

**Performativity and Politics:
The Rise of Slam Poetry in India**

by Elloit Cardozo

Paper presented at National Conference on 'Languages and Literatures of India',
Organized by Somaiya Vidyavihar, at Mumbai, India on 7 July 2018

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Abstract

With the advent of the Technological Age, the way literature is produced and consumed all over the world has inadvertently changed. This includes the production and consumption of poetry in India. Despite only being famous in limited circles, published poetry in India has had a strong foothold down the years. However, with digitalization and the influx of e-books amongst several other factors changing the face of publication in India, the status of published poetry has certainly taken a hit. Paired with the role of the internet in creating a youth culture based on affinity and differences at the same time, this has led to the rise of Slam Poetry in India. A poetry slam is a competitive event where poets perform original work either alone or in teams for an audience which plays the role of a judge. A movement driven mostly by the youth of the country, slam poetry has become popular in India for its ability to provide youngsters with a platform to express themselves unapologetically in an environment that thrives on a sense of affinity. Performed in several languages including English, Hindi, Marathi and Urdu amongst others, slam poetry in India has covered a diverse range of topics right from men's and women's struggles with patriarchy to cultural affinities with one's motherland. This paper attempts to analyse the politics of performance in Indian slam poetry. In doing this, the paper touches upon both, the political and performative aspects of poetry slams in India while also establishing a relationship between the two.

Keywords: India, perform, politics, poetry, slam

Introduction

Spoken word poetry was born in 1984 in Chicago when a construction worker, Marc Smith, started poetry reading at a popular club as a way to democratize

poetry and bring it to the masses. Two years later, he approached the owner of a jazz club to make the readings competitive and a weekly affair.

In 2011, a TED performance by Sarah Kay, a renowned American spoken word poet was shared widely on social media. Titled "If I should have a daughter", the performance served as the entry point for many Indians to spoken word poetry. (Mantri)

Poetry has had a place of its own in Indian literature down the ages, having been produced in several languages and styles throughout the country. Despite having initially started out as a practice for and of the elite, much like most other forms of literature, poetry has eventually permeated social hierarchies, also serving as the voice of the oppressed sections of society on several occasions. While the restrictions of who can produce and consume poetry have been increasingly invisibilized over the years, one distinction that has seemed to persist is that between the producers and consumers of poetry. While it certainly has permeated social divisions, printed poetry has often seemed to form a clear distinction between the poet and the reader, with the reader ever-reliant on the poet for the authoritative interpretation of a poem. This, in addition to the status of elite art associated with poetry has meant that the poet has constantly enjoyed a privileged position in the dynamic with the reader. Paired with the decline of print publication due to digitalization, this has seen the consumption of conventional printed poetry in India take a hit in recent years. This decline in the production and consumption of printed volumes of poetry, unsurprisingly, has been accompanied by the subsequent rise of Slam Poetry in India. A poetry slam is a competitive event where poets perform original work either alone or in teams for an audience which plays the role of a judge. This paper attempts to analyse the performative politics of slam poetry in India. The first part of the paper looks at the performative nature of slam poetry, going on to establish a parallel to its rise to prominence in India. The part that follows scrutinizes the politics of this performative dynamics while also addressing its enmeshment with the politics and performance of identity in slam poetry in India. In doing this, the paper attempts to bring out the nuanced nature of the relationship between the performative and political aspects of slam poetry in India.

Performing Poetry or Performance Poetry?

While slam poetry is undeniably an offshoot of spoken word poetry, it is important to demarcate a crucial difference that predetermines a lot of the dissimilarities between the two. While the spoken word is a crucial element of slam poetry, it is only one element of a larger, more comprehensive performance which entails much more than just the words or the language of a poem:

The distinction between the oral and the performative is an important one to make as it marks the difference between poetry's transmission and reception... In live venues (as well as audiovisual media), appreciating poetry becomes a multisensory experience. Audiences don't merely listen to a poem; they react to an entire performance of verse, at times performing right back through applause, spiteful hissing, or comments shouted to the poet or slam host. Audiences receive performed verse by experiencing how the poet moves, appears, sounds, and physically embodies the poem. (Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*¹ 16-17)

Besides the role they play in the immediate reception of a poem as it is being performed, an audience in a poetry slam has another crucial role to play. Given that performances at a poetry slam are judged either by an entire audience or by randomly selected members of an audience, the audience is automatically placed in a position of privilege:

In a spectacular role reversal of a traditional poetry reading, which usually asks its audience to be silently and passively receptive, poetry slams put the audience in the seat of critical power, asking them to immediately and overtly evaluate performed poetry through applause, shouting, and scoring. (CPSP 24)

What this also very interestingly does, is that it largely predetermines the process of a poem's production. While one can't claim that this completely takes away from the poet's vision of their poem, it is undeniable that given the importance of an audience's role in an event, wider accessibility is a concern that places the poet in a precarious position:

¹ All further references to *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry* will appear within the text in parenthesis as (CPSP).

No predetermined rubric of evaluation exists that the poet could be sure a sharp-eyed/sharp-eared "expert" would share, and reward... If potentially anyone can judge, theoretically all are judges, and thus the poems performed—if to succeed—must have broad popular appeal. (Blitefield 109)

This emanates from the fact that the poetry slam is “a paradoxical event where poets often find themselves navigating a set of boundaries between what pleases an audience and what they might believe constitutes a “good” poem” (Fields et al.). Given that the poets don’t know whom exactly the poem is going to be performed for beforehand, the concept of a ‘target audience’ that they would otherwise function by gets thrown into jeopardy with the slam audience (if such a classification can be made) emerging as the target group. Given the diverse and possibly unpredictable nature of the composition of a slam audience, the poets need to ensure that their poems can be understood and judged by anyone and everyone:

Slam poetry is verse to which, at least theoretically, anyone can have access and whose worth anyone can determine. The accessibility of slam poetry is facilitated and perhaps demanded by the medium of performance, which is bounded by time, space, and—perhaps most important—an audience’s attention span. (CPSP 5)

Accessibility, hence, is a key element in slam poetry due to the role played by the audience. The duality of this, given the fact that the accessibility of a given verse would depend on the demographic composition of a slam audience, makes it an intriguing element of performing at poetry slams.

It naturally follows that to properly understand the performative dynamics of slam poetry in India, one must look at the demographic composition of those involved in it. Interestingly much like the rest of the world, both, the performers and the audience of slam poetry in India consist of a ‘young’ demographic: “spoken word poets generally belong to the younger lot, and speak about issues like sexuality, gender, mental health and relationships which make for shareable content, also helps” (Mantri); “with poems becoming a tool to voice dissent, opinion, criticism and perspective, the ever-opinionated young audience is exploiting it to bring mainstream attention to semi-sidelined issues” (Bansal). While it is hard to say without any certainty given that a majority of the slam poetry groups in India started out as college groups, one may

assume that “young”, in this case, stands for a group consisting majorly of those between the ages of 18 to 25. With its complete dismantling of the hierarchal relationship between the poet and the audience, it is unsurprising that slam poetry has a burgeoning community growing around it in India. This is especially true of the youth whose opinions are often dismissed by the powers-that-be:

Perhaps the most vibrant characteristic of slam poetry [in India] today is the community that grows around it. The medium possesses a degree of openness and intimacy that attracts young people who have a thing or two to say about society. (Bhasin)

Unsurprisingly then, given the age groups of a majority of both, the performers and the audiences, the content of Indian slam poetry ranges right from sexuality to women’s issues, from the privilege of masculinity to teenage love, from the hesitation around discussing menstruation in India to something as mundane as a blue umbrella. This, in addition to the fact that despite having initially started out as a practice limited to English, slam poetry in India has eventually gone on to be performed in multiple languages including Hindi, Kannada, Marathi and Urdu, clearly proves that just like the rest of the world, in India “slam’s emphases on diversity, inclusion, and democracy have resulted in a “pluralism” among its poets” (CPSP 6).

In an extremely interesting take on the nature of these communities built around poetry slams, Tyler Hoffman equates the atmosphere with that of a Bakhtinian carnival:

The laughter evoked by the poetry slam likewise frees participant from the prohibitions and norms of a dominant culture, allowing them, if momentarily, to construct a second, or unofficial, culture from which to contest the hierarchies that structure their daily lives. (62)

While this is especially true of slam poetry that hinges on forms of humour such as satire and parody, one could argue it is not limited to such poems. It is true that humour plays a crucial role in giving slam poetry the leeway that it gets to annihilate social hierarchies while bestowing poets with the liberty to express themselves, however, one could also argue that “the improvisatory nature of slam poetry- a poetry in a constant state of change, ultimately unsettled- helps to establish it within

this politically charged populist sphere” (Hoffman 50). The best example of such a performance from the Indian slam poetry circuit is this masterpiece in dark humour:

If you want to kill someone for fun,
 not get too involved and watch from a distance,
 set him on fire.
 Use kerosene and not petrol,
 you see petrol vaporizes
 But kerosene falls into the next layer of skin before burning the previous one.
 They say
 once when all the sensory nerves in your skin is burnt
 you can see yourself burn and not feel any pain.
 Beyond that point there is no saving you
 as your brain melts through your ears like a chimney on fire. (Sukumar)

One could very well argue that it is the carnivalesque atmosphere created at the slam which facilitated the performance of a poem with such dark and graphically violent content, and even got it classified as a form of humour. The fact that the poem was performed in the alternative space of a poetry slam made it “[transform its] primitive verbal functions, acquir[ing] a general tone of laughter” (Bakhtin 17).

Much like other places across the globe, despite having started out as a subculture in India, slam poetry eventually seems to be catching on. A large part of this can be attributed to the carnivalesque atmosphere generated by the performative nature of a poetry slam, creating an alternative social space, free from the usual hierarchies that the participants in slams would otherwise find themselves chained by.

The Politics of Performance and Identity

Because the slam format encourages the “I” of the page to also be the “I” of the stage, there is a hyperawareness of self among slam poets and audiences, one that manifests itself most commonly through the author’s performance of identity. (CPSP 33)

Because most slam poems engage a first-person, narrative mode which encourages a live audience to perceive the performance as a confessional moment, one of the most defining characteristics of slam poetry is a poet’s

performance of identity and identity politics. (Somers-Willett, “Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity”² 52)

Given slam poetry’s performative nature, it often becomes difficult to distinguish the poet from the speaker of the poem. In fact, it could be argued that this could work in favour of the poet as the audience would immediately empathize with them, based on the content of their poetry. The same blurring of the lines that works to the advantage of the poet, however, could also end up predetermining the nature or even the extent of the poet’s performance of their poem:

Slam poetry entails not only an admission of authorial self but an outright proclamation of authorial self through performance. In this way, the identity of the author is inextricably linked to the slam poem, both in writing and performance, because the author is proclaiming an aspect of self in the poem and performing that self onstage. (CPSP 35)

The poet, it naturally follows, is expected to communicate ‘authentic’ experiences and express ‘authentic’ emotions and feelings through their performance. This is precisely where the paradox of the authenticity kicks in. Who determines which experiences or expressions are authentic? Inevitably the performance of any identity that the poet attempts gets inextricably linked to previously performed and consumed expressions of the same or similar identities:

As discursive practice, performativity is both prior to and a result of any embodied performance: performativity is that normative behavior to which a performance alludes or which it parodies, and it is also a performance’s effect in that the normative behavior reflected in a performance is disseminated and eventually incorporated into that behavior’s performative history. (SPCP 56)

A poet is therefore expected to pen an identity that would make him the speaking “I”, and as an effect, the subject of the poem. With this in mind, it could be said that “writing the slam poem and performing the slam poem [are] not only co-constitutive, but imbricated within a process of subjectivation” (Rivera 114). Despite the slam audience’s apparent insistence on authenticity then, it could be argued that a poet is expected to perform not what he believes is authentic, but what the audience has previously

² All further references to “Slam Poetry and the Cultural Politics of Performing Identity” will appear within the text in parenthesis as (SPCP).

experienced, witnessed, accepted and have eventually come to expect as an authentic expression of that identity. The slam poet therefore, is constantly negotiating between his vision of the authenticity of an identity and the yardstick of authenticity that the audience places on a given identity:

The identities expressed by slam poets are performative—that is, they are performed consciously or unconsciously for audiences to certain ends. Because identity is an effect of performance in the world, just as it is at a poetry slam, what is authentic about identity is not the realness or truth it is often used to connote but the repetition and reception of certain [behaviours] and characteristics over time. That is, what is often deemed authentic by an audience is actually a norm of tried identity behaviour. (CPSP 8)

Hence, given the performative nature of slam poetry, the reliability of anything and everything associated with it, just like authenticity, inextricably gets linked with the question of performativity. Does authenticity not exist at all in slam poetry then, given that a poet is required to compromise their vision of what an authentic identity is? It could be argued that authenticity does exist in slam poetry, but “as a performance in which a subject and his or her audience agree that an identity is successfully and convincingly portrayed” (CPSP 8).

Given the possibly unfathomable diversity in the socio-cultural experiences and identities of slam audiences, particularly in a country as multicultural and multilingual as India, it is only natural that most of the audiences’ benchmarks of authenticity when it comes to identities are rarely based on personal experiences. While they might very well be based on first-person accounts of personal experiences, it is also a possibility that their yardsticks are based on popularly produced and accepted notions of authenticity. Hence, given the increasingly liberal and egalitarian nature of society in the twenty-first century, the slam poetry circuit is a place that not only encourages, but also celebrates diversity. The implications that this stance can have for performers at a poetry slam are immense:

In their focus on celebrating diversity and liberal politics, slam aesthetics frequently correspond to performing marginalized identity in order to engage (and at times exploit) a slam audience’s shared value of difference. (CPSP 9-10)

It naturally follows that poetry slams often witness performances of several marginalized identities. This happens to ring true of the Indian slam poetry circuit as well, testified by the fact that slam poetry in India is “possibly one of the few literary genres where women outnumber men” (Bhasin). While it might seem like a stretch to say that every slam poem by a woman would be about a female identity, one must keep in mind that “all slam poems become about the author’s performance of identity on some level because of the author’s mandated presence onstage” (CPSP 18). Given that such a large part of the way a performance is received when it comes to slam poetry depends upon the performance of an identity, it is unsurprising that certain kinds of poems tend to get a better reception than others:

Although it may seem strange for a three-minute political rant to be considered entertaining, audiences often reward confrontational or angry slam performances. Such conviction and passion are inevitably deemed authentic by many audiences, and it is often a more passionate and seemingly authentic connection to the subject and author of verse—not the artificial hushed and reverent tone of a traditional poetry reading—that they seek in coming to a slam. (CPSP 23)

The best testimony to this in the Indian slam poetry circuit is this confrontational poem about the experiences of being an Indian Muslim:

*Apne hi taur se jeeta hoon,
daaru cigarette bhi peeta hoon.
Koi neta meri nass-nass mein nahi,
main kisi party ke bas mein nahi.
Main Hindustani Musalmaan hoon³. (Haidry)*

Hussain Haidry’s “*Hindustani Musalmaan*”, while not overtly boisterous or explicitly aggressive, certainly has a confrontational tone to it: that of a man confronting societal prejudice and stereotypes for the frustration they put him through. If the warm reception Haidry received for the live performance, seen in the YouTube video

³ I live by my own terms,
I consume alcohol and cigarettes too.
No politician is in my veins,
I’m not controlled by any party.
I’m an Indian Muslim [translation] (Haidry).

(which has in excess of 600, 000 views), isn't proof enough of the poem's resonance with the audience, one only needs to look as far as the media attention it eventually garnered. Besides being featured on Internet news websites like Huffington Post and The Quint amongst others, it even received attention from mainstream media: getting featured on Hindustan Times and even making an appearance on NDTV's *Prime Time with Ravish*.

Hence it is clear that the inextricable link between a poet's identity and their sense of self is a vital feature of slam poetry in India, like several other parts of the world. The superfluous nature of the relationship between the "I" on the stage and the "I" on the page, and its link with the slam poetry circuit as a space for celebrating marginalized identities are amongst the major factors for the rise of the genre in India.

Conclusion

It is thus clear that a major reason for the rise of slam poetry in India is that it "dissolve[s] the social, cultural, and political boundaries that generalize human experience and make it meaningless" (Algarín 9). However, as this paper has discussed, this has largely to do with the demographic group that is mostly involved in slam poetry both as performers and audience. Slam poetry, unlike conventional poetry, serves as a "censure-free platform for young writers to express their feelings, their anger and their hope, their feelings about parents, society and the world" (Dhar). While it is undeniable that "spoken word poetry's popularity in India owes plenty to social media and YouTube" (Mantri) that is best saved for a discussion all on its own.

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