Samyukta: A Journal of Gender and Culture
Vol. 3, No. 2, July 2018

Poetry for The People: The Counter-Cultural Significance of Malayalam Rap

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Abstract: Rap music, a sub-genre of Hip-Hop music, that evolved out of the African American community in The United States of America during the late 1970s, is a musical genre that has spread its influence across the globe, including India and specifically in the State of Kerala. But how does such a complex and youthfully vigorous art form fit into the specific socio-political and cultural contexts of Kerala? This dissertation attempts to trace the comparatively short but bustling history of the rise of Malayalam Rap, in order establish the place it occupies today, with regards to both the wider context of Hip-Hop culture, as well as the narrower but equally important contexts of its birthplace, Kerala.

Essentially, going against the grain of conventional art, Malayalam rap and its practitioners have ushered in an independent art form, adopted from the West and reshaped to fit the needs of Kerala's culture.The focus is on the literary, artistic and technical aspects of Malayalam rap, in an attempt to legitimize it as a modern, radical form of poetry and to refute certain misconceptions about rap and Hip-hop as a culture that has infamously garnered a bad reputation. The dissertation argues that Malayalam Rap music is a more accessible form of poetry, which has become apopular platform thatvoices the voiceless, the historically silenced classes, and flourishes as an independent counter-culture that opposes and does not fear the threats of commercialization.

Key Words: Rap, Hip-Hop, Malayalam Rap, Counterculture, Poetry, Music

Music is functional in nature as it promotes human well-being through disposition, and by socially propagating ideas, information and emotions. We came quite easily, one might surmise, to the cephalic state of enjoying music for itself, its endless diverse expression of sound, and to realizing that it was within our power to self-generate it. On his many

voyages, Charles Darwin spent quite a bit of time studying the phenomenon of song, specifically because of its evolutionary and historical significance. Evolutionary evidence over a wide range of cultural groups reveals diversity of song and instrument, yet gaps and speculative considerations still remain: some cultures sing a lot, some sing a little less, but most do sing. Music's ties to our ancestry are undeniable and evident.

The impassioned orator, bard, or musician, when with his varied tones and cadences he excites the strongest emotions in his hearers, little suspects that he uses the same means by which, at an extremely remote period, his half-human ancestors aroused each other's ardent passions, during their mutual courtship and rivalry. (Darwin 337)

However, in order totrace the roots of a specific genre of music better, it is best to begin within the bounds of the socio-cultural factors that provided the stimuli for its inception and growth, rather than travel back to the beginning of man itself. While music itself has a long, complex and intertwined history, the beginnings of modern genres of music are heavily contextualized within their identifiably precise time periods and cultural prerequisites.

On August 11, 1973, a back-to-school party raged on in Sedgwick Avenue, in the Bronx, New York City. Clive Campbell, alias DJ Kool Herc noticed that the dancers seemed to love the percussive breaks in the funk and soul music he was playing and decided to experiment. Using two turn tables, he isolated and extended that small drum break in the record. Owing to his Jamaican ancestry, Campbell knew the common practice in Dub music of speaking over a record and he used his mic to urge dancers on during the repeating beats, a practice that was already in vogue at the time. This, they say, is how the seeds of Hip-Hop were sown. The extended beat became The Break, and the boys and girls who danced to those beats became Break dancers, the B-boys and B-girls of today. And of course, the rhythmic talking over the beat became rap. Soon, these "hip-hoppers" – the Disk Jockeys, rappers or the Emcees/MCs (Master of Ceremonies), dancers and graffiti artists – became the forerunners of a cultural and artistic revolution that would spread across the globe. This is the story of how a backstreet party changed the world.

Those who gave Hip-Hop life were predominantly, if not completely African-Americans who, at the time, found themselves bankrupt, unemployed and exposed to a worsening drug problem and extreme cases of violence. Hip-Hop guided people and showed them a new way of life.But when more and more people began to be drawn into it, Hip-Hop was quickly consumed into mainstream culture, rapidly gaining audiences and then spreading its

influence to other nations. With commercial success on radio and television, inner city Hip-Hop music in America began to lose the "counter-culture" tag.Today, Rap Music and Hip-Hop culture have become an irrefutable part of Western cultural history and flourishes as a billion-dollar industry, spreading its wings of influence and inspiration across the globe.

Rapping, also known variously as Rhyming, Spitting, Emceeing or MCing is a musical form of vocal delivery that incorporates rhythmic speech, and street vernacular. It is usually performed or delivered over a backing beat produced by a DJ or turntablist. As an art form, rap stylistically occupies the gray areabetween speech, prose, poetry, and singing and is much more musically complex than meets the eye. It is a complex assortment where the content or what is being said, is as significant as how it is said, using rhymes, rhythmic patterns, delivery styles, cadences and tones.The earliest precursor to the modern rap can be traced to the West African griot tradition. Griots are "oral historians", or "praise-singers", who served as respected advisors to rulers, as tutors for princes, and as diplomats in delicate negotiations (Hale 250). They would disseminate oral traditions and genealogies, or use their formidable rhetorical techniques for gossip or to praise or critique individuals.

Hence, rap music, a term used interchangeably with Hip-Hop music today has its roots firmly set into West African history, which also incidentally, inspired Blues and Jazz music, to the evolution of which rap bears a striking resemblance, both stylistically and formally. This warrants the question of how and why rap music, so intrinsically connected to a culture and its people, found far reaching resonance in the diverse cultures of the world. The primary objective of this dissertation then, is to trace how rap, as an art form and a cultural phenomenon, translates to music in other languages, specifically Malayalam and to understand why young men and women from India and particularly the state of Kerala have seemingly found their voice in a thoroughly Western musical form. The study also looks at how Malayalam rap music upholds the authentic counter-cultural values professed by the 'OGs', the original artists, creators and practitioners of Hip-Hop in the Bronx, at two distinct levels– what is said and how it is being said.

Hip-Hop originated as a tale of youth expression in the inner-city ghettos of the Bronx that went ahead to gain widespread commercial success. In India, Hip-Hop has put itself in reverse gear – from the commercial to the streets. A new era of Underground rappers in India, from various cultures, singing in multiple vernaculars, trying to make Hip-Hop their own, has revolutionized the way we look at Hip-Hop. From the gullies of Mumbai to the foothills of Kashmir, rapping has broken ground in India in fine fashion. They talk about

their own lives – who they are, where they come from and what they are about.What's more, they are making Hip-Hop their own. Hip-Hop is finally going 'Desi' and it seems for the best. Underground rappers sing about pride, family, sustenance, survival, poverty, violence, social inequalities and injustices but they do so in their own vernaculars – Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, Khasi, Malayalam and more.

The first authentic voices in the history of Malayalam rap were heard in 1999, and came from a ragtag crew of young men from different walks of Kerala, RJV "Pakarcha Vyadhi" Ernesto, Haris "Mappla" Salim, Amjad "Azuran" Nadeem and Abhimanyu "Earthgrime" Raman. Initially drawing inspiration from and experimenting with Spoken Word and Slam poetry, the group quickly found a mutual passion in Rap music. Along with a couple of music producers like Vivek "V3K" Radhakrishnan, who directly adopted music from Western Hip-Hop to create 'Alternative' styled Hip-Hop beats that blended folk, ambient, glitch, bass, R&B, jazz, grime and soul music, they formed what would become the first Hip-Hop collective from Kerala, 'Street Academics'.

From making pause-tapes with cassettes, scissors, blades & cello tapes, to producing studio quality music with synthesizers, turntables and orchestral instruments, Street Academics is still going strong today, decades later with the same dynamic energy and social awareness that inspired countless artists who followed in their footsteps. Moreover, they are leading the avant-garde of Malayalam rap, showing how rap can be used as a tool to inspire critical thinking, about social issues that profoundly affects life in Kerala. Known for using a mix of Malayalam, Tamil and English lyrics, Street Academics was responsible for creating the blueprint of Malayalam rap and they continue to reinvent themselves through experimentation and calculated risks.

An experimental genre at the time of its inception, and the decade that followed, quite obviously no music producer working in the film industry would seriously have considered Hip-Hop as having any popular appeal. The lyrics, usually a blend of Malayalam and English, that often were meant to sound either intimidating or by contrast, comical, would hardly be readily welcomed by the average listener. The need of the hour was platforms that would give artists the opportunity to showcase their music and slowly, but surely gain an audience that would appreciate and take their art seriously. Cue the rise of the internet, followed by people with similar interests finding each other on social media; much like how Street Academics initially shared their music on platforms like Myspace and Orkut and surely many other lesser known artists who had only happened upon the world of Hip-Hop at the time.

Perhaps the biggest internet event that would shape the future of independent music in Kerala, and in fact around the world, was the launch of YouTube in 2005, which would go on to become the single largest video-sharing platform on the internet. Followed by audio-sharing and streaming services like SoundCloud, YouTube became the perfect space for new Hip-Hop artists to publish their music, not only because it was free and didn't require the backing or production of a music label, but also due to the fact that certain features of the platform like self-embedding and recommendation of similar videos allowed audiences to find their work easily; no-cost accessibility was the order of the day.

The present decade has undoubtedly been the most fruitful for Underground Malayalam rap music. "Underground' can have a number of contextual meanings, but generally any non-commercial rap song, music video, album, EP (Extended Play), LP (Long Play), Rap Cypher or Mixtape by a Malayali artist that stays true to its Western roots by 'keeping it real' is considered a part of the Kerala Hip-Hop Underground.Malayalam rap today, even though still finding its footing, seems to have established itself as a growing industry of countless possibilities, with talented artists worthy of national and international recognition.As even a surface level analysis of songs and lyrics would show, rappers from Kerala have succeeded in molding the Malayalam language, infamous for its rigidness and semantic complexity, in order to completely adopt rap techniques to fit their expressive requirements.

One such Malayalam rapper, one of the first to 'go viral' on YouTube and hit the radar of the general public, is Febin 'Fejo' Joseph, a native of Vytilla , Kochi. Fejo has had a long and tedious journey in rap, from his first music video appearing on his YouTube Channel on July 2nd, 2011.Fejo, however, is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Malayalam rap today. Perhaps the most interesting detail is the diversity of rappers from Kerala, each of whom has established their own style of rapping, their unique identity, that visibly sets them apart from the rest. So while Fejo sticks to compact, precise lyrics and catchy melodies that often address personal struggles and social conflicts that he has witnessed first-hand, Vishnu 'ThirumaLi' M. S. is all about lyrical word play and a mixture of harsh criticism for the worst of Kerala and a unerring nostalgia for its best. When Street Academics goes symbolic and surreal with their music, Rameez 'RZee' Musthafa is grounded but quick with his words, flowing through rhymes with the ease of a master. Non-Resident Indian rappers from Kerala like Abhijith 'A.B.I' Gopinath and Sarath 'Nomadic Voice' Sasidharan give voice to the struggles of the common Malayali, with motivational and strongly phrased lyrics and their own experiences of leaving home in search of purpose

and profession, using a blend of Malayalam with other languages that they have encountered outside Kerala. While their foreign accents become part of their storytelling and their narratives, others like the well-experienced Marthyan colors their music with various local accents, sticking to pure Malayalam to get their message across. And then there are the clarion calls, the call-to-actions, the definitive statements of truth and the expressions of freedom that become staples of their music for many other revolutionary rappers. As interesting as the stage names and personas they adopt, are the complex narrative yarns that they thread through Hip-Hop, which seems to be poised perfectly to meet the aesthetic needs of a starving Kerala audience, and in the process, open their eyes to 'the real'.

Richard Shusterman's article, "The Fine Art of Rap", from a 1991 edition of the New Literary History journal begins thus – "in the view of both the culturally elite and the so-called general public, rap music lurks in the underworld of aesthetic respectability" (613). It accurately captures the mainstream attitudes that one might find towards rap lyricism. Even the ardent listeners of rap might be inclined to hold the same opinion, often seeing such music as just something to blast at full volume. Much of this is owed to the bland, diluted and commercialized forms of the art that is culturally encouraged and popularized. Rap music is either deemed unworthy of literary analysis by academic aestheticians or even worse, seen as some random conglomeration of raunchy, repetitive, crude and simple-minded ideas, intended simply for entertaining the general public. Yet rap is a postmodern popular art which challenges some of our most deeply entrenched aesthetic conventions, conventions which are common to the artistic style and ideology of modernity, that haunts artistic expression, even today.

The same holds true for Malayalam rap, perhaps even more so because it is a new genre, trying to establish itself in an extremely conventional society that finds it necessary to question anything out of the ordinary. The struggle faced by rap music seems to be against traditionally accepted standards of music and poetry, that by all accounts bears the mark of the elite. But informed and sympathetic close reading will reveal in many rap songs, not only the cleverly potent vernacular expression of keen insights but also forms of linguistic subtlety and multiple levels of meaning that can sometimes rival this so-called "high-art". Its insistent breaking of conventions itself becomes its identity. Hence, turning that into a reason for disregarding its lyrical quality destroys all reason as to how it came to be in the first place. Rap was born as poetry, and remains to stay so, but only to those who actively open themselves up to it.

Figurative language and poetic devices have found a new home in rap lyrics. Over the past forty years, no other genre of popular lyric has done more to explore this figurative imperative than the language of Rap. By lifting what Shelley calls "the veil of familiarity" from the world, poetry renders the familiar unfamiliar, newly charged with wonder and mystery. Rhetorical figures and forms are perhaps the poet's most potent tools for awakening and enlarging the mind. When it comes to theatrics and humor, there is never a dull moment. Irony and puns flourish, and so do sly jabs and explicit jokes. But such direct use of language and dry humor is as much a part of rap lyricism as the more heartfelt personal expressions and cultural commentary. Many such examples abound, but reading lyrics as poetry can create some familiar limitations. The melody is often privileged over the poetics of the line or stanza, repetition is often employed for musical concerns rather than poetic concerns, and rhymes are often designed to be memorable after one listen rather than to be complex. Certainly there are song lyrics that may not hold up under the microscope of scansion and close reading, but in general, Malayalam rap lyrics and songwriters are better off under the rigor of literary analysis than most other musical genres.

A 2014 study conducted by Musixmatch looked at 25 different genres to identify which boasted the largest vocabulary in music. Unsurprisingly, Hip-Hop rap topped the charts with 478 unique words per song, with the next in line being Pop music with only 302 words. Rap songs are lyrically dense, averaging a vocabulary size of 1963 words per song (Jewalikar, Verma). Our primary means of communication is the word and it is rap's efficiency with words that allows it to be the perfect vehicle for addressing a varied range of subjects through its unique storytelling capabilities. When it comes to socio-political, cultural and even religious commentary, Malayalam rap leaves no stone unturned. Artists make no attempt to hold back their feelings, which is part of what makes it so compelling. Rap originated as a form of resistance and rebellion through art. This open-hearted voicing of personal and public opinions, symbolic of the demographics that they represent places an unprecedented responsibility on these artists.

For instance, the influence of the radical lyricism of Street Academics has found a place in the socially-aware and religiously toned projects of the collective, Mappila Lahala. In collaboration with Haris Salim of Street Academics and popular Malayalam Actor Mammukoya, they produced two songs, "Native Bapa" and a sequel, "Funeral of a Native Son". Rendering a specifically local prose dialect into rap lyricism, blended with English lyrics, both songs verge on the thin line between spoken word and rap. In order to understand the narratives of the project, the historical and contemporary constructions of

Muslim identity in Malabar region of Kerala needs to be understood.Overall, the journey of Mappila Muslims from colonial history to the present is a journey from a clearly subaltern position to that of a more powerful community, experiencing considerable educational and economic progress and political empowerment. Although the Muslims of Malabar are no more a subaltern community, stereotypes and stigmas surrounding their religious identity continue to persist in the public sphere even today, often in new forms.

The musical movement Mappila Lahala, even in their title, invokes the collective memory of the Mappila Rebellion of 1921, in an attempt to reclaim the historical misattribution of the term 'Lahala' that came to mean fanatic, lawless riots, as opposed to peasant revolts against the British rule and upper caste feudalism, which was a movement for independence. The songs attempt a semiotic reconstruction of the lasting stereotypes that constructs the 'Muslim' as a 'terrorist', which can be observed to have lineage in global Islamophobia.Layered with historical material the song is a temporal movement between the rebellious Muslim past signified in the very title of the musical movement, the nationalist past of the Muslim community, the nationwide crisis of secularism and state terror that stereotypes the Muslim community. In this sense, Mappila Lahala moves out of the realm of music into diverse forms of cultural and political speech and articulation.

Hip-Hop in the West, in the last two decades, has followed the path of commercialization. With the "discovery" of Hip-Hop artists by corporate record labels, rap music was stolen from its community, repackaged by money-minded businesspeople looking to create a wider appeal by erasing Hip-Hop's historic function, and sold back to the streets through marketing ploys such as music videos and Top-40 charts. By the end of the 20th century, Hip-Hop had become a business and rap music was a valuable commodity. Rap's commodification has not only alienated it from its roots, but also disenfranchised it as a form of resistance. If the condition of rap music in the West is any indication of the future of Malayalam rap, matters would seem grim. But authentic rap storytelling still survives in the inner-cities of America, as well as in many of its off-shoots across the world like Malayalam rap. This 'Underground' counter-cultural tendency of rap, though overshadowed by its mainstream counterpart, still thrives and has proved difficult to be written off.

Though rap music began in resistance to dominant ideology, the music industry has long since assimilated it. Mainstream Western rap, today, sadly has become one such factory line, churning out similar sounding, formulaic songs that mean nothing, and imply even less. Malayalam rap, however, still has hope.This hope lies in the spirit of rap embodied

by Malayali MCs. The music they make and the lyrics they so passionately pen and perform does not carry the ideology of an outsider, a music label or Multi-national companies. They are not aligned to political parties or socio-economic classes, because their aggression and frustration is taken out on injustice, irrespective of its source. There is no hidden agenda because they wear their hearts on their sleeves and their lyrics reveal everything they wish to say. It is made clear that what they rap about is their subjective feelings, opinions and emotions. Even though they might represent a certain community and voice their concerns, rap never instructs or preaches, but reveals things as they are. Ambiguity becomes, at best, a lyrical tool to showcase their talent but never veers into vague political speech. While some would argue that true Battle rap, where two MCs would go head to head, is a dying art, its principles that preach direct addressal, confrontation through the mightiest weapon – the word, and forbids withholding of both emotions and truth, is still alive in Malayalam rap.

Istvan Molnar-Szakacs, a research neuroscientist at the University of California, has explored how music "creates the sense of social belonging," as he writes in a 2015 paper, "Please Don't Stop the Music", a fitting title to the circumstances we find ourselves in. As authoritarian politics gain footholds across the world, with intolerance, discrimination and violence in the name of religion, gender, race and class becoming too stark a reality, we are in need, now more than ever, of movements like Malayalam rap that uphold liberal inclusion and critical thinking. It becomes an avenue of art that while reaching millions of people, for once does not include corporate agenda or compromises on quality in the name of marketability, but instead becomes the voice of the voiceless, singing stories that matter.

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