

Tune Of Transcendence in Tale of Transformation : Exploring Transgender Love Songs and Resistance in Kashmir

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Abstract :

Unabated curfews, media gag, and clampdown on communication in the Indian-administered Kashmir has been ongoing since 1947. In the midst of this political turmoil, at the intersection of religion, gender, and conflict lie the transgender people of Kashmir who are placed at the fringes and have been facing abuse and discrimination. While in the West, drag enabled gay men to manipulate aspects of femininity for the means of earning fame and money. In conflict-ridden Kashmir, transgenders have been singing songs at wedding ceremonies, wearing colorful, scintillating gowns, rouge on their cheeks, kohl in their eyes, and brightly painted nails, expressing their desires and longings for a partner while challenging conventions through unabashed enjoyment of public flirtation disallowed in mundane everyday life. In most of these highly energetic songs, they symbolically embody the bride, vocalising pride in their own looks by using lyrics like "I am very sexy, sexy, sexy,"

while expressing their desire for a potential mate and proclaiming their own sexual attractiveness, which is considered condemnable in heteronormative patriarchal society. In one song, Reshma, a famous transgender singer of Kashmir, talks about her visit to America to meet her "gay," subtly hinting at the conservative nature of Kashmiri society compelling her to travel in pursuit of her amorous love, while in the other song titled "Hay Hay Wasiyee," she talks about the pain and torment inflicted upon her by her partner, resulting in her melting like snow. These songs have increased the sexual self-confidence of trans folks in Kashmir, overcoming fear and expressing their emotions for companionship, support, and love. Employing a multidisciplinary approach that includes transcribing and translating the songs through a queer folklorist lens with the help of native speakers and seeking help from other secondary sources, this paper attempts to explore how songs about love and longing sung by trans identities in Kashmir fuel resistance to rigid gender and sexual ideologies through their conscious challenge, emphasising the importance of non-heterosexual couples in society. It further explores how the extension of liminality beyond the ritual frame inspires the hopes and expectations of the audience, leading to everyday gender performative changes that open cracks in patriarchy.

Keywords :

Love, Transgenders, Songs, Kashmir, Patriarchy Works Cited

INTRODUCTION:

Music serve as an indestructible weapon of speaking to power in subjugated colonies where resistance take both subtle and overt trajectories. It facilitates counter hegemonic discourses on socio cultural realities, gender issues , suppression, discrimination, patriarchy and a tool for collective action. Music within the queer movement has allowed listeners to build communities , carving agency, and conducting political action while remembering past and reimagining future. Music produced by queers have helped us to contextualize the socio political movement through which generations of queer have survived. While in the West, Disco clubs and queer bars have helped in building community and carving out spaces for solidarity, in conflict ridden Kashmir¹ , trans identities have instrumentalise the wedding song to express their desire and longing for love and companionship in a heteronormative society while challenging rigid gender norms and promoting sexual self confidence.

ORIGIN:

The Kashmiri term "vanwun" is a modification of the term van van meaning repetition. These songs primarily deal with the themes of love and romance apart from comedy. There are multiple versions across different parts of valley due to vernacular peculiarities. One striking feature on vanwun is it's composition that's done on the spot, according to situation and ambience. Historically, hafizas, Kashmiri women dancers used to practice dance who would dance to sufi music. Kashmiri music is an amalgamation of music from countries like, Iran² , Samarkand³ , Arabia⁴ and Tushqand⁵ which reached its height during the Muslim rule particularly under Sultan Zain-ul-abdin⁶ patronage. Later, dancing became a badge of dishonor for the respectable Hindus and Muslim during the dogra⁷ rule and was confined to marginalised and economically weaker sections. After 1920s, Bacha kot⁸ or Bacha nagma took the place of Hafizas who were boys impersonating women. In the 1990s Kashmir became a sanctum of violence and bloodshed as the general masses sought to determine its political future. Kashmiri weddings known for their multi course feast and night time rituals segued into hasty daytime event effected by political turmoil. Women were confined to the four walled rooms putting an end to these traditional performances. As Kashmir was on boil, due to political insurgency, transgens started performing as wedding singers ,becoming more popular than cisgender women and Bach kot performers with several families willing to book trans performers months in advance even though they charged higher than the traditional singers. This practice has challenged the patriarchal sex /gender system of Kashmiri culture, as new spaces for transgens has emerged where they can escape the societal ostracization by earning a living for themselves through dancing while also providing

recreation. Transgender folks in Kashmir have used their songs and associated dance to express their desire for companionship, love and support of a counterpart while challenging societal paradigms that restrict them to prescribed roles, attaining them the ability to influence and get clarity in their identities. Moreover, with the advent of social media platform like YouTube⁹ their performances have become hyperinvisible bringing light to their existence.

THE WEDDING PERFORMANCE:

For performing at the menzraat(mehndiraat¹⁰) they get ready at afternoon by applying rouge on their cheeks, lipstick, brightly painted nails and incising their eyes with Kohl. They embellish themselves with faux gold necklace, bangles and pair of shoes that goes with their colorful outfit, completely opposite to their primitive image that included wearing of pheran along with dangling earrings, the same outfit that's worn by a married Kashmiri pandit woman. They settle in wedding tents(shamiyanas) with their musical instruments like tumbaknaer¹¹ a drum like instrument and tambourine. Transgens folks rely on prominent writers like Rasool Mir¹² and Habba Khatoon¹³ for lyrics, by never altering the words, they demonstrate their regard for these renowned poets, a respect that reverberates them as traditional bearers. Through a change in the melodies can be witnessed depending upon the mood of the setting.

Beginning with religious invocations they set the mood, gradually making eye contacts with the audience, they seek audience interaction through performing different movements and expressions. Listeners coax and demand ostentatious performances, building the singers confidence to engage in non normative bodily movements by being flirty, clapping and swaying their hips. Interestingly, women audience also appear to be empowered in these videos acting completely contrary to their assigned behavior prescribed by patriarchy. For example, in some videos women voices can be seen increasing their volume as singer progresses through songs and some others joining the dance hooting enthusiastically. These wedding performance have provided the transgender people with the primary source of income that's sustains them through political turmoil and social ostracization. Given the region's socio political instability and the prevalence of fanatical religious laws, the transgender community has been facing ongoing ostracization which starts at home followed by victimisation at school. This catapults them to confined to their feminine attires and makeup to marriage functions. In their, everyday life they conform to gender and social norms to protect their family from harassment. Whenever they leave to perform, they disguise their feminine attires under a long shrug, with a mask like veil to get unrecognizable. They recognize each other through behavioral codes which include their way of talking, hand gestures and plucked eyebrows.

ANALYSING WEDDING SONGS:

The wedding songs are accepted traditions, which because of their dynamic folklorist characteristics and ritual performances serve as spaces that are both public and counter public , and create terrains of imagery and portal to innovation. As Fawzia Afzal-Khan¹⁴ , drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick¹⁵ , argues in her study of Pakistani¹⁶ women singers, feminist theories of gendered spectatorship lead to resistant readings of patriarchal/nation whereby 'queer' can refer to :the open mesh of possibilities, gaps ,overlaps , dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexualityaren't made(or can't be made) to signify monolithically. Likewise, T. J Tallie observes that a queer reading explores how the customs, practices, and potentially the very bodies of indigenous peoples can become queer despite remaining ostensibly heterosexual in orientation and practice, as their existence constantly undermines the desired order of an emergent settler state"Though the wedding songs are a part of well known collections, those that are the subject of this research are narrated by trans identities through creative opportunities for reflective commentary that reveals their longing and desire for a counterpart while proclaiming their own sexual self confidence.

FIRST SONG:

Oh, I went to Punjab¹⁷ ," (Audience) "Why?"

"My 'gay' is in Punjab."

(Audience) "What happened after that?"

(Random Punjabi lyrics to cause laughter.)

I ran after listening.

After finding corners, I ran back.

Oh, I ran back, my love. Oh, I ran back, my love.

"Oh, I went to Ladakh¹⁸

," (Audience) "Why?"

"My 'gay' is in Ladakh."

(Audience) "What happened after that?"

(Random Ladakhi lyrics to cause laughter.)

I ran after listening.

After finding corners, I ran back.

Oh, I ran back, my love. Oh, I ran back, my love.

"Oh, I went to America¹⁹

," (Audience) "Why?"

"My 'gay' is in America."

Stay quiet. (Random English lyrics to cause laughter.)

I ran after listening.

After finding corners, I ran back.

Oh, I ran back, my love. Oh, I ran back, my love

"Oh, I will return to Kashmir!" (Audience) "Why?"

"My 'gay' is in Kashmir."

Upset with me, my lover has left.

Come back, my dear flower.

But from the depth of my heart, I will call you back.

Oh come back, the vision of my eyes.

Upset with me, my lover has left.

Come back, my dear flower.

Let us go, friend, to gather basil.

He wounds my heart with an axe,

But never bothered to check on me.

I will call you from the hill.

Please come, the vision of my eyes.

Don't run away, we will destroy the hil

Come, my friend, let's go down.

I'll give you the gold of my head.

Upset with me, my lover has left.

Come back, my dear flower.

I'm waiting for you on top of the hill.

I am in extreme pain, calling you uphill.

Oh my friend, let's go, the one who dies never comes back.

But I will still wait for him forever.

The song starts with Reshma, a well-known transgender singer, expressing her fervent yearning to go to Punjab in pursuit of her amorous love. This line opens up possibilities of queer romantic relationships in the heteronormative conservative Kashmir, giving an example of Punjab, which remains in close vicinity of Kashmir. Throughout the songs, cisgender women appear to be equally enthusiastic, doing vocal encouragement by engaging in spontaneous interjections and inquiring questions like "Why?" and "What happened?" The singer then intersperses the songs with random Punjabi lyrics, trying to imitate and mimic the language, causing unabashed and unapologetic laughter among both women and transgenders, an act typically condemnable in everyday life. This laughter encapsulates a queer feminist aesthetic in the song, where the singer and women both embrace defiance against nonconformity. Reshma's declaration of "I ran back" expresses her apprehension of her family due to the fanatical and heteronormative societal setup where the existence of queer couples is deemed an abomination of family honor. Reshma then recounts her sojourn to Ladakh to find her "gay", leveraging Ladakh's less Orthodox character, giving transgenders some degree of agency. Further continuing her narrative she talks about her venture to America to find her gay, envisioning it as a utopian land where she can explore her sexuality devoid of social ostracization. The mentioning of different "potential" partners subverts the traditional notion of only cisgender men allowed to have polygamous privileges. In the next line, interestingly, Reshma conveys to the audience her love for her Kashmir, expressing her desire to return to her native hometown for her gay. This is particularly interesting as she provokes the patriarchal order and teases its rigidity, which cannot stop her from meeting her beloved. The songs take a different turn as the funny recreational songs masterfully segue into a sorrowful account of the tormenting her lover has inflicted upon her, symbolized as a flower and embodiment of her vision. In the next lines, she talks about waiting for him on the hill, even annihilating it to decrease the barriers between them culminating into sacrificial love and eternal devotion by giving the

wealth of her head for him and even waiting for him for the rest of eternity. These lyrics subtly but strongly demonstrate the love of a queer which is in no way less than that of heteronormative couples.

.Reshma's decision to return Kashmir is not only a testament to her unconditional love for her beloved but also a beacon of hope for other queer folks to have a counterpart, thus encouraging perpetual liminality. Kay Turner²⁰ notes in her essay "Deep Folklore/Queer Folklorist" that liminality is an ongoing "cultural understory, that liminal playpen of enchantment and darkness inhabited by third-party figures we study and analyze, worship and adore: the bricoleur, the folk saint, the orisha, the ghost, the trickster, and the witch. Unnerving, ambiguous, unbounded, all these figures exhibit queer tendencies. They disturb and are disturbed by classification. These wedding songs express the folks' desire for companionship and support, as they cast their winking eyes toward the audience and make funny faces, prohibited in everyday life. Wedding songs facilitate spaces for such expression, as Turner says, "those between-worlds... the very spaces where a queer folkloristics works at troubling conventional notions of how relationships and communities are formed, for whom, and for what purpose. The heteronormative absolute is questioned and found to be fundamentally questionable."

SECOND SONG: Hay Hay Wasiye.

Oh my friend, my lover is tormenting me!

Oh my friend, my lover is made my cry!

He made me cry

He tormented me,

He made by laugh

I searched for him in borders and mountains.

Searched in more borders

Searched in more borders

My dear friend, he made me melt like snow

Oh my friend, my lover is tormenting me!

My dear friend, he made me melt like snow,

They left making me laugh,

They left making me cry,
Oh my friend, my lover is tormenting me!
They left making me laugh,
They left making me cry,
Oh my friend, he made me cry like rain,
Oh my friend, my lover is tormenting me! mom is not agreeing to it,
Dad dad is not agreeing it,
Dad is not agreeing,
Dad is not agreeing,
Oh my friend, your shyness killed me,
Oh my friend, my lover is tormenting me!
He made me cry
He tormented me,
He made by laugh
Brother is not agreeing,
Sister is not agreeing
Sister is not agreeing
Sister is not agreeing
Oh my friend, your loved killed me
Oh my friend, my lover is tormenting me!
Paternal uncle is not agreeing,
Paternal aunt is not agreeing,
Oh my love, your distance killed me,
Oh my friend, my lover is tormenting me!
He made me cry

He tormented me,

He made by laugh

This song is a melancholic account of a transgender person talking to her friend about the pain and suffering her lover inflicted upon her while making her laugh, cry, and suffer all at once. She then talks about her expedition to mountains and borders in pursuit of her lover. The song recurrently uses the word "mountain," symbolizing the ties of folk songs with the physicality of the valley. The word "border" suggests the metaphorical border caused due to political turmoil and social uprisings of the contested territory, again becoming a hindrance in her way. Delving deeper into the account of her misery, she conveys how helplessness and grief of her lover's separation has resulted in her melting like snow and crying like rain. An interesting commentary is made when she hints at the patriarchal fabric of Kashmir, as she talks about her familial opposition to her relationship with her lover. Additionally, she mentions her dad twice after the

first mention, hinting at a society where men control the ways society works. Furthermore, she also talks about her paternal aunt and paternal uncle being against it, again a reference to the unimaginable power the singer's dad's family holds in comparison to her maternal side, an oblique hint at the power dynamics of Kashmiri homes. She then talks about the distance with her beloved causing her untold misery. The word "distance" here is emblematic of "distance" caused due to entrenched social norms. While singing, the transgenders twirl their bodies and weaponize their marginality as someone outside the realm of gender roles, doing ostentatious bodily moves that a Kashmiri cisgender woman would, while also encouraging the bride to do so to proclaim her sexual self-confidence and push the boundaries of respectability. What comes blazing through is the fact that women in the audience sing alongside the singer, vocalizing the same beliefs that are imposed on them. This underscores a close relationship between trans rights and women's rights, where limiting freedom for trans people worsens conditions for all women by re-entrenching the very gender stereotypes that have underpinned centuries of women's oppression. It's quite similar to the West, where queer activists like Angela Davis and Brenda Howard have been at the vanguard of feminist movements, establishing a deep relationship between cisgender women and LGBT folks, both of whom have fallen prey to patriarchy."

DIGITAL FOLKLORE:A BLESSING IN DISGUISE:

In the wedding song, stories about transgender desire for companionship are told through music and movement while speaking to the gender system, its hierarchies and its limitations from overlapping standpoints..Transgens songs uploaded on YouTube have generated a sense of compassion and increased awareness regarding trans identity transnationality offering them some validation from the dominant society. These songs also affirm the sense of community through cultural enactments . They push convention through unabashed and unapologetic joy of public flirtation with multiple partners as they state at the audience with wrinkled eyes and receive welcoming smiles and movements forbidden in everyday life.As the wedding singers get engrossed in their performances they start to realize that they are in a communal space outside the mundane common experience giving rise to the concept of "communitas". Richard Bauman²¹ , Martha. C. Sims and Martine Stephens explain that this alteration in opinion, instigated through "markers" hints to audience that they are outside the realm of "normative time", and are dwelling into "queer" temporality in which the performers ability to influence fragments the normative hierarchies. According to Bauman, when the performers asserts domination this way, the scope for transformation of social structure becomes available, opening plethora of imaginative opportunities for quantifiable change.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, wedding songs and music have expressed a crucial tool for the expression of love,longing and desire of trans identities for a partner in the patriarchal heteronormative society of Kashmir through unique negotiation of conventional transient spaces for continuous engagement with indigenous and global audiences. They have offered artistic intervention that can act as a catalyst for the transformation of systematically oppressive social structures and, more importantly, a vision of what society can look like when transgender are free to express themselves.

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