

The Apollonian

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies
Open-access | Peer-reviewed

Vol 3, Issues 1&2 (March-June 2016)

Submission details and instructions for authors: <http://theapollonian.in/index.php/submission-guidelines/>

Saraswati Reincarnated: Representing the Body of a Female Vocalist

Anindita Chakrabarty

To cite this article: Chakrabarty, Anindita. "Saraswati Reincarnated: Representing the Body of a Female Vocalist." *The Apollonian* 4:1-2 (March-June 2017): 69-76.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly prohibited.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The authors bear sole responsibility of any plagiarism found in their articles. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.



The Apollonian

ISSN 2393-9001

<http://www.theapollonian.in/>



Saraswati Reincarnated: Representing the Body of a Female Vocalist

Anindita Chakrabarty

Tata Institute of Social Sciences

The research aims to conflate sociology of gender with the sociology of music. Sociology of gender concerns cultural ideals and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. In the field of music, there has been continuous engagement with the conventions of female respectability, and music has assumed, in subtle ways, a metaphor for gendered representations. The paper shall focus on how the body is created, shaped and reshaped for it to satisfy the 'acceptable'. In doing so, it shall focus particularly on the representation of 'female body' or bodies of women vocalists on stage. The presentation of women on stage in classical music is dictated by the 'acceptable' forms of dress code, limiting one's gestures during one's participation in the public sphere as female musicians, or rather acceptable gestures. In analyzing the complexities involved in the shaping of the body of a female vocalist, the paper shall also aim to understand its inter-linkages in class, caste and religion matrices, and the notions of chastity and purity.

Keywords: The Female Body, Women in Classical Music

Nirmala draped the off-white Tasar silk saree, pleated its anchal. She looked at the mirror to capture a glance of her 'self,' adorned in the fabric enclave and imagined that the anchal if left un-pleated, would look more beautiful, as it would expose the design of the fabric more extravagantly. However, immediately she becomes careful about the informal normative expectations that she has to adhere to as a performing female musician on stage. She was getting prepared, decorating herself, and meanwhile Rina also rang the calling bell. Rina is Nirmala's shishya, a young girl of sixteen or seventeen, a student of Shastriya Sangeet and also a student in one of the convent institutions in the city.

Rina was strictly instructed by her Guruma to wear a saree, preferably a silk sa-

ree, and if she could manage to be comfortable in this 12-hand attire, she might choose a salwar kameez with a dupatta.

Rina is an interesting character. She is an obedient student at school as well as a conformist shishya and shapes her appropriately to the situational contexts and expectations and social constructs.

Before they were about to set off, Nirmala emerged from her bedroom where she was getting dressed and came to the drawing room wherein Rina was quietly waiting for her. She emerged with a neatly tied hair, pleated saree, and a sober make-up, which is not prominently visible. She looked at Rina, adjusted her silk dupatta, and they both boarded the private car to head for the venue of the concert. Among many other aspects, she is careful about 'her visibility' on stage and her professional spheres which assume a significant area of concern.

Nirmala was one of the performers at the annual conference, organized by Rajya Sangeet Academy.

(An excerpt from *A Narration of Lived Experience*)

Participation of women in public sphere in the Indian context: a brief history

A critical historical analysis would reveal that public singing by women, unless connected to religious and ritual purposes (such as weddings), came to carry the taint of disrepute; it became the preserve of the *tawaif* (the courtesan), the lower caste woman (Srivastava 2004). Musicians received patronage in the courts of the rulers. Women musicians were stigmatized on the grounds of sexuality, their participation in the public sphere was perceived with much disrespect. Entry of women into the public domain followed after a process of classicization of music, which as Partha Chatterjee (1993) puts, was a careful and negotiated process of the national culture formation. It was necessitated to reshape music to be made suitable for and facilitate the nationalist agenda. Some prominent music scholars and teachers of the late nineteenth century, whose principal aim was to revitalize "what they felt had become neglected and tarnished musical tradition" made conscious efforts" (Moro 2004). The motivation behind their endeavour was a sense of a Hindu classical past, a Hindu Golden Age of Spirituality, which had eventually led to a negative valuation of the Muslim contributions to music during the extended period of Mughal patronage (Moro 2004).

Bureaucratization leading to sanitization of music:

The revitalization, which may be appropriately called the religious sanitization of music, was carried out by some means such as the founding schools, inventing systems of notation, crafting modern music scholarship and organizing music con-

ferences and instituting the public concert. History-writing, based on the study of Sanskrit treatises and intended to establish norms for performance, helped the process.

The introduction of All India Radio played a strategic role in canonizing or classicizing music. Under Vallabhbhai Patel's reign as minister for information and broadcasting (1946), the effort towards producing a purified national culture was manifested in the prohibition of "singers and musicians from the courtesan culture" (Lelyveld 1995). During Balakrishna Vishwanath Keskar's tenure as Union Minister for Information and Broadcasting, there came to be instituted a bureaucratic selection procedure for All-India Radio musicians whose most explicit aim appears to have been the undermining of the Gharana system (Srivastava 2004). An important outcome of this process which included both institutionalization and bureaucratization of music was the entry into the profession of artistes from 'respectable' backgrounds; those, in other words, who had avoided the allegedly improper influence of the Muslim-dominated Gharanas and allied systems of performance (Srivastava 2004).

Nirmala is an upper-caste noblewoman, both of which she has achieved through marital institution/contract. Therefore, we may reflect upon her constant engagement and effort to adjust to the normative order of her achieved identity and re-socialize herself to become fit to be an able daughter-in-law of her in-laws. She has carefully designed her body, often compromising to the extent of alienation of her body from her 'self' to achieve and establish her identity as a female member of the musicians' family. Neither her self nor her body belongs to her but is a reflection of the gendered structure of society and public space in particular. Interestingly, for many Brahmin elites, the sign of the successful classicization of music and dance from the 1920s to 1940s was the transformation of these into 'arts' fit for upper-caste, middle-class 'family women' (Weidman 2003). All this is to say that within early 20th-century nationalist discourse there existed a strong theme which linked the emergence of the modern Indian self to a 'pure' (Sundar 2003) and 'ancient' Hindu genealogy. The canonization or classicization of music comprised a part in the process of constructing a national gendered culture in India.

Appropriate Gestures to suit hegemonic space:

Some of the key arguments to introspect upon would comprise the assumption of a neutral user of space, the contested nature of public space, the centrality of gender in determining spatial access, along with concerns of respectability.

As a child Rina would innocently ask her father, ‘Baba, why does a vocalist continuously move her hands while singing?’

Her father would take the curiosity to Nirmala, when she would say that it is a way of expressing, is not deliberate, but spontaneous.

However, Nirmala would often scold her disciples for expressing ‘too much’ through gestures and would instruct to limit those, which would otherwise be visually odd. The hegemonic structure thus puts a limit to the modes of expression as well.

Thus, there exists a dialectical relationship between social structure and space, and socio-spatial constructs play constitutive roles in the production, reproduction, and representation of social relations. In response to criticism for ‘excessive’ virtuosity, Kaushiki Chakraborty states in an interview that she is not “a 60-year-old trapped in a 20-year-old’s body. [She] enjoy[s] the excitement of singing fast *taans*; [She is] aware that at times [she] get[s] carried away.” She has also had to face criticism for the way she conducts herself on stage: some people think that she is aggressive, possibly because she moves her hands. “It’s funny how they expect a girl to be timid and demure on stage,” she says (*Tehelka Magazine* 2010).

It is important to understand at this juncture how bodies experience space. When the tenuous structures of power are reinscribed through space by everyday practices of moving through and occupying space, it is the body that becomes the locus of action for it is through the body that the everyday is lived, executed and experienced. To paraphrase Shilpa Ranade, we might understand that the socio-spatial configurations play a significant role in producing gendered bodies, and this process is characterized by normalization of gender space and maintenance of this order for self-preservation through continuous or adherence of the order ensured through regulation and disciplining and replication of it. “Hegemonic notions of masculinity and femininity have to be relentlessly performed by male and female bodies and anybody that attempts to transgress the boundaries of appropriateness threatens the social order” (Ranade 2007).

Thumri as a space for female vocalists

The space of women artists in the genre of thumri may be interesting to analyze. Thumri is a ‘light classical’ form of music, perceived as devoid of the purity of the classical forms of khayal and dhrupad. In other words, it lies at the bottom of a hierarchical structure based on purity wherein dhrupad is positioned at the top followed by khayal and then by thumri. Dhrupad and khayal have allowed extremely skewed space to women performers, with thumri being the permitted area for women. The extent of the devaluation of thumri may be understood from the

fact that it hardly comprises the major focus of recital in any concert and is mostly relegated to the last few minutes of a concert of ‘serious’ music. Thus, Hindustani classical music may be perceived as a patriarchal discourse, the self, the centre, wherein the norm is masculine; the feminine is banished to the realm of the other. An excerpt from an interview of Girija Devi says:

The Benares tradition is of “Chau-mukhi Gayan” (vocalism with four facets). Our training encompasses the four principal genre—Dhrupad, Khayal, Tappa, and Thumree. Therefore, Khayal and the semi-classical genres do not present themselves to us as alternatives to building a career. When I was growing up, Maharashtra emerged as the home of Khayal vocalism, with its own regional and devotional genres pushing the Thumree into a corner. Up to Abdul Kareem Khan and his immediate disciples, the Thumree retained its stature, though it changed its complexion. In later years, however, the new Khayal establishment appeared to create a climate of opinion in which the Thumree and its allied genres were regarded as either easy to master, or otherwise inferior. This bothered me immensely. So, I decided to match the competence of Khayal vocalists on their “home turf,” and challenge them to match me on mine. I worked very hard on my Khayal and performed it more widely and consistently than any other Benares vocalist in recent times. (swaratala.blogspot.in)

As mentioned, earlier, purification of music formed an important agenda of the process of ‘Hinduization’, which was carried out through bureaucratization of music. Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (1872-1931) and Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860-1935) were two prominent figures who engaged in the process of social reform-oriented towards reclaiming and reviving India’s tradition and culture, restoring its erstwhile spirituality. The enterprise of sanitizing music resulted in the banning of thumri artists from performing at All India Radio in the early years of independence. This, in turn, resulted in their shifting of professions and exploring the field of music. Women moved out or were pushed out of thumri’s small canvas into the expanses of khayal or the world outside music (Rao 1990).

Interesting to note here is how a thumri singer’s space gets defined and reshaped to ensure a stable and safe identity in the patriarchal, hegemonic societal structure. Thumri comprises mostly narration by viraha-stricken, lovelorn women, patiently yearning for a reunion with her beloved, overpowering emotions. It involves romantic lyrics and orientation to the male gaze, and an unorthodox musical structure. The rendition of such songs would involve certain controversies as the lyrics might be in conflict with the virtues of proper womanhood. The lyrics are somehow pacified by the diluted, subdued, pure image of a woman vocalist on

stage. The thumri singer continuously would emerge in the public space with a saree, often off-white, the anchal wrapped round her shoulder, and a high-necked blouse, ensuring a minimum exposure of skin. In other words, the unrefined content and 'unorthodox' characteristic of the songs in contrast to the khayal or the dhrupad repertoire is being diluted and pacified by the nimble appearance of the singer, presenting the piece characterized by lyrics that poses a potential threat to a woman's chastity and sexuality.

The gestures, with movements of eyes, hands, and torso have also reduced. In fact, these may be understood as rituals of purification of the body that maintain the purity and chastity of the body engaged in a 'not so pure' pursuit.

Interconnections with the politics of voice

Such limitations on one's visibility find expression in the politics of voice as well. The process of cleansing music from Muslim influence was crucial to the nationalist project, and it is evidenced in the singing style or the texture of voice. For example, women vocalists would always sing 'softer' ragas such as Yaman, Desh, Khamaj, Kafi that does not necessitate much gamak. It would be very unusual for a woman to render 'heavy' ragas such as Darbari Kanada, Puriya Dhaneshree, or Marwa. In fact, the voice and the gesture encompass certain intricacies as softer ragas would involve nimble texture in the voice expressed through 'softer', more feminine gestures, while the heavier ragas involve more 'masculine' ones, which are visually odd for a woman musician on stage. The thumris, mostly based on softer or sweeter ragas, are appropriate for a feminine engagement.

The central importance of the body may also be introspected in the field of popular music, especially in reference to Bollywood, and the intricacies of the body with voice would also be important to note. Body coupled with voice has contributed to the construction of an ideal Indian femininity through the popularization of a homogenous singing style and image of a female singer resulting in habitual consumption on the part of the audience. The most obvious manifestation of this process was Lata Mangeshkar's singing style (Srivastava 2004). Referring to Mangeshkar's songs in Aag (1948), Vijay Mishra writes that her 'virginally pure voice [is] a symbol of the lovelorn, viraha-stricken, constant woman of canonical literary texts of love' (Mishra 2002). Voice, in this context, may be perceived as a product of a particular historical and social moment. In the task of carrying out the larger agenda, Lata's voice was 'cleansed' of all those qualities that would in time be read as markers of decadence, immodesty, and by extension, in the warped logic of Indian nationalism, Muslimness (Sundar 2008). This enterprise was accompanied by the technological developments in the form of

gramophone and microphone, which were instrumental in producing this voice as much as a nationalist discourse.

Coupled with carefully designing her voice, equally important was the image of an ideal Indian woman that Mangeshkar was successful in establishing to her audience. Her modest white and off-white saris, lacklustre stage persona, and consistent refusal to sing 'vulgar' songs draw attention away from the female body—her own body and, by extension, the bodies of the women she represents vocally (Majumdar 2001). This disavowal of the body effectively contains female sexuality in film. Her single status also silently confirms her being a virgin and in a way implies her absolute devotion to music.

Her voice monopoly inter-linked with her appearance found prominence in the construction of bodies of later musicians such as Anuradha Paudwal, Kavita Krishnamurthy, Alka Yagnik, Sadhana Sargam, and, later, Shreya Ghoshal as well, a fact which was in contrast to those of Ila Arun, Alisha Chinai, Jaspinder Narula, Sunidhi Chauhan. Thus the body is not an entity, and it must be intersected to understand the complexities associated with its construction: a body assumes a reflection of social structure; it is situated within a socio-spatial frame and therefore necessitates a close introspection through a matrix of class, caste, gender, nation and so on.

Works Cited

- Amanda Weidman, "Gender and the Politics of Voice: Colonial Modernity and Classical Music in South India." *Cultural Anthropology* 18:2 (May 2003): 194-232.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* 11. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Lelyveld, David. "Upon the Subdominant: Administering Music on All India Radio." *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*. Ed. Carol A Breckenridge. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. 49-65.
- Majumdar, Neepa. "The Embodied Voice: Song Sequences and Stardom in Popular Hindi Cinema." *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music* Eds. Arthur Knight and Pamela Robertson Wojcik. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001. 161-81.
- Mishra, Vijay. *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Moro, Pamela. "Constructions of the Nation and the Classicisation of Music: Comparative Perspectives from Southeast and South Asia." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35:02 (2004): 187-211.

Anindita Chakrabarty

Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture, and Postcolonialism*. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.

Ranade, Shilpa. "The way she moves: mapping the everyday production of gender-space." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2007): 1519-1526.

Rao, Vidya. "'Thumri' as Feminine Voice." *Economic and political weekly* (1990): WS31-WS39

Srivastava, Sanjay. "Voice, Gender and Space in Time of Five-Year Plans: The Idea of Lata Mangeshkar." *Economic and Political Weekly* (2004): 2019-2028.

Sundar, Pavitra. "Meri Awaaz Suno: Women, Vocality, and Nation in Hindi Cinema." *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8.1 (2008): 144-179.

Tehelka Magazine, Vol 7, Issue 38, Dated September 25, 2010

<http://swaratala.blogspot.in/2007/05/girija-devi-i-am-in-service-of-goddess.html>