

Gayatri Anand

Assistant Professor of English

MCM DAV COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

gai3.anand@gmail.com

Performance Poetry and the Twenty-First Century: An Amalgamation of Contemporary Concerns

The paper attempts to analyse the growing relevance of performance poetry in these current times. Performance poetry amalgamates the requirement of poetry and prose while retaining its own uniqueness. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed a major revival of the oral poetic form which can be traced back to the birth of literature itself. Sabrina Benaim, Alex Dang, Sarah Kay (Founder of the Voice) and Lee Makobe (Founder of Vocal Revolutionaries) are just a few of many contemporary performance poets who deal with latter-day concerns such as cultural deterioration, gender, identity, euthanasia, impossible physical standards, post-coloniality, racial issues and homosexuality, just to name a few. The tendency of performance poetry, as a counter-cultural movement, to review society more objectively than other mainstream arts would, has been appraised in this paper as well.

the girl learns to fly.

she is a fish.

the hook is in the water.

she willingly thrusts her body onto the hook all for a better look at the stars

(Sabrina Benaim-Magic Trick 002)

Although the art of writing has always been secondary to the oral tradition chronologically, the twenty-first century has witnessed an amalgam of the two as far as the genre of performance poetry is concerned. It deals with relevant twenty-first century concerns such as cultural deterioration (Sabrina Benaim in *Explaining My Depression to My Mother*), gender (Sarah Kay in *If I Should Have A Daughter*), race (Alex Dang in *What Kind of Asian Are You*) and various other eclectic issues such as identity, poverty and euthanasia. Kathryn Michalko defines spoken word poetry “a branch of creative writing that uses free verse to express thoughts from a poet’s point of view”. Performance poetry allows flexibility of rhyme and rhythm in poetry to such an extent that it becomes as pragmatic as prose. The influence of the Black Arts Movement on the growing popularity of the form is undeniable. Cafes, community theatres, church basements and other venues began to be used to hold performances and continue to do so, to this day. Studies by scholars such as Barbara Sparks have revealed how this art has helped disenfranchised youth in re-defining themselves. Amiri Baraka’s reading of ‘Black Art’ which carried the message that any poem which doesn’t attempt to voice what has never been voiced is worthless could be considered the anthem of this form.

The countercultural aspect of the movement has added a new depth to the feminist movement. The performance poetry aka slam poetry of Sabrina Benaim has added a new dimension to the feminist tradition through her collection *Depression & Other Magic Tricks*. Her poems like *First Date* are highly indicative of the ever-present servitude the female psyche is submerged in. In her poetry the barricade between Eastern and Western feminism seems to vanish for one brief instance. The inherent dichotomy between women and freedom has never been expressed as succinctly. Using her verbose and mesmerising dialogue, Sabrina Benaim has ushered in a new chapter in the Book of Feminism. To bring to light the truth about suppression requires a depth which Benaim has completely surpassed, even transcended. Even though Chandra Talpade declared in *Third World Feminism*, that the plight of women from under-developed nations cannot be equated with or

defined by Western feminism. However, performance poetry can bridge geographical gaps as it manages to redefine and even revolutionize the limits of literature.

Sabrina Benaim is an iconoclast for feminists, Eastern and Western, irrespective of geographical, cultural and traditional differences. Andrea Gibson's words are hauntingly apt: "the loss in Sabrina Benaim's poems arrives as a roadmap; a guide to finding ourselves in what we lose". She even touches upon widespread concerns such as post-colonial 'amnesia' as well in *How to Fold a Memory* when she says "our brains are constantly rerouting the path, rewriting what we remember." This can be considered symptomatic of the colonial enterprise as a whole.

In *On Releasing Light*, the age-old plight of misunderstood women everywhere like Helen, Draupadi and Eve is brought to the foreground when the speaker says "In my story I am the protagonist & the bad thing, I have to learn to bend the light out of myself". These women have been historicised infamously as perpetrators of doom in their respective stories, in spite of the fact that their mistakes were less grievous, malicious and deliberate than the mistakes of the other (male) characters.

The spoken-word performer doesn't merely communicate with words but with the tone, the eyes, the pitch and the overall demeanour. These artists have more tools at their disposal than those who rely solely on the print medium. Possibly influenced by Simonides' definition, PB Shelley defined poetry as "a speaking picture". It can be said to have reached its zenith in performance poetry.

Although Thomas Gray said "the language of the age is never the language of poetry" (*letter to Richard West*, 8 April 1742), the popularity of this diverse poetic form begs to challenge that undoubtedly elitist notion. The spoken-word poet, more often than not, speaks in the language of his or her day. According to *Youth Voices: Performance Poetry as a Platform for Literacy, Creativity, and Civic Engagement* by Emanuelee "Outspoken" Bean and Kate Rybka Brennan this form helps in "building a literary culture and platform for social change". In spite or perhaps because of the fact that it is away from the mainstream, it serves to underscore the elitist and

orthodox culture. It attempts to separate and subvert challenging orthodox norms. Julia Novak in *Live Poetry: An Integrated Approach to Poetry in Performance* declared that “Poetry is experiencing a Renaissance through the spoken word”.

Performance poetry is conventionally associated with an “anti-establishment edge” (*The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Seventh Edition). However, Harold Bloom’s cynical elucidation of it as “the death of art” (*Paris Review*, Spring 2000) seems a bit unjust. Rather, it is this disaffection and spirit of nonconformity that embodies the twenty first century and thus performance poetry can serve as an iconoclastic form of art of the generation. The fact that performance poetry is often competitive furthers its holistic appeal. It turns poetry into a pseudo-sport and perpetuates a communal atmosphere.

In *Performance, Poetics, And Place: Public Poetry As A Community Art*, Julie Marie Schmid describes the role the form has played in bridging the gap between cultures. Sarah Kay’s Project Voice uses performance poetry as an empowerment tool. In *Performance, Poetics, And Place: Public Poetry As A Community Art*, Julie Marie Schmid describes the role the form has played in bridging the gap between cultures. She also refers to Maria Damon’s “Was That Dissonant, Dissident, or Different?” and her concept of *close-listening*. Marc Smith describes the way in which performance poetry helps up in setting up a poetic community removed from all barriers of caste, creed, culture and race and helps in making the marginalized, if not the new mainstream, a community of their own. The anti-elitist beginnings of the form only help in furthering this purpose.

Slam poetry “can be accompanied by highly choreographed gestures and subtle voice technique, leading to accusations (not always unjust) of style over substance”. However, on the contrary, these serve as tools which assist the poet in conveying his message in the spirit in which it was meant. Oral poetry was the ancestor of literature but the great irony lies in the fact that language, as we know it, did not exist then. The reason the verbal is taking precedence over the written in this time

and date is perhaps, that mere language is failing us yet again. The expansive range of emotions that embody the spirit of this generation can only be conveyed through performance poetry, art and drama. It is not merely the poet who experiences and shares his emotion but the viewer/audience as well.

Besides the visual, the auditory senses are stimulated as well as the mind to a whole new level. Traditionally poetry was written in isolation and for readers who were invisible to the eye. The spoken word poet, on the other hand, usually creates the poem in front of the very visible audience as a part of the performance. The poet creator in this case is a communal being. It is destined to be performed, the inverse of the closet drama which is fated to be read.

I am looking

For the words to a poem

I can't remember

(Sarah Kay in No Matter the Wreckage)

Some believe spoken word poetry belongs in the sphere where disenfranchised youth, graffiti, etc. belong. However, this form of literature makes it more accessible to those who avoid picking up books. In *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, scholar Johanna Drucker says “The idea of performance in poetry is conventionally associated with a real time event in which a live or recorded reading provides effective dimensions to a poetic work through the immediate experiences that constitute an event (...).” These visual means perform the work as a poem that can't be translated into any other form. She also talks about the “presence of a poem”. It is a living, breathing organism which takes on a life of its own in the heat of the moment. The crowd forms a part of the silent author spectrum. It thus, is indiscernibly influenced by those it is performed for. They form an indelible part of the poem.

Social media has and continues to play a major role in the promotion of this genre. The growth of technology has perpetuated the popularity of this genre and is perhaps a major factor behind its newfound popularity. The internet as a whole has been a major catalyst for the genre. Rather than versification, the emphasis is on expressions, gestures and hand movements. More than anything else, on the flow of words. Unknowingly, William Wordsworth was defining not poetry in general but performance poetry when he defined it as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800). Its natural and raw elements add newfangled intimacy to the process of reading and hearing poetry.

The suppression of minorities, whether it is women, people of colour or any form of the “subaltern” (Gayatri Spivak), voices have been quashed, words erased and books burnt. Like the quintessential phoenix, the 21st century poet redefines and recreates his or her identity through this form, finds an entirely new voice and expression using this method.

At a time when a vast majority of youth is losing interest in literature, performance poetry may prove to be the voice of the new generation. Although it is a counter-cultural movement, not mainstream in any way, it can still be considered highly representational. Perhaps this is the age wherein counter-culture is the new norm. It is the Age of Performance Poetry.

Works Cited

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