

Hitting the Right Note: Shubha Mudgal's Stories

Bandana Chakrabarty

Former Joint Director (Academic),
Commissionerate of College Education, Rajasthan, Jaipur
Email: bandana.chakrabarty@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The present paper "Hitting the Right Note: Shubha Mudgal's Stories" explores a few stories written by Shubha Mudgal, a renowned name and a versatile Hindustani classical artist. The stories are of course about music and musicians but also about misadventure as the title of the book mentions. Mudgal writes perceptive stories on themes related to music because she has first-hand knowledge and knows the ins and outs of the music world. The paper analyses how Mudgal has made use of satire in these stories where music becomes a means to gain fame, money, and recognition. It also discusses how Indian classical music has undergone a drastic transformation due to globalisation and commercialisation.

KEYWORDS

Music, globalisation, satire, musicians, commercialisation

Like a tumultuous river, Indian classical music has gathered different influences along the way and merged them into the flow. (The Music Room)¹

One of the most popular and versatile Hindustani classical singers of the newer generation, a Padma Shri awardee, Shubha Mudgal has added a new book *Looking for Miss Sargam: Stories of Music and Misadventure* (2019) to the already burgeoning repertoire of recent Indian writing in English (both fiction and non-fiction) about music and musical traditions. For instance, *Small Remedies* by Shashi Deshpande (2000), *The Music Room* by Namita Devidayal (2005), *The Immortals* by Amit Chaudhuri (2009), *Heart to Heart: Remembering Nainaji* by Vidya Rao (2011), *Poignant Song : The Life and Music of Lakshmi Shankar* by Kavita Das (2019) and many more². Shubha Mudgal, a

multi-faceted artiste is a true pathbreaker because of her courage to experiment with various forms of music and her willingness to speak unhesitatingly about the hypocrisy attached to the patronage of classical arts.

Mark Twain had once said, "Write what you know." This is exactly what Shubha Mudgal has done --- She has written seven stories of music and misadventure because she knows the ins and outs of the Indian classical music world, its eccentricities, its rivalries, its foibles, the obsession with artistic integrity. Her protagonists are all classical musicians wrestling with the complications of a world that assesses the fruits of their dedication to music and art but is too insensitive to appreciate the effort.

The paper attempts to explore how Mudgal uses satire in these short stories

where music simply becomes an accessory or specific way of making money in the musicians' lives. Earlier people did 'riyaz' (rigorous practice) for years together to reach a certain stage but now everyone wants to be an instant musician like the two-minute noodles without making much effort. Satire is the use of humour, irony, exaggeration or ridicule to expose and criticize people's follies or vices particularly in the area of contemporary politics or other issues. Mudgal has used satire in these stories to produce laughter. She is not bitter in her portrayal of the artistes of the present era. Rather she has provided a humorous perspective to the stories while ridiculing the present scenario of the classical music world.

Music has always been an important part of human life and has been an expression of human emotions through which we are defined. Earlier music was accessible to the cultured elite but since globalization music has become accessible to people in society and due to technological advancements music has become an industry capitalizing on emotions. There has been a rapid transformation since the 1990s in the manner that Indian classical music is disseminated, learnt and experienced. This has happened to a large extent because of globalization and its result –commercialisation and technological advancement. Many artistes have benefitted from such transformations as they are now able to reach out to a wider audience though sometimes the quality suffers.

In an article in *The Hindu* (2011) Mudgal wrote, 'Performing arts in India and its practitioners are today referred to most commonly as being part of the 'entertainment industry.' This may seem innocuous enough to some, but the usage of the term and its passive acceptance in most circles definitely indicate a paradigm shift in the manner in

which the arts are viewed by society at large. That today the arts must entertain and amuse in the manner defined by showbiz and that they must form part of an organized industry.'

The first story 'Aman Bol' is based on the *Aman ki Asha* programme which began as a peace initiative between the two countries -- India and Pakistan. The Jang Group of Newspapers from Pakistan and the Indian Times of India Group launched the Aman ki Asha project in 2008. Jasbir Jain writes, "Aman ki Asha project went ahead to organize mushairas, debates and other cultural dialogues and literary bodies like FOSWAL (Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature), in line with the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) objectives organized literary and folk festivals on both sides of the borders."

In 'Aman Bol', the Organiser of the grand show, the Vice_President of a major media company, Shweta Bansal, who also owned the most prestigious and currently the most successful daily : *The New New Times* (TN2T) published from fifty-one cities simultaneously has roped in two singers from India and Pakistan for this magnanimous show. Sikandar Sufi, earlier Sikandar Liddar who wore 'brightly coloured bhangra costumes in satin (11) but on his journey from Moga in Punjab to Mumbai Sikandar had 'discarded the satin and the surname' (12). Here was a metrosexual mystic musician with designer stubble, kaajal-lined eyes and sweeping tresses styled and blow-dried to perfection (12). From the other end, Hayat Ali from Pakistan was to perform. The whole concert is hyped up with 'videos and promos for the event in all possible formats emerged with unrelenting regularity on tv, in print, on radio and social media' (21).

The managers of the two artistes

have greater egos. At the press conference of the artistes, Shweta invites everyone to come for the concert 'because Aman Bol will make history' (32). When the two voices made an exquisite start, Shweta saw that Hayat Ali was gradually 'taking over the concert' (35). She had seen that Sunny, Sikandar's manager had bribed the sound engineer before the concert and soon the 'concert began to collapse' (36). The story ends in a fiasco with Sikandar's Manager saying, 'Amaan-shaman...saadi zindgi vich te neyi (Peace-veace...Not in our lifetime)' (37).

Indian classical music in the present times has undergone different phases of transformations and transitions. Samidha Vedakala writes, 'In the world of globalization with the course of economic flexibility and advancement of technology, society has undergone visible phases of change. Incorporation of western values, ideas, technologies and institutions have changed the core values of culture introducing an era of commodification of almost every aspect of human life and so Culture and music too'

The very opening of 'Foreign Returned' another story, reminds the readers that all will not be well. Asavari Apte, Hindustani classical vocalist and teacher from Pune had longed to bag a 'foreign tour.' Though she was an Indian classical artiste of great calibre yet she had moved only between Delhi, Kolkata, Lucknow and Udaipur. She always longed for a foreign visit where she could perform Hindustani classical music. Asavari Apte finally gets to go for the US tour, the first foreign tour in her life with the help of one Upendra Oak, 'a young and talented Pune-based table-player who was steadily gaining popularity among vocalists in India ...and in equal measure, for his ability to organize and manage overseas concert tours for the vocalists he accompanied' (48). At

first Asavari is dumbstruck how 'this chit of a fellow could even think of a USA tour' (49). For decades, Asavari Apte had dreamt of this moment and now...this young fellow was saying he could make it happen just like that, 'she decided to tread cautiously' (50).

Asavari is in complete shock when she learns that the young boy had using his guruji's contacts in the US manipulated themselves into being invited to the US for a music tour. Asavari was shocked to learn the entire story which was like 'pulling the rug under your guru's feet' (52). For two weeks, the tour had been fairly good 'despite her having to live with complete strangers in a completely unfamiliar environment, in a basement room that sometimes made her claustrophobic' ((61).

For Asavari, 'Classical music was sacred' (69) something to be revered but in the US she finds it strange that after a recital at the hostess' house, Asavari saw some music lovers withdraw dollar bills from their pockets and some even dug into their pockets for some coins and dropped them into the fish bowl' (67). Asavari is deeply humiliated and feels that she had never imagined that it would be like 'singing and begging in the streets' (67). She wonders whether this was truth about 'foreign' tours that everyone talks about ?

Asavari's foreign tour ends in a debacle when she has to return to India all of a sudden, all by herself as Upendra Oak and his two musicians had been arrested in Houston for carrying marijuana in his pocket (70). She listens to this news disbelievingly as she does not even possess enough money to purchase a return ticket. The only saving grace were her visa and passport which she had with herself and was able to reach Pune safely. She would never forget her 'foreign' tour.

'Taan-Kaptaan' is a story based on tv music programmes like the popular 'Indian Idol,' 'Sa Re Ga Ma 'and 'Chhote Ustad.' When a small-town music teacher, Vikas Saxena and a big-city businessman, Ramesh Gupta, team up for India's best new classical talent show and dream of making a few crores in the process, the end result is a catastrophe. Mr. Ramesh Gupta is so shrewd that before the actual proceedings of the programme begin, he already pays the initial fifty-one thousand rupees to Mr. Saxena and his wife keeping them in good humour but whenever the talk of the contract comes up between the two, Mr. Gupta conveniently forgets the episode.

There is also disagreement between the two regarding naming the competition. Mr. Saxena, the idealistic music teacher wanted names like Sur Sewa, Sur Sadhna, Raag Rang which were immediately rejected by Mr. Gupta (87) whereas he wanted to show that these days 'classical music is also rocking'(87) and came up with a silly name such as 'Raagon ka Rasiya'and the quarrel of the two over the name of the contest continued. Soon they decided on the name 'Taan-Kaptan' and both Saxena and Gupta finally agreed upon it.

The project started gaining momentum and 'hoardings appeared in Meerut, Delhi, Lucknow and neighbouring cities' (91). Soon promoters are required to promote the event and Mudgal rightfully says,'Although the marketing managers of most business had no taste for classical music, and saw Gupta and his project as a lot of a nuisance, some of them found the 'heritage' aspect of the project a good fit for their products and marketing strategies' (92). Finally having collected over 'a crore and twelve lakhs of rupees'(99) Gupta had fled the scene without informing Saxenaji. Mrs. Saxena's fears had come true...'Gupta was a

conman who had bolted with all the money he had managed to collect for the show, and now they would have to face the music'(101).For no wrongdoing of his own and having tried to participate in doing his bit for classical music, Mr. Vikas Saxena lands up in jail.

The status of music has changed over the years. Once considered so 'powerful' it has now deteriorated to a product to be enjoyed momentarily. As Miranda Wangiy states, 'The prevalence of the worship of superficial enjoyment is creating ignorance among people, commercialization is the culprit.' The avenues for performances have increased, the number of music centres has increased both in cities and small towns but the kind of music teaching and learning is denigrating. The guru-shishya parampara or the seena-ba-seena tradition of learning and teaching music is dying out. An artiste has to compete in this emerging economic scenario. Now music is being tutored either once or twice a week or students attend online classes, hence the approach of the artistes as well as the audience or students too has changed. Mudgal's book of short stories hardly has happy endings; instead they are 'realistic accounts of classical musicians of our times, says Mallik Thatipalli.

Globalisation brought about certain positive changes in the Indian nation like rapid transportation facilities, greater number of jobs, more choice to consumers in selection of goods etc. but it influenced Indian art and social customs unfavourably. 'Saleability' became a pivotal element of assessment. Even in Amit Chaudhuri's novel *The Immortals* (2009) Mallika Sengupta starts learning music from Shyam Lalji in the hope of becoming a recording artiste. She never strove for a career in music but her love for music was more than the nonchalant hobby of a woman living a luxurious life.

Mallika had wanted recognition... but she hadn't wanted to dirty her hands in the music world; she'd wanted to preserve the prestige of being at once an artist and the wife of a successful executive (68).

Shubha Mudgal is a popular Hindustani classical singer who started her career in the 1980s and has experimented with other forms of music including pop and fusion, hence her repertoire covers a wide range of the world of showbiz and its highs and lows. In her stories possessing talent is no guarantee of the 'meteoric rise' of the career graph of any musician. Manzoor Rahmati, the eponymous hero, was one of the most popular harmonium players in the capital city of Delhi and on reaching Bade Khan Saheb's house he orders the maid servant 'to make him some tea with lots of milk and plenty of sugar' (133). But even after fifteen minutes of waiting there was 'no sign of either the maid or the residents of the mansion'(133).His only ambition in life was to be nominated for a Padma award and thus his 'life's mission would be accomplished' (143).

Music artistes are under constant pressure because of commercialization and globalization. Some of them feel that they have to sell themselves or their talent in order to make a name for themselves in the music industry. Rahmati is a 'khandani' musician who had played the harmonium with several reputed singers. He also owned rare music *bandishes* (compositions) which were given to him as legacy by his father. But he gives them away Bade Khan Saheb in the hope of being honoured with

a Padma award. Rehmati is ready to share the fiercely guarded musical heirlooms he inherited from his father to get a Padma award. For a musician such compositions were treasures never to be given away to someone outside the family. In *The Music Room*, Namita Devidayal writes, 'Marriages were strategically arranged in those days that music did not go out of known territory' (146). She also says that daughters in the house learnt music by default. They were never officially trained or tutored but picked up knowledge by 'being a fly on the wall or a wife in the next room'(146).This was the reason daughters were never taught music in traditional homes because they would get married and would be disclosing their wealth of music to a rival home after marriage.

Rehmati's tireless pursuit leads him to his downfall and death. The saddest sentence in the story is the final sentence,'Manzoor Ahmad Sahahabadi's name did not feature in the list of awardees'(147).The title of the collection, *Looking for Miss Sargam* is satirical as well as humorous. Each musical artiste in this world is trying to find a place for himself or herself and they are also looking for the right notes (seven swaras – sargam) of music in this world which has lost its authentic music. On being asked what was the impetus for Mudgal to write *Looking for Miss Sargam* she replied that she had been writing about Indian music for a fair while now. For over a decade, she wrote a column on music for the 'Lounge' section of *Mint*. She has also written occasional articles for various journals and publications almost always on music.

Notes:

¹ *The Music Room* (2008) by Namita Devidayal is a biography of her guru Dhondutai Kulkarni.

² Some of the other books about music and musicians (both fiction and non-fiction) are *Song Sung True* trans. By Saleem Kidwai (2003), *Raga 'N' Josh: Stories from a Musical Life* by Sheila Dhar (2005), *Ae Mohabbat: Reminiscing Begum Akhtar* by Rita Ganguly (2008), *The Silent Raga* by Ameen Merchant (2010), *My Name is*

Gauhar Jaan : Life and Times of a Musician by Vikram Sampath (2010), A Monsoon of Music by Mitra Phukan (2011), On the Wings of Music : A Book of Journeys by Shantanu Moitra and Aruna Chakravarty (2014).

WORKS CITED

Chaudhuri, Amit. The Immortals. Picador: India, 2010.

Devidayal, Namita. The Music Room. Noida: Random House, 2008.

Jain, Jasbir. 'Aman ki Asha: Initiatives for Peace and Narratives of Healing in The Sub-continent' Classiques Garnier, Paris, 2017 pp 391-404.

Mudgal, Shubha. Qtd. In Samidha Vedabala's article 'Indian Classical Music in a Globalised World.' Sangeet Galaxy. Vol.5, Issue 1. (Jan.2016) pp3-9.

Mudgal Shubha. Looking for Miss Sargam: Stories of Music and Misadventure. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2019.

Thatipalli, Mallik. Living News. 'Shubha Mudgal on her debut work of fiction, Looking for Miss Sargam, and the real-life inspirations behind it. August 10, 2019.

Vedabala, Samidha. 'Indian Classical Music in a Globalised World.' Sangeet Galaxy. Vol.5, Issue 1 (Jan. 2016) pp3-9.

Wangjy, Miranda. 'How Commercialisation Ruins Music' Teentalk. Feb.26, 2016.

Dr. Bandana Chakrabarty is Former Joint- Director (Academic) in the commissionerate of College Education, Rajasthan, Jaipur. Has taught English for more than 37 years in various Government colleges of Rajasthan. She has presented papers in National and International Conferences in India and abroad. President of ELT@I Rajasthan: Jaipur Chapter, she has been instrumental in organising several Workshops and Conferences.