to the neoliberal understanding of resilience, which implements adaptation through submission to a particular scheme of power to guarantee individual survival and commodification.

If individual survival is linked to collective transformation and a social revolt, then a rebellion involving subversion takes place. This possibility opens up a third way in which resilience leads to the creation of a new social structure by means of a change that derogates political neoliberal structures of control and limitation (Bracke, 2016; Darías-Beautell, 2018). I believe that Akram Khan portrays experiences of resilience that ignite not only descriptions of modification and survival, but also of renewal and contestation. Khan, as I have stated elsewhere (2017), is a citizen and an artist of the diaspora space, his life and creativity explore how recurrently postcolonial and neo-colonial specificities and modalities still determine the perpetuation of an unequal society. Diaspora space is here understood following Avtar Brah's definition of diaspora as the abstract space of convergence among "specificities (economic, political, cultural variables) and modalities (such as gender, race, class and religion) where the hybridity of cultures is produced" (1996: 24-5). In this space, there are interlocking systems of domination in terms of race, class, and gender, which are established as a colonial consequence that needs to be contested.

Khan articulates his commitment as a transnational and transformative artist by presenting and resolving racist and discriminatory situations resulting from a colonial heritage. He envisages the roots of the problem and defines cultural identity as a hybrid and multiple composite where the contemporary diversity of cultures is articulated beyond static discourses such as those propounded by Samuel Huntington (1998, 2004). These theories of fixed identities address reality only by looking at the multi-faceted but static surface of society, obviating that diaspora is a multi-sided place, a space and moment of transit where, according to Homi K. Bhabha, "complex figures of difference and identity" are produced (1994: 1).

This intricate web of variables is the space and moment of transit that Khan facilitates in his productions to guarantee that the *passage* of cultures inherent to all cartographies of migration entails the possibility of liquid identities to be formed (Bauman, 2004; Mankekar, 2015; Zizek, 2016). This representation of migration as a diaspora space pledges a transformative possibility that is performed to renew the trans-systemic nature of those structures that limit, control and challenge survival in migratory movements (Derrida, 2000, 2010; Chakrabarty, 2000; Coleman, 2012; Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez, 2016). Khan, nevertheless, presents migration as transmuting for the ones moving and the receiving cultures/territories/societies, thereby also enhancing a cathartic process of social change for the existing communities, which promises an existence that involves a resilient strategy of renewal in order to survive. In order to support this assertion, I will now analyse how Khan came to terms with his own trajectory of migration in *DESH* (2011), then how he presented a new reading of the 7 July 2005 bombings in the piece "Abide with Me" (2012), and finally how he denounced and subverted the transnational structures of gender discrimination in both "Dust" (2014) and *Until the Lions* (2016).

3. *DESH* (2011): TRANSNATIONAL CARTOGRAPHIES OF MIGRATION

Khan has grounded his artistic language in the metaphorical fluidity and resistance of history and identities. He has been called a performer of "in-between Dance Cultures" (Guy Cools, 2015: i) and an artist renowned for "generating unique aesthetics through [...] multi corporeality [...] concerned with the communication

of personal identity-politics through a language that emerged at the interstices between kathak and the eclectic idioms of contemporary dance, theatre, music, visual arts, literature, digital arts and film" (Mitra, 2015: vii). In *DESH* (2011), a solo show that is documented by Joanne Coates in the award-winning feature *Homeland: The Making of Akram Khan's DESH* (2011), Khan depicted his upbringing in London as both British and Bangladeshi. Khan illustrated the corporeal conflicts he felt moving back and forth between Bangladesh and the United Kingdom to face his family roots, so that he could find his own route as a British man, combining elements from both cultures into a new artistic language that searched for its own corporeal and dancing vocabularies. Royona Mitra (2015, 2016) documents how important Khan's works have been in disrupting the notion that South Asian performing arts in the diaspora are all about fake notions of Indianness and Hindu art that ignore the true origin of Bharata's *Natyasastra* (3 BC) and the regional artistic differences within South Asia. Other theorists of the South Asian performing arts tradition, such as Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins (1996), Avanthi Meduri (1996), Alessandra López and Royo (2003), Janet O'Shea (2007) and Ananya Chatterjea (2014, 2013, 2011), also refer to the same idea. For instance, O'Shea has extensively studied the classic South Asian dance notions of *rasa* (empathy) created through the portrayal of *bhava* (emotions) and the use of classical *abhinaya* (gestures) by communities in London, New York or Mumbai. In view of this cultural contextualisation, Khan himself explains "I don't want to be English if that is exclusive. I'd [sic] rather be Universal" (2014b: 0'48"-0'50"). It is by virtue of these inclusive terms that Mitra situates Khan's work "at the interstices between the politics of diasporic identity and the syncretic genre of physical theatre" (2015: 1). This new artistic language that emerges is proof of the way in which Khan understands resilience as renewal instead of as the mere commodification of orientalisising and orientalisised values.

Khan combined in *DESH* the work of martial arts dancer Andrei Nazarenko, British animation designer Nick Hillel, classical and devotional composer Jocelyn Pook, and Chinese visual designer Tim Yip. As Khan states, "in *DESH* I realised that it is worth taking the risk of collaborating with other people" (2014b: 14'46") because "[one needs] to put oneself into situations where you don't know who you are" (2014b: 4'28"). Talking about his

roots allowed Khan to disclose his own fears about his mother not liking that he was talking openly about their families' stories, because it meant a journey to embrace the fluidity associated with his diasporic consciousness.

In this sense, the retelling of Bangladeshi fables and the historical events of the Bangladeshi Liberation War from West Pakistan (1971) meant that Khan was able to confront the "unease" (2007: 187) that Khan always described when retelling his experience of migration (qtd. in Kannall, 2018: 3'05") and that Robin Cohen defines as underlying the concept of home within a diasporic consciousness. In Cohen's own words: "A diasporic consciousness [...]. reflects a degree of unease with the here and now and the current location [where] 'home' or homeland is reconstructed and revalorized through fabulation [sic], historical memory and social organization" (2007: 187). Consequently, *DESH* allowed Akram Khan to reconnect with the present and future fluidity of his own existence as a hybrid inhabitant of the diaspora space (Brah, 1996), as it deals not only with his Bangladeshi roots, but also with the experiences of different people who are defined beyond the labels of emigrant or immigrant. As producer Farooq Chaudhury states, "[*DESH*] is about a man starting a journey to understand himself, searching from where he comes from [and] where he belongs to [while] trying to find it very personal but also very universal" (Chaudhury qtd. in Coates, 2011a: 12'28"-12'48").

Khan makes use of the fluidity of natural elements (water, earth, fire and air) to explain how his diasporic identity becomes resilient, allowing him to transform and adapt, ultimately ensuring his own survival at the interstices of the aforementioned diaspora space. The show starts with Khan hitting the ground with a hammer as if he was trying to dig deeper and deeper. He is clearly looking for something. The act of hammering was constructed, according to Khan, as "a symbolic action of going into the past, and going into the future. In the same moment, smashing into history and the past, and smashing into the future" (Khan qtd. in Bohm-Duchen, 2018: 68). The scene follows the music recorded by Jocelyn Pook in the visit of the troupe to the shipyards in Dhaka while preparing the show (Pook qtd. in Coates, 2011a: 14'45"; photographs in Bohm-Duchen, 2018: 69). There is a man on stage who is about to set off on a journey, embarking on a metaphorical boat that he is making (or remaking).

At the same time, the image evokes an individual building and destroying his own roots to start new routes. I read this opening act as a way to set a course in which identities become fluid and liquid because, as Pérez Fernández states, “[t]he idea of belonging to a place does not exist any longer [and so] the status of identity should be understood as located in a continuum” (2009: 158). Static identities fostered by neoliberal discourses of resilience are therefore challenged by this understanding of migration. *DESH* was conceptualised in this “continuum” Pérez Fernández refers to when Khan enjoyed an artistic residency in Grenoble (France) in 2010. He has claimed that this creative experience helped him focus and detail the way in which he felt “isolated from [his] office [and] from [his] family” while he was in France (Khan qted. in Coates, 2011a: 17’35”-18’48”).

In *DESH*, Britain is portrayed as the place where Khan and his father quarrel because Khan does not help in the South Asian restaurant his family runs (Coates, 2011a: 23’36”). London is the setting of many segments of the show, including being the backdrop when Khan hides behind a chair to look at his Bangladeshi roots. These disputes with his Bangladeshi origins are illustrated as shadows projected around the chair and Khan can neither understand them nor does he want them to be there (Coates, 2011a: 4’03”). Khan himself has stated that “being displaced is something I’ve been conscious of since I was a child because of racism” (Khan qted. in Bohm-Duchen, 2018: 64) and “it is now that in contemporary UK I feel more brown than ever [referring to Brexit]” (Razzall, 2018: 3’05”). Khan recognises what Hall and Lamont had referred to as “the capacity of people bound together in [a] racial group [...] to sustain and advance their well-being in the face of challenges to it” (2013: 2) and underlines the collective dilemmas that define the diaspora space. *DESH* deals with these individual dilemmas and challenges, yet the show offers a collective approach to the different sides of the typologies of migration. Khan portrays the problems faced by different people in Bangladesh, the UK and the continuum space between them, instead of focusing only on his own individual trajectory of diaspora.

Bangladesh as a land appears in *DESH* with reference to Khan’s arrival in Dhaka, in a segment in which he becomes lost and anxious trying to cross a congested road with heavy traffic (Khan qted. in Coates, 2011b: 4”-13”). After this scene, Khan begins running until he reaches a

jungle created through animation and projected onto the background of the stage. These woods are the place where two personal stories are shared with the audience. Firstly, the tale of a boy who got lost looking for honey and, secondly, the description of how his uncle’s friend had the soles of his feet stabbed during the Bangladeshi Liberation War (1971). Khan follows the animated figure of a boy projected onto the screen, to later merge with him and go deeper in the jungle without fear, echoing the folk-tale of the Honey Hunter who, in the Sundarbans (a rainforest in the coastlines of Bengal-India and Bangladesh), defies the harvest season and eats honey before the approved time. Karthika Nair, story writer of *DESH*, has continued this story in *The Honey Hunter* (2014) where she expands the action, focusing on the pre-eminence of drought and famine seasons due to the over-cultivation of fields and the depletion of the oceans carried out by men in the area (Nair qted. in Nagarajan, 2014). This denouncement reflects the notion that Khan offers stories of opposition that look for renewal and transformation of society, not a mere neoliberal tale of self-salvation.

The latter segment recounts a true story that happened to Khan’s uncle’s friend at the time of the Bangladeshi Liberation War (1971). In this conflict, East Pakistan fought against West Pakistan, with the help of India, for Eastern self-determination and, later, the creation of Bangladesh (where *desh* means “land” and *Bangla* refers to the Bangla language, so “the land which speaks Bangla”). East Pakistan denounced the host of commercial activities that West Pakistan had imposed on Dhaka and the territories of East Pakistan (van Schendel, 2009). As Khan himself recounts, it is the story of “[his] father’s friend. They were freedom fighters. [His] father’s brother ran. The friend was wobbling. The soles had been sliced up. They used to slice the soles to say: ‘you want to feel your own country, go and then feel if you can feel it with the soles’” (Khan qted. in Coates, 2011b: 34’34”-35’39”). The story had a profound impact upon Khan as, in his own words, “soles and palms are very important [...] because you touch the floor and the sky” (34’34”-34’38”). The image of this is very powerful on stage and lets Khan and the spectator know about the stories of Partition (1947, 1971), how terrible its consequences were, how it still plays a role in contemporary Bangladesh and how resilience was a force to survive the “trans-systemic” conflict of interests (Coleman, 2017).

The next part portrays Khan recovering strength in the middle of a political demonstration. This is the first point in the show in which Khan joins other Bangladeshi people besides his father. Khan joins a protest in Dhaka and walks along with other demonstrators. This is the fire of a land that cries for change. This is the arrival of the natural element of fire on stage and a reading of resilience as going beyond "a middle ground" (Hogget, 2001: 33) to contest the political situation in Bangladesh during the visit of the troupe to Dhaka in 2011 (Khan qted. in Coates, 2011a: 28'27"). Khan joins the demonstrators and fully recovers his ability to move after having performed the role of his uncle's friend. He then unveils a series of paintings in Bengali on a giant chair designed by Tim Yip. Khan explains that these paintings state "let democracy be established" (28'36") and that he saw them painted on the back of the demonstrator Nur Hossain (Bohm-Duchen, 2018: 64) when the company visited Bangladesh (Khan qted. in Coates, 2011a: 28'39"). Furthermore, Khan states that "at some point everything started because of him [referring to Nur Hossain]", because he illustrated that political and social change was possible (28'54"-28'58"). These demonstrations refer to the protests that followed the re-election of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wazed, elected Prime Minister of Bangladesh for the third time (having been previously elected from 1996 to 2001 and then re-elected in 2014 despite the fact that many seats were uncontested). Khan recognises that he was inspired by the way in which these social revolts demanded political change in Bangladesh, fighting against political corruption, lack of economic development, social difference and demanding a secular government. Khan has acknowledged that he found in the creative language of martial arts teacher Andrei Nazarenko a way to convey how his character breaks away from the interlocking systems that control human beings on behalf of cultural traits, economic labels and social positions (Khan qted. in Coates, 2011a: 10'41'-11'11").

DESH facilitates the cohabitation of places and histories through the artistic use of the natural element of air. This element plays a decisive role in the show through two narrative elements designed by Tim Yip: the white chair that is on stage for half of *DESH*, and the closing segment in which Khan flies over the stage. The huge white chair is the place from where Khan stages

his tantrums with his father or where he takes refuge when he feels lost after not being able to face the death of his father (Coates, 2011a: 4'03"). The final scene, when he glides over the stage, starts with the ascendance of Khan towards the sky as if his face was over some high crops (44'18"-45'23"). This image allows him, in his own words, to walk over the clouds, ignoring the differences in geographical space (43'32"). The audience is also able to participate in this flight, and Khan thereby illustrates that the concept of a homeland is a composite of experiences of resilience that are always changing and that, in Khan's telling, demand "revolt" and "confrontation" (O'Brien, 2015: 191, 195) to guarantee a social transformation that struggles against those resilient interlocking systems of control imposed upon people.

4. FROM MIGRANT TO TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES

It could be argued that World War I (1914-1918) and the London Olympics (2012) have played crucial roles in defining London in history books for political, economic and political reasons. Out of the many cultural activities of these two bygone events, this essay will focus on *Lest We Forget* (2014), the dance show that commemorated the one hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of WWI, commissioned by director and lead dancer of the English National Ballet Tamara Rojo, and the Opening Ceremony of London 2012, directed by Danny Boyle. What the general public ignored was that both events shared a common bond: Akram Khan, who directed the segments "Dust" in the former and "Abide with Me" in the latter. Both dance pieces were corollaries to the two shows and talked about life, hope, social confrontation, death and the possibility of intercultural societies. This part of the essay starts by studying "Abide with Me", in order to understand how Khan represents the transformation of a single British identity and challenges the burdens of belonging to an individual category. I will show here how he recapitulates his own experience of diaspora as a resilient British artist practicing transnational art, which displays the possibility of a transnational identity composed of different diversities and specificities. I will then analyse how "Dust" (2014) and *Until the Lions* (2016) are shows in which Khan addresses gender equality to focus on how history has ignored or obviated stories of women.

4.1. "Abide with Me" (2012): How to Renew Definitions of Belonging

"Abide with Me" was commissioned by Danny Boyle for the Opening Ceremony of the 2012 Olympics in London. The piece honoured the victims of the terrorist attacks in the centre of London that took place on 7 July, 2005. The choreography gathered together a set of 52 dancers from different cultures to represent the 52 victims of the attacks. Scottish singer Emili Sandé sang "Abide with Me" (composed by the Anglican author Henry Francis Lyte in the 19th century and played at FA CUP finals since 1927).

The show represents mortality and connivance as it epitomises a group of different people, both female and male, firstly huddling together and then creating a circle with a nine year old boy running through the middle. The boy eventually falls down, the company gathers together, the group becomes static, and then Akram Khan himself appears and takes the boy in his arms. Khan has stated that the dancers symbolise "spirits" and the boy represents "hope and legacy" (Khan, 2014a). In the end, Khan lifts the boy as if to comfort him, and guides him into the circle as the sun sets and gets ready to rise again.

The sunset which appears in the background symbolises the promise of a new beginning. The boy himself represents the hope that lays ahead for society in the future, which is then further illustrated through the parade of sports players that follow the piece. Royona Mitra has studied the figure of children in Khan's work and has concluded that Khan uses them to reinforce ideas of evolution, transformation and connivance of times and possibilities (2015, 92-114). Khan himself has stated that children "remind [him] that everything is possible" (Khan qtd. in Shafaieh, 2018: 42).

The piece caused controversy because the United States TV channel NBC (who broadcasted the ceremony in the US) interrupted the live transmission to show an interview with *American Idol* presenter Ryan Seacrest and swimmer Michael Phelps. Khan expressed that he felt "disheartened and disappointed" at this as the piece had not been considered "accessible or commercial enough" to be shown live in their schedule for the Opening Ceremony (Khan, 2012). Journalist Arlene Phillips, nevertheless, praised that the piece had neither of those targets, instead aiming at

bringing "stillness and reflection" to the international transcendence of the mega-event (2012). I believe that the choice of choreography and narration proves that Khan defied commercial imperatives and appealed to the world for a transnational celebration of humanity, without paying heed to differences in gender or skin colour. As Khan stated, his recreation of "Abide with Me" opened up a space for him to display "the struggle between life and death using such powerful images of mortality as dust and the setting sun" (2012). Khan himself relates how the day after the performance he "returned to Russell Square [one of the places where the bombings took place] to witness the quiet and sombre crowd who gathered to hear tributes to the dead and honour the heroism of those who came to the rescue of those caught up in the tragedy" (Khan qtd. in Ng, 2012: n.pag.). In this sense, a historical transformation is embodied in Khan's reading of the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, as he portrays a story of a renewing resilience for Britain (a boy lifted into everybody's arms as the main character in the show), as a result of which the country is able to advance and be transformed as a whole towards the bustle of change, possibility and connivance that followed in the next parts of the Opening Ceremony of the Olympic Games. Migrant is then obviated as a label and, instead, there is a transnational call to arms to promote an integration that is not national but international. Under these terms, there is an appeal to a collective international action to bounce back against and revolt against systems that promote war and define individuals in terms of difference.

4.2. "Dust" (2014) and *Until the Lions* (2016): How to Subvert Transnational Structures of Gender Discrimination

Akram Khan and Tamara Rojo joined forces to, respectively, choreograph and perform "Dust" as part of the English National Ballet's *Lest We Forget* (2014), which commemorated the first centenary of the outbreak of the First World War (hereafter referred to as WWI). For this piece, Rojo commissioned four segments composed by four different choreographers. "Dust" shows how women became the main workforce in the country in WWI and it urges the spectator to think about the role of women in history by making them the protagonists of the conflict. Khan explained that the section's inspiration was twofold. Firstly,

"the concept of a trench, of the young men and old men all going into trenches [...] and disappearing [to try to] return to land" (Khan, 2015: 11"-22'). Secondly, the idea that in WWI there was a huge social "shift" for women, because they had been previously seen only as housewives, but at that point in history they had to start "to work in factories because men left for war" (0'25"-0'43"). Judith Mackrell praised this change in the narrative of WWI and highlighted how Khan's "Dust" stood out due to its "chorus of women [who] are warriors of the home front, their choreography driven by piston-pumping arms and dervish turns" (2014).

Khan actually claimed that the piece was designed to offer an alternative image to the traditional "men dying in the trenches", reflecting the fact that "even though people were dying, people still had to work" (Khan, 2014: 0'59"-1'02"). Accordingly, Khan decided to demonstrate the ways in which women actively worked in the conflict (1'03"-1'07") and how those women needed to be recognised as part of history, because they formed part of a "cyclical" pattern according to which "in order for someone to live someone else was putting their life on the line" (Khan, 2015: 0'45'-0'48"). Madison Keesler, a dancer in "Dust", recognises that Akram Khan wanted "to show the strength of the women in the First World War" (qtd. in Khan, 2014: 1'12"-1'15"). Correspondingly, his choreography gives prominence to women on stage, displaying how they led the workforce at a time where men were fighting away from their homes and cities.

Dust becomes the thematic symbol throughout the piece, which toured around the world and was even performed on the Pyramid Stage at the historic Glastonbury Festival in 2014. Khan defines its meaning, stating that dust is a way to refer to skin and the importance of renewal and transformation to stay alive. In his own words, the narrative element of *dust* refers to how people in war were "covered in dust [and how] skin needs to be relished in order for new life to start" (Khan, 2015: 2'10'-2'12"). This modification and transformation of both physical bodies and history in the motif of the interplay between dust and the dancers' bodies clearly illustrates the cohabitation of the world and the body and constitutes a rewriting of a historical event such as WWI through Khan's interdisciplinary dance language which, in his own words, aims to dismantle public discourses "about separation,[...] about building walls, and brings back echoes of

our past mistakes, which is frightening to admit to our children who will be the future storytellers" (Khan, 2016a: n.pag.).

Khan stated that he wanted to propose a "new script for history" that facilitated "a connivance for the future generations" (Khan qtd. in Dhillon, 2016). Resilience here emerges as key in his choreography, because Khan considers that we must collectively overcome the current trend in which fear is consuming our society. According to the works of Tabish Khair (2016: 3-4) or Sarah Ahmed (2004: 64-84), creating a sense of division and alignment leaves some out and validates speeches and actions of hate and violence. Khan shows women and men together in "Dust" in the opening segment, where dancers create a DNA sequence with their arms intertwined (Khan, 2015: 1'42"- 1'52"). This figure is broken when the war starts and women are left alone while a man observes from the background. Female dancers start to shake the dust off their skin, illustrating their resilience and their determination to change their role in order to guarantee their own survival (Khan, 2014: 3'01- 10'44"). The presence of women on stage is only interrupted when this observer, a reflection of a soldier, starts interacting with one of the female dancers in a segment of collaborative dance (10'50"-16'). I interpret his section as signifier of the fulfilment of teamwork between women and men on stage, in WWI, and as a reflection of contemporary times. The rest of the production only features women performing mechanical movements which are reminders of their role as the main body of the workforce during the conflict, cooperating with each other as if weaving a network of nourishment and sorority.

Khan refers to this alliance on stage, arguing that it is necessary to "be social" (Khan, 2016b) throughout a collaborative dance language that promotes *being human* and *social* so as to contest the dividing speeches of fear and separation of WWI, the historical portrayals of that event and the recurrence of that vocabulary in the context of the rise of xenophobic discourse in the UK in 2014 led by UKIP. In his own words, Khan's choreography in "Dust" allowed him to proclaim that "[we] have always been social creatures, it's what makes us so powerful. And dance has been a huge part of that social exchange. We must, as guardians, break the very walls that are being built around us, and use every opportunity to open up dialogue again" (Khan, 2016b). New typologies of migration and coexistence emerge here,

represented in Khan's work because his choreographies contest how history has been traditionally told, and denounce categories of division and inequality such as gender discrimination. He therefore proposes new stories from where history can be revisited to offer new spaces and possibilities that had previously been rejected in representations of migration.

Khan argues that the burden created through gender discrimination must be diminished and transformed. In this sense, just as "Dust" placed women and their role in WWI at the centre of the 2014 production by way of acknowledging their role in the conflict, *Until the Lions* (2016) retells the Indian epic of the *Mahabharata* (3 BC), reversing the role given to female characters in this ancient text. He claims that he had often wanted to rewrite "epic stories" of historical transformations and migratory challenges, the narratives which, nowadays, represent "epic stories [...] of us, of our journeys, our struggles, our endeavours, our accomplishments" (2016a). Khan's choice is absolutely remarkable because he is not only portraying British women differently in history but also reflecting on his South Asian roots and how traditional narratives have ostracised, stereotyped and secluded women in epics such as the *Mahabharata*. His work bridges these two issues, recognising the importance of showing South Asian history. He points out the necessity of focusing on South Asian narratives because, as he explained in the Keynote Speech for Navedisha International Dance Conference held in Birmingham in 2016,

Why are stories important? Because stories are a way for me to make sense of the world we inhabit. Stories are the way for the next generation to make sense of the new world that they will inherit [...] Let me narrow it now or focus it even further. Do we need South Asian dance in this new world where our many cultures are becoming a global monoculture based on free market economics. My answer would be again 'yes'. (2016b: 3)

The show is based on one segment of Karthika Nair's *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata* (2015), in which Nair retells the ancient text in the original verse form, but through twenty-eight voices – those of the characters who, in the original, could not speak for themselves or were forced to accept a sort of violent destiny imposed upon

them. Nair's rewriting of old myths in her poems functions, according to Arundhati Subramaniam, as a way to guarantee the "the fierce human impulse to survive in a marauding universe where are constantly snuffed out (by design, legislation or indifference)" (2013). The choice of title by Nair and Khan draws on an old proverb which states, "Until Lions write their own history, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" (qtd. in Magu, 2015: 21). They retell the story of princess Amba, giving her a new prominence that liberates her myth from guilt, inaction and dependency of male figures. Amba was a princess who was abducted, rejected and ignored by three men in the ancient epic and finally made to pay penance as a river of difficult banks to redeem her sins before she could be born back to life as Shikhandi, a man, to defy the three men who had limited her freedom, forced her destiny and condemned her.

In Nair's text (2015), Amba defies these men and reverses history by returning to life to guide Shikhandi to assassinate Bhishma, her kidnapper. Khan's choreography for *Until the Lions* (2016) is centred on this moment and he places Amba's metamorphosis not as a simple change but as a collaborative participation in her own history. The transformative power through which Amba performs a role in her own history is choreographed by Khan using dancing elements drawn from traditional martial arts, kathak and contemporary dance. According to Judith Flanders' reading of Khan's *Until the Lions*, Amba is presented as a human and creature who "metamorphoses" to survive (2016: 17).

Khan portrays Amba as "triumphant, [...] atop the spears" while a voice chants "It's time to begin, to begin, to end, to begin" (Flanders, 2016: 17). The overlapping of times and characters is crucial in order to understand the transformation by which Khan allows Amba to star in the telling of the events of her own story, without having to wait to be reborn as a man. As he does in "Dust", Khan opens a new possibility for women in history and for human beings in the development of history and the planet itself as he states, "[a]s to our human race, I feel we are entering a new phase in our relationship with each other, and with the planet that we seem to believe we own" (Khan, 2016b).

This narrative modification enhances a sense of confrontation and renewal that provides stories of resilience and survival, allowing for the possibility of transforming

and integrating changes in order to defy structures of discrimination. The stage in Khan's *Until the Lions*, designed by Tim Yip, illustrates this change. Action takes place on a round platform that represents a tree trunk which cracks open and comes back to normality incorporating the new positions adopted by Amba during the course of the epic. Luke Jennings commented that the stage was "a giant cross-section of tree trunk, a metaphor for rebirth and the circularity of time (Bheeshma has a tree emblem on his chariot flag)" (2016). Therefore, both "Dust" and *Until the Lions* illustrate the coexistence of historical layers. Khan reverses the main characters in both stories and points at that "circularity of time" (Jennings, 2016) that allows the recognition of liquid identities in diaspora space. This circularity is present in the staging and in the motif of the tree's log breaking away and playing host to the new stories that lay ahead in Amba's own history. I read this choice of setting as reminiscent of that collective power of resilience that aims at transforming and challenging old systems of control and domination.

The power of transformation becomes the narrative voice of both pieces in terms of the determination that these heroines show when they can play a role in their own lives. Khan shows an ethical commitment in the modification of conventional codes of these stories to echo the contemporary social and human needs of a country such as Britain, where migration and its typologies haven't been used in pro-Brexit discourses. Khan adds renewal and the possibility that the renewal can take place as a valedictorian to mobilise people, to contest social and political structures alike.

5. RESILIENCE: HOW TO IMPLEMENT TRANSNATIONAL CARTOGRAPHIES OF RESILIENCE IN MIGRATION

An analysis of Akram Khan's work between 2011 and 2016 offers a view of Britain and British identity that is transnational. His choreographies offer an intercultural dance language and the shows deal with recurrent topics which integrate identities and different historical perspectives present in the diaspora space he inhabits. I have shown in this article how Khan offers different cartographies of migration that have transformed not only British history but the whole socio-political dynamics of the contemporary world, which I have explained through

an analysis of *DESH* (2011) and "Dust" (2014). The figure of the migrant and the transformation of history through the inclusion of different voices have therefore established Khan's vision, opening a space for dialogue as well as a different artistic language that is transnational. Khan's artistic revolution enhances, as Royona Mitra points out, a "transcultural, transnational, transmedial [*sic*] and transtemporal [*sic*] dialogue [where] the prefix 'trans', and its connectivity [induce a] category blurring and non-normativity embracing conceptual stance" (2016: 90). This interconnectivity appears in Khan's description of contemporary Britain as composed of humans, their histories and stories.

"Abide with Me" (2012) and *Until the Lions* (2016) show that Khan is conscious of contemporary history, as demonstrated by his choice of the terrorist attacks of 7 July 2005 for his piece in the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympics (2012), as well as the misrepresentations of gender and story-telling in old traditional times such as the *Mahabharata*. Khan represents a hopeful future that integrates the voices of those, such as women in history, who have suffered gender or racial discrimination. And these expressions are recurrent because, as he notes,

How can art, and dance in particular, speak to this present crisis? Art is the bedrock of what makes us human. Our sense of reflection, of learning, happens through seeing and exploring the world and our stories through mediums other than politics and television. It allows us to see those stories in a more ancient way. The popular conception is that with each generation, we become more intelligent. Many ancient tribes, however, believe that with each generation we become less wise. We feel we're more intelligent. (Khan, 2018: 41)

Akram Khan's art therefore describes how the human challenges he has faced as a migrant, as a citizen, as an artist and as a choreographer become imbricated in themes and approaches that praise the human being, defying previous typologies of diaspora and story-telling through dance.

The four shows that have been studied narrate stories of resilience that define humanity as a force that challenges, renews and guarantees survival. Khan argues that they are testimonies that

can be used for any “present crisis” (2018: 41). And it is at that intersectional point where Khan’s choreographies offer transnational cartographies of resilience in contemporary Britain which enact distinctive possibilities for transforming history and integrating the challenging migratory fluxes, prompting reflection on the present moment and making the world a better place where survival is an inclusive and resilient possibility.

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NOTES

¹ Research for this paper has taken place within the framework of the research project *Narratives of Resilience: Intersectional Perspectives about Literature and Other Contemporary Cultural Representations* (FFI2015-63895-C2-2-R, MINECO/FEDER), graciously funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

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Título: Cartografías transnacionales de resiliencia en la Gran Bretaña contemporánea: Transformaciones históricas y desafíos migratorios en las producciones de Akram Khan (2011-2016)