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TUNERS OF SOULS: MUSIC GURUS AND REBEL DISCIPLES  
IN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY INDIAN ENGLISH LITERATURE

by

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Professor Brent Hayes Edwards

and approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Tuners of Souls: Music Gurus and Rebel Disciples

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by SONALI BARUA

Professor Brent Hayes Edwards

This dissertation examines 20<sup>th</sup> and very early 21<sup>st</sup> century Indian English writing that thematizes music and musicians. I argue that Indian English authors who engage with the question of music write in response to the phenomenon of guru worship both in India and abroad. The many works that turn to music in a bid to depict, defend, or as in some cases, turn away from Indian musical culture, present a complex range of reactions to guru worship and its consequences. Within these works, while the auto/biographical writing often tends to replicate older patterns and postures as part of the process of postcolonial cultural self-fashioning, the fiction attempts to break away from the rule of the guru to gesture towards more contemporary possibilities. My secondary argument relates to the much-debated question of whether or not Indian English fiction is relevant to the Indian reality. In this connection, I shall show how the deployment of themes and motifs from Indian music allows authors like Shashi Deshpande and Kiran Nagarkar to make meaningful contributions to current Indian discussions on religion, politics, gender, and class. Chapter 1 analyzes E.M.Forster's Indian works, Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, and the lectures of the *vina* maestro and Sufi teacher Inayat Khan, mapping the intersection of notions about Indian spiritual and musical gurus on the early 20<sup>th</sup> century international stage. In Chapter 2 I read a selection of musical novels and fictionalized

autobiographies in an attempt to understand the crucial roles of the *raga* music guru and of musical autobiography in the process of postcolonial self-fashioning. Chapter 3 deals with Indian authors' handling of western musical forms, specifically pop-rock by Salman Rushdie and art music by Vikram Seth. My emphasis is on the unique methods by which each author seeks to virtualize the role of the maestro/guru. Finally, my focus moves in Chapter 4 to *bhakti* or devotional music, its relation to Gandhian thought, and its use by Kiran Nagarkar in a project that attempts to outline a progressive version of Gandhism for 21<sup>st</sup> century India.

Dedicated to Baba, my father Prashant Kumar Barua,  
who hoped very much to see me get this degree

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## Introduction

In this dissertation I examine 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian English writing that thematizes music and musicians. I argue that Indian English authors who engage with the question of music write in response to the phenomenon of guru worship both in India and abroad. The many works that almost compulsively turn to music in a bid to depict, defend, or as in some cases, turn away from Indian musical culture, present a complex range of reactions to guru worship and its consequences. Within these works, while the auto/biographical writing often tends to replicate older patterns and postures as part of the process of postcolonial cultural self-fashioning, the fiction attempts to break away from the rule of the guru to gesture towards more contemporary possibilities. The secondary argument I will thus also make, in small in Chapter 2 and then more substantially in Chapter 4, relates to the much-debated question of whether or not Indian English fiction is relevant to the Indian reality. In this connection, I shall show how the deployment of themes and motifs from Indian music allows authors like Shashi Deshpande and Kiran Nagarkar to make meaningful contributions to current Indian discussions on religion, politics, gender, and class. I see my project in part as a response of a supplementary nature to the work of Srinivas Aravamudan, whose *Guru English* (2006) parses the language of the Indian spiritual guru. Chapter 1 thus examines works where musical and spiritual gurus come together in the same figures. My secondary argument is a response to interventions in the Indian English debate over the last decade by Meenakshi Mukherjee, Tabish Khair, Deepika Bahri and Priya Joshi.

The decade between 1995 and 2005 produced a spate of literary Indian English books on music: Salman Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and Vikram Seth's *An Equal*

*Music* (both 1999) and Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) were only the most prominent amongst them. For the first time in Indian English literature Kiran Nagarkar gave the *bhakti*<sup>1</sup> singer-saint complex and novel-length treatment in *The Cuckold* (1996), winning the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award for his efforts. Sheila Dhar published her memoir essays *Here's Someone I'd Like You To Meet* in 1995 and followed this up with the 'Cooking of Music' section in *Raga 'n Josh* (2005). Amit Chaudhuri had ventured his stylized *Afternoon Raga* nostalgia piece in 1993, and it is Chaudhuri who also came up with the most recent work in this quite remarkable group. His mature and confident 2009 auto/biographical novel *The Immortals*, a prosaic and realistic reworking of the previous version, is clearly the result of several years of revisiting the same musical period in his life. Meanwhile Namita Devidayal was researching and gestating her own auto/biographical offering, *The Music Room* (2007). The first question that prompted my readings towards this dissertation therefore was: what circumstances had provoked this quite unprecedented literary interest in music?

Perhaps this question had some obvious answers in the musical sphere. As Peter Manuel, Regula Qureshi, Vamsee Juluri, and other music and culture studies scholars and ethnomusicologists have shown us, the wonders of mechanical reproduction in the half century following independence in 1947 had transformed forever the once relatively unchanging face and function of Indian music. First low-cost cassettes in the '70s and '80s, and then low-cost CDs from the late '90s meant that music, especially religious and film music, had become big business. Large, profitable niche markets had also opened up for Hindustani (North Indian) and Carnatic (South Indian) raga music, now referred to as Indian classical music. Devotional genres as varied as the *qawwali*, the *naat*, the *kirtan*

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<sup>1</sup> *bhakti*: devotion or devotional.

and the *bhajan* were selling as never before. Internationally, Indian raga, devotional, and folk music had plugged themselves into lucrative and prestigious World Music networks, enjoying preeminence amongst New Age meditational and self-healing musical systems. Bollywood was going truly global, and Arjun Appadurai was the high priest of soundscapes. Another answer was to be found in the gradual maturing of Indian English: as a lingua-franca for the Indian middle and upper classes, as a hybrid literary language at which huge numbers of young and educated Indians were becoming increasingly adept, and as a medium of communication with a world suddenly interested in an ever more exoticized India and everything exotically Indian. That these two forms, Indian music and Indian English literature, coming into their own at around the same time and having displayed their market muscle, should converge at some point, was then hardly surprising.

But if globalization was the prime catalyst in this convergence, are the issues and themes to be found in these books related to globalization? Only in the one case, Rushdie's *The Ground*, which discusses music in its migratory aspects: hybridity/authenticity, appropriation by the west, and commodification/corporatization. Even Vikram Seth's *An Equal Music*, about English musicians in a classical string quartet, though it also moves away from India, plays itself out in certain limited spheres before limited audiences: homes, parks, and concert venues in London, Vienna, and Venice. One would imagine that a novel by someone of Seth's background could, even if it dealt with European art music, make reference to the larger world: the way in which, for example, western classical music has been taught and nurtured in the one-time colonies, the prestige that still attaches to it in many such non-western cultures, the

consequent global market for recorded work etc. But with the exception of a brief description of one Japanese student of the violin, meant primarily to convince us of her teacher's unspeakably dictatorial behavior rather than to draw attention to her as representative of a cultural phenomenon, the rest of the world hardly exists for the performers in Seth's novel or for the people around them. Other than Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raga*, the books that deal with raga music are, unsurprisingly, all set in India, with performers making a few trips abroad, trips that though sought after as measures of worldly/material success are also almost invariably depicted as misguided and opportunistic, as interruptions, often obstacles, to "true" musical development. Nor do western attitudes seem to be important other than in matters financial; the west is envisaged as the admiring and wistful audience for an ancient and glorious Indian art form, an audience of novices spiritual and musical, to whom unfamiliar and complicated concepts must be peeled down and explained in their simplest forms. Even as western fascination with ragas is accepted as logical and justified, western adulation of individual musicians is represented as something that must always be played down as distracting and possibly harmful; instead, attention is almost obsessively focused on the opinions of senior musicians/critics/discerning audiences in India as the appropriate indices of artistic achievement. Chaudhuri's unnamed student at Oxford learns to appreciate something of the new culture he finds himself in, but his book is a paean to the more fulfilling life of musical apprenticeship left behind at home in India. Nagarkar takes up a 16<sup>th</sup> century heroine few westerners outside academia will have heard of and writes about her with language and allusions that, brilliant though they may be, scarcely anybody outside India would completely grasp. Of the recent authors discussed, many non-Indian readers

outside India will of course have heard of Rushdie and Seth, a scattering - very likely all women - perhaps of Deshpande, some music eclectics and readers of global anglophone anthologies of Chaudhuri, and possibly the lone South Asian enthusiast in some literature department, of Nagarkar. What culture of writing or thinking about Indian music before them had made these authors write books, so many of them about Indian music, in English? What were the concerns common to all these Indian English books about music?

As I read and reread the earliest texts, and as new ones came to my attention, I began to realize that the big backdrop was not globalization, or at least, not just globalization. Because these are globalized times, all the books are, by definition, in lesser or greater measure about music in globalized times. The books are written for readers in this globalized time too. But the focus in all the texts is a more interior focus: not so much on music itself, or how it travels (though there is certainly that as well, particularly in Rushdie), but on questions of origin, on how we learn music, on instinctive and unconscious acquisition versus formal and other instruction, on what musical roots might mean, and, at some length, on the politics of musical pedagogy and the relationship with the teacher of music. Especially, there appeared to be a guiding preoccupation with the figure of the teacher, the music guru: who qualifies as a guru, how to negotiate or rebel against the traditionally quasi-divine status accorded to him in India, how to obtain or do without his mentorship, approval, and best teaching efforts, how to deserve or demand the gift of his knowledge, how to make adequate return in new and materialistic times, how to endure - or not - his tyrannical whims as a necessary aspect of musical development. It seemed logical to go back a bit in time and inspect early music gurus,

and particularly early gurus whose trajectories had taken them west, for it was these gurus who had a formative impact on how western readers thought about Indian music, and then in turn on how 20th century western-educated Indians, under (post)colonial influence, thought about it themselves. Here I found rich and rewarding material in the careers and writings of Rabindranath Tagore and the Sufi teacher Inayat Khan. As I read, I began to see that what drew Chaudhuri and other musician-writers like Dhar and Devidayal to the act of auto/biography was also precisely what had pushed Rushdie and Seth away from Indian music as a primary theme and towards other musics and other modes of thinking about the musical: the figure of the guru as the first and most crucial representative of ancient Indian musical tradition.

If this decade or so saw an efflorescence of Indian English writing about music, what were the models available to our authors? Present day Indian English writing looks towards three categories for inspiration: earlier writing in Indian English (not a very large corpus, all things considered), writing in Sanskrit and the vernaculars (too massive and varied to begin enumerating) and contemporary western writing, primarily British and American writing from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Was there a context not just for writing about music, but also for this preoccupation with the origins and the teaching of music? Earlier Indian English writing does not provide anything that is both musical and literary in the sense that these texts are. Casting our net wider, the only South Asian work that we may regard as a precursor at least to Rushdie and Seth is Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976) which fictionalizes the life of the legendary unrecorded early jazz musician Buddy Bolden. Ondaatje's novel, like Seth's, gives no hint of any South Asian writing tradition of which it may be a maverick part; it anticipates the

Apollonian/Dionysian musical tensions apparent in Rushdie and in a lesser way in Seth, by depicting jazz as the seductive bastard offspring of the musical union between church and whorehouse. American and British writing provide all kinds of interesting examples, but none that is as preoccupied with the music teacher or his role in cultural revitalization. In the area of autobiography, Louis Armstrong's early effort, *Swing That Music* (1936) for example, was a justification of jazz, then called swing music, written against the backdrop of race as the most prominent of black musicians' realities. Marian Anderson's *My Lord What A Morning* (1956) also talked about music in a time of segregation. Yehudi Menuhin, whose two-part autobiography *Unfinished Journey* (1977 and 1997) provides fascinating methodological details about how to personalize and internalize classical music, as well as anecdotes of his interactions with prominent musicians like Benjamin Britten, Sibelius and Bartok and public figures like Charles de Gaulle and Pope John Paul II, has little auto/biographical time for his teachers. This is in spite of the fact that Menuhin had at least three illustrious teachers, Louis Persinger, Eugene Ysaye, and George Enescu; none of them are represented as anything other than mere facilitators, in lesser or greater measure, in the process of making him technically accomplished.

More recently, a hunger for the public eye and easy access to publishing have made pop and rock autobiographies very common, and while most are obviously ghosted and cannot boast of much literary merit, one fact is clear: there was and is hardly any space for the process of music acquisition or for those from whom music is acquired. Increasingly, also, there have been auto/biographies not just of singers and instrumentalists, but of other kinds of talented and ambitious professionals who have

achieved prominence in the field of music. Berry Gordy's autobiography *To Be Loved* (1994) outlines the life of the songwriter, music store owner, and hugely successful music agent and Motown impresario. The composer George Solti's *Memoirs* (1998) focuses on his life and his eventually successful efforts to make it into the big symphony orchestras rather than on his training, and a whole chapter is dedicated to his favourite composers. So too Henry Mancini, whose *Did They Mention The Music* (1989), probably the closest to Dhar's work in terms of conversationality, tells stories of musical and other friends, but unlike Dhar, without delving too deeply into music itself. In his autobiography *Notes in Advance* (1991), William Glock, the hugely influential BBC Controller of Music from 1959-73, opines on British music policy and music appreciation for the masses. And in *Burn, Baby, Burn* (2003), Magnificent Montague, disc jockey and radio station owner, holds forth on his life and times. Whether because a majority of Indians are culturally hesitant about such self-affirmation as autobiography implies (we will go into the reasons for this in Chapters 2 and 4), or because the Indian music industry in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was not at the stage that the western music industry found itself in, in India nobody other than the most famous singers and instrumentalists could embark on autobiographical projects with any hope of even the smallest readership. But there has always been a strong Indian tradition of biography, and in particular, of musical biography by *shishyas* (disciples) that needs to be read today through what Janaki Bakhle describes as a "dominant hagiographical gaze" (218). And it is this tradition that several writers in my dissertation are working within and against, creating a mode of writing about their gurus that is quite literally auto/biographical: telling the story of their musical education as part of the long tradition of their respective *gharanas* or musical lineages, with the guru at the

apex of that structure and they themselves represented as the last and necessary historicizing links.

With the possible exception of Seth, the writers here also do not seem to be following particular trends in English fiction on music from the west, which offers several fascinating examples in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but none of them focused on teachers or training, whether respectfully or in repudiation. Kazuo Ishiguro's critically acclaimed *The Unconsoled* (1995) depicts a concert pianist trying to find his inner self in a novel about memory and the esoteric nature of modern music. Jeanette Winterson's *Art and Lies* (1996) features three artistic characters named Handel, Picasso, and Sappho, and is preoccupied with what Stephen Benson glosses as the "secular transcendence of the properly and permanently artistic object", an approach derived from 1920s high European modernism (Benson 155). *High Fidelity* (1995) by Nick Hornby, tells of an anxiety-ridden record collector and his efforts to relate to the outside world. Hornby's recent work *Juliet, Naked* (2009), is the story of a reclusive rock star who has to put up with the demands of his fans when an old album of his is in its latest release. In *Grace Notes* (1998) Bernard Maclaverty brings the contemporary woman composer to the forefront, discussing issues of Irish identity, motherhood, and music-making. The authors in my dissertation thus do not appear to be following any international or even English/Anglophone thematic zeitgeist in focusing on the teaching of music, on its teachers, and on questions about its origins. Seth, writing about European art music, does however share one idea with Winterson: his characters as much as hers reserve the utmost reverence for the musical score, Winterson's book ending provocatively with nine full pages taken from the score of Richard Strauss's 1911 opera *Der Rosenkavalier*. Seth's

novel similarly accords pride of place to musical scores, in his case that of Bach's *The Art of Fugue*. Yet in its protagonist Michael's neurotically anxious recollections of his years as a student and his relationship with his old maestro, *An Equal Music* is thematically much closer to the other Indian English works analyzed here. Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raga* deploys the *khayaal* format of raga exposition to meander into memory in ways that certainly owe much to earlier such stylistic assays in western writing, probably the best-known 20<sup>th</sup> century example being Thomas Mann's use of the Wagnerian *leitmotiv*. Yet thematically again, Chaudhuri's fidelity conflicted though it may be, is to his Indian models. Chaudhuri's is a particularly complex and interesting case because his two novels, separated by 17 years and both celebratory of his guru, do their work in very different ways. *Afternoon Raga*'s open reverence of the guru is very traditional; but *The Immortals* (stylistically likened by some reviewers to Mann's *Buddenbrooks*; Chaudhuri himself says he was thinking of 'Toni Kroger') is a somewhat more clear-sighted vehicle for its author's preoccupation, like Mann and Henry James, in "the role of the artist in relation to power, to ambition and worldly failure, and not just to creativity."<sup>2</sup> Chaudhuri's position in regard to Indian music is of some interest to us; in answer to a question on England's "looming presence" in his India, he "confesses" in the interview quoted above: "I can't be completely clear about that. I know that England was important in the way I thought about writing and music. I used to play the guitar and sing in the Western popular tradition. But when I went to England at the age of 21, I realized that that was not my music and that Indian classical music expressed me *authentically*" (italics mine). Chaudhuri thus joins Devidayal in the small but growing group of young

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<sup>2</sup> "Evocative Anthem to a Changing India". Interview by Anna Mundow for the Boston Globe. [http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2009/08/23/amit\\_chaudhuri\\_explores\\_desire\\_ambition\\_power\\_in\\_the\\_immortals/?page=2](http://www.boston.com/ae/books/articles/2009/08/23/amit_chaudhuri_explores_desire_ambition_power_in_the_immortals/?page=2). Retrieved on 02/27/10.

urban Indians whose intellectual interests are often western, but whose aesthetic and especially whose musical commitments are to Indian forms, a combination with important effects on the literature they produce and as the audience they imagine for it.

In his book *Guru English* Srinivas Aravamudan discusses in detail both the explicit meaning and the unstated connotations of the Indian word “guru”:

The Sanskrit etymology of guru presents this figure as “a dispeller of darkness.” The guru’s power is perceived to be spiritual even as the sisya or chela – the disciple in search of wisdom or enlightenment – can choose to pursue and is sometimes encouraged to perform an absolute surrender of his or her will to the will of the master. Etymologically, the male sisya might perform the funeral rites of a son for the guru, saving him from an afterlife in the underworld. Unlike the spiritual authority of the guru, that of the acarya (preceptor or teacher) is understood to be that of a circumscribed pedagogic authority within accepted social conventions, whereas the figure of the guru as Sudhir Kakar has also argued, features powerful parental and psychoanalytic functions for the disciple. The guru’s function for the disciple, within the framework of an open-ended religious transaction, is therefore potentially unlimited in the manner in which it could transgress personal and social boundaries. Guru is also the astronomical term for Brihaspati, the preceptor of the Hindu pantheon, and designates the largest planet...Jupiter. This parallel Sanskrit etymology of guru as the planetary and astronomical “heavy: with considerable influence may be just as relevant, even if ironically so, in relation to a history of complicity with, as well as antipathy for, gurus within the history of religion in South Asia. (7-8)

Aravamudan discusses the spiritual guru in his work; my dissertation examines the music guru. It is important to remember that the teacher of music in India also has traditionally been and continues to be called a guru. The history of the word as it has been used in India ensures that it retains many of the old connotations, and hardly any of those more cynical and pejorative which have accumulated around it internationally in the last 50 years. Nor, particularly in the context of music, does it merely mean someone with a special aptitude or qualification, in the way that western speakers may refer to management gurus or tech gurus, or more flippantly, style gurus. While trainers, instructors, and mentors in other spheres of life, the formal academic sphere for example,

were also called gurus at one time, western influence has substituted other words for guru in schools and colleges: teacher, master, professor, all more or less equivalent only to the Hindi-from-Sanskrit *shikshak* / *adhyapak* / (and at the highest level of mentor, more rarely) *acharya*, the words actually used in referring to such figures today. Even the teacher of yoga, for all his association with the spiritually evolved higher levels of consciousness ascribed to possession of that knowledge, is now the “yoga master”, except at the very highest levels, where a famous and much-televised adept like Baba Ramdev, who, significantly, also dispenses spiritual, dietary, and moral instruction, may be referred to as a guru. (We should bear in mind here the ancient connection between yoga, *ayurveda* healing techniques, and music, as three of the primary related areas of expertise attributed to the early Vedic Hindu *rishi* or sage, someone I will discuss a little later.) In music however, unless taught in a school or university towards a formal degree, the teacher is most often still referred to as the guru. A serious student of music will be asked who her guru is, not her teacher or master. In responding, she will pinch her own ear to indicate her apology for the temerity of pronouncing the guru’s name aloud. The same signal on stage is also an acknowledgement of a mistake made in singing or playing; the apology is not rendered to the audience but to the present or absent guru for having let him or her down.

It seems to me, then, important to understand why the more demotic linguistic shift did not occur in the case of music. Until the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, students received musical guidance under what is called the *guru-shishya parampara*, or the tradition of the guru and the disciple, a word also freighted with religious-spiritual meaning. In this tradition, it is assumed that the truly gifted musician is a saintly or sage-

like character, and therefore also the best and most appropriate teacher. This is both because sages and priests were traditionally also the teachers in Hinduism, and because such scant literature as is available on early raga music has been interpreted to the effect that it was the reclusive forest-dwelling *rishis* or sages who first developed, practiced, and taught this music. The disciple in the guru-*shishya* musical relationship that grew out of this idea lived in the guru's home, imbibing everything he could about music and its culture, practicing what he had learned ideally for at least 10 to 14 hours a day, singing occasionally and only if called upon with the guru in public performances, and making return to the guru (called *guru dakshina*) through devotion, domestic service, and such money or gifts as he could lay his hands on.

Of these *guru dakshina* components, devotion was the most necessary, perhaps more so even than talent in the early stages, an attitude without which no transfer of knowledge or skills was considered deserved by the *shishya* or justified on the guru's part. Reverence for the guru's person, ideas, and musical genius was a given, and had to be frequently displayed or verbally expressed as an index of appropriate dedication and loyalty. Insubordination, laziness, or any interest in musical forms taught by rival musicians could mean at the very least, stern public rebuke and harsh corporeal punishment, and frequently also temporary or permanent expulsion from the guru's presence and from the musical sphere around him. Analyzing the literature that relates to music and its teaching in 20<sup>th</sup> century India, I do not draw on Aravamudan's work merely because it suggests or reminds those interested in music of the connection between Indian music and religion; that connection, as in many cultures, has existed and been acknowledged in India for almost as long as has Indian music. Rather, *Guru English* is

valuable for my purposes because in its definition of the guru, its description of guru worship, and its close analysis of the guru idiom, it implicitly highlights the religious-spiritual aspect to the *teaching and learning* of Indian music *even to this day*, and thus the continuing quasi-religious sanction to the role of the modern music guru.

The religious origins and basis of Indian music therefore deserve mention in this introduction. In her recent book on the teaching of Carnatic music in Chennai, Lakshmi Subramanian explains the connotations of the word *nada* in the Indian sound lexicon, and the related concept of *nadabrahman*, common to both South and North Indian musical cultures, that was evoked in nationalist efforts to revive raga - or what came to be known as classical - music. She describes *nadabrahman* (in its simplest translation “sound-(as)-divine-being”) as “an originatory deep mind that produced the experiential world through vibration and touched human consciousness as audible sounds.” *Nada*, therefore, as Subramanian’s reading of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit text Matanga’s *Brahaddeshi* reveals, was “primordial...the pervading causal sound that animates the universe”, but also simultaneously, the word for musical sound, for the process of sound as it emerges vocally, and, quite specifically, for improvisational exposition of a raga. In this theory, *nadabrahman*, or sound as a “central conduit in the experience of realization of pure consciousness...could be attained by music practiced as a form of yoga.... (2008: 29).” Subramanian emphasizes the importance of this semantic density for the new, educated, early 20<sup>th</sup> century middle-class custodians of classical music, looking for older and richer meanings in the songs they heard and sought to revive. Lewis Rowell digs further into the etymological connection between the homophonic *nada* (which in another form also means roarer or bellow), *nadi* or (river), and *nada* (again, this time meaning reed), and

observes: "...the reverberation of a powerful sound and the flow of a river are seen as manifestations of the same process, in which vital energy courses along a channel...and thus arose the idea of a "conduit" for vital substance in any of its forms sound, speech, breath, water, vegetative growth, semen, and the like" (45). Clearly, the later music guru's role as quasi-divine composite creator/composer-performer-teacher in an improvisatory and primarily oral culture came not just with complex and very high expectations, but also with a powerful textual sanction.

One caveat is essential: the scope of my dissertation where it deals with Indian music is limited largely to two categories of North Indian music: *bhakti* or devotional music, and what is now known as Hindustani classical music, or raga music as it has developed and been taught in North India from Rig Vedic times (roughly 1300 - 1000 BC) to the present. In part this is because these two forms of music have, for reasons that I will explore in my chapters, captured the most space in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian imagination as well as in the image of India as it is disseminated internationally. More substantially though, my dissertation focuses on these forms because, very likely as a result of the circumstances alluded to above, it is only these that appear in 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian English fiction, the area of my specialization. Readers should bear in mind that *bhakti* and raga music are two mutually very permeable categories, for almost all *bhakti* poetry that has made its way into song has been set to melodic structures (ragas) and rhythms (*talas*) long recognized within the classical music framework. The significant differences between them include *bhakti*'s quite logical emphasis on words over melody, and the fact that except in the case of especially talented students and performers, *bhakti* music on the wider scale continues to be relatively untaught in a formal sense, something that brings

vast numbers of amateur, untrained, often spontaneous and unselfconscious singers into its fold. There is another sense in which the two both diverge and yet come together: while *bhakti* songs were originally performed with intent to worship in the very act of singing, and some of this inheres in its performance traditions even on the modern western-style concert stage, raga music, which has in modern times been regarded more in the light of entertainment, also has, as we have seen, a deeply spiritual and religious aspect owing to its origins in scriptural chant; both thematically and functionally therefore, the two are certainly not watertight categories.

Some discussion of the Carnatic or South Indian music tradition, its relation to Hindustani music and to Indian English fiction, and the reasons for its absence from my dissertation is necessary at this stage. Carnatic music, which originated in the pre-Aryan Dravidic culture, has a rich history that predates what we now call Hindustani music by at least two millennia. Music historians claim with substantial reason Carnatic / Dravidic origin for many aspects of Hindustani music. The generally held view is that as the invading Aryans pushed the original Dravidian inhabitants of the subcontinent southwards they took the music they found and adapted it to their purposes, both religious and secular. In one version of this view, Carnatic music, today primarily taught and performed in the four southern states, represents the “pure” essence of ancient Indian music because it is supposedly uncontaminated by external influences. Needless to say, this idea has been hotly contested by recent scholarship interested in tracing the two-way processes of long lasting and insidious cross-fertilization between northern and southern forms. The other most important influence from which this music has been allegedly “preserved” is that of Islam, brought by the Turks, Afghans, and Mughals whose

descendants ruled large parts of the northern, western, and central subcontinent from early in the second millennium till British times. With the coming of the Muslims, argue some Carnatic proponents, North Indian classical music deteriorated into “mere” court entertainment, whereas its loftier Carnatic counterpart remained safely enshrined within the sanctity of temple performance. Whether because of this, or because there has always been a tension between religious and secular music, or whether both factors combine here, battles in the 20<sup>th</sup> century politics of Hindustani classical music have invariably been fought over issues of purity/authenticity and ownership along religious lines.

The question however remains: why is Carnatic classical music so under-represented, if indeed it is at all present, in Indian English fiction and both open and fictionalized auto/biography? A good number of Indian English authors would perhaps be more familiar with Hindustani music, many of them having been brought up in Mumbai, Kolkata, and Delhi. But the major authors also include South Indians: from the old guard, two of the triumvirate, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan, and amongst current day names Shashi Tharoor, and half-Malayali Arundhati Roy, whose one novel lyrically recreates the southern state of Kerala. Yet Rao, whose work we will read in my final chapter, sees the song-commentaries of *bhajan* meetings and *harikathas* in his fictional village of Kanthapura only as a strategic space for Gandhian propaganda, and does not attempt any sustained literary representation of this music and its performers, or those of its classical counterpart. While R.K.Narayan, who had some amateur training in Carnatic classical music, gestures at the *devadasi* (South Indian entertainer-courtesan) tradition in *The Guide* (1958), his focus is on the dancer rather than the musician. When Tharoor talks music at all, the music is that of Bollywood as a background to his novel about that

industry, *Show Business* (1993). One possible answer, given the international readership sought by the major Indian English authors, is that Hindustani classical music has more global purchase. It was the first Indian music to travel to the west through the efforts of personalities like Rabindranath Tagore, the Sufi teacher Inayat Khan, the dancer Uday Shankar, and then most prominently, the sitar maestro Ravi Shankar. A musically trained author like Chaudhuri might therefore feel comfortable explaining its intricacies to his western readership in a way that Tharoor, had he the musical qualifications to embark on such a project, might not those of Carnatic music. But also, significantly, the Indian English books on Hindustani classical music are all quite recent, the earliest dating only as far back as 1993, and the other four clustered around each other shortly before and after the turn of the millennium. Something, it seemed, had come to fruition in that late postcolonial moment, something that triggered off this spate of books on Hindustani music gurus, their *shishyas* (students), and the politics of that pedagogy. What could that something be? This curiosity fuelled my analysis of the representation of devotional and raga music in Chapters 1 and 2.

In Chapter 1 I examine the three authors most relevant to the subject of Indian music in colonial India of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: E.M.Forster (1879-1970), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), and the Sufi teacher and *vina* master Inayat Khan (1882-1927). Though Forster of course cannot be categorized as an Indian author, I include him because his writing gives us one liberal European approach to the reality of Indian music in India, and makes an interesting contrast to the ideas of W.B.Yeats in the latter's famous Introduction to Tagore's *Gitanjali* (1912). I begin this chapter therefore with an analysis of E.M.Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924) and *The Hill of Devi* (1953), as well as

extracts from his Indian memoirs, to show how Forster's ideas about form as an organizing principle, on which he commented extensively in his writing as a music critic, affected his views on Indian music. Though a relatively sympathetic observer of Indians, Forster's writing attests to his deep sense of the failure of Indian music to provide what to him were the critical satisfactions of structure and coherence. In the college professor Godbole's singing, as in the musical frenzy of Mau, are the seeds of Adela's echo, Mrs. Moore's ominous "boum", and the "muddle" and "mystery" that were to become Forster's terms for India's opacity, endemic eccentricity, and mismanagement. Quite another kind of mystery, though no less incapacitating in political terms, was that which western readers found in Tagore's *Gitanjali* lyrics, and the recitals and musical-spiritual lectures of Inayat Khan. It is now a critical commonplace that the *Gitanjali* - through whose combination of pantheism, humanism, and late Romanticism most foreign readers know Tagore - is a tiny and unrepresentative sample of his large, varied, and somewhat more politically knowledgeable oeuvre. The *Gitanjali* lyrics and the later lectures of Inayat Khan in New York and London were aimed at a literary-critical avant-garde thirsting for what Romain Rolland termed the "healing touch of the East" (Aronson and Kripalani 25-26). Tagore's physical appearance, described by Japanese Nobel Laureate Yasunari Kawabata as that of "an ancient Oriental wizard", and by Frances Cornford as her idea of "a powerful and gentle Christ", served to further accentuate the connection between Tagore's writing, his musical compositions, and some long-sought Indian mystical truth to which western seekers could only find the way if guided by the spiritually evolved Indian singer-songwriter-musician (Sen. Inayat Khan brought his message of the spiritual force of music into the space thus opened up by Tagore. The

Khan texts that I will look at in this chapter are selected from the first section of *The Mysticism of Sound and Music: The Sufi Teaching of Inayat Khan*, a 1991 anthology of lectures delivered from roughly 1917 to Khan's death in 1926. Khan's early work in popularizing instrumental raga music in the west, his religious teachings under the banner of Sufism, and his canny feel for the cultural-spiritual market established a relationship between Indian music and the healer-mystic-guru tradition that long outlived him and that continues to surface in global culture to the present day.

Chapter 2 analyzes writing that reflects independent India's approach to the teaching of classical or raga music. One important fact that must be mentioned here is that all the post-independence English literary texts which treat raga music and its teaching in detail can be located somewhere on the biographical or autobiographical continuum. Selected here are: a woman singer's memoir essays, a fictionalized auto/biography by an Oxford student that honors his dead former musical mentor, a formal novel with overwhelmingly autobiographical content by the same author (Chaudhuri) on the theme of the dead guru, a novel on the writing of a fictional woman singer's autobiography, and an actual biography of a named musician written by one of her students. I examine the relation between the urgent need for cultural self-fashioning in the new post-colony, the crucial role of the musical mentor-guru in this self-fashioning, the concept of the *gharana* or musical lineage as an important component of this dynamic, and the urge to record both process and outcome of musical training in the auto/biographical mode. The five books are written at around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at a time when the process of rehabilitating raga music had already culminated in this genre becoming a high cultural, educated upper middle class preserve. They are also products of a moment in which

women from respectable families had emerged to occupy a crucial public space in raga music. The texts I analyze are Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* (1993) and *The Immortals* (2009), Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000), Sheila Dhar's *Here Some I'd Like You To Meet* (1995) and its later version, *Raga' n Josh* (2005), and Namita Devidayal's *The Music Room* (2007). I argue, here, that while the actual auto/biographies tend towards the hagiographical in their effusions over the guru figure, and validate traditional values in an effort to preserve and defend this newly resuscitated art, the fiction pulls away from the guru-worship mode to foreground more progressive possibilities. In Chaudhuri's later work and particularly in Deshpande's novel we see serious attempts to demystify the musical guru and highlight, instead, the potential of music for pragmatic political activism.

An important line of examination that my dissertation also follows in this connection is the question of how Indian English writing reflects issues related to gender in Indian musical thought, training, and performance. As in most other cultures, Indian music too has been steeped in a variety of more or less sexist and misogynist attitudes, beliefs, and religio-social practices.<sup>3</sup> If trained women performers have traditionally been given any role to play, it has been as *devadasis* (temple courtesan-entertainers) in the Hindu tradition, and *baijis* or *tawaiifs* (also courtesans, but shorn of the religious sanction) in Muslim society. Classical musical forms have been seen and taught as male, serious and cerebral - the *dhrupad*, and then later the *khayal*, and female, lighter, sensuous - the *thumri*, *dadra*, *kajri*, and *chaiti*, with fairly predictable consequences for their relative stature in performance. Leading disciples of gurus, the future standard-bearers of their

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<sup>3</sup> See work by Regula Burkhardt Quresh, Janaki Bakhle, Amelia Maciszewski, and Amlan Dasgupta. Illuminating studies of traditional and contemporary attitudes to gender in western music can be found in the writing of Rose Subotnik, Susan McClary, and Lucy Green.

respective *gharanas* or musical lineages, have until recently almost always been male. The early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century saw Brahmin pundits and nationalist politicians on the aggressive, making music “respectable” for women from upper and middle class families. But the aftermath of courtesan culture and the unfortunate fate of these early performers cast a long shadow on women’s association with music, making the figure of the female music guru as depicted in Indian English auto/biography a particularly fascinating subject of analysis. In contrast with classical music, *bhakti* music, given its more obviously religious bent and the fact that at the simplest levels it can require little or no training, has allowed women to participate more freely and in surprisingly transgressive ways. Chapters 2 and 4 scrutinize how Indian English authors variously attempt to accommodate, contend with, mask, explain, justify, critique, and suggest changes to this complex of gendered musical ideas and practices.

In Chapter 3 I examine the purposeful move away from Indian music that Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth made in 1999, a year that saw two of their books, Rushdie’s *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and Seth’s *An Equal Music* vie for international attention in the summer publishing season. Rushdie’s novel follows the fortunes of two Indian rock stars in the west, while Seth eschews everything Indian after his Indian magnum opus (*A Suitable Boy*, 1996) to write a novel about European chamber music players set in London and Vienna. Opening their locales and subjects up in this way obviously allowed both authors to continue speaking to an international readership in a way that Chaudhuri or Deshpande cannot hope to - perhaps do not seek to - achieve. I argue that the move to western music is not merely about market considerations: both texts work, in effect, to virtualize the role of the maestro-teacher-guru. Seth’s novel does so by transferring

ultimate authority to musical scores and to the dead composers behind them, and Rushdie's by circumventing the formal pedagogical process altogether and making music into something instinctive rather than acquired. Rushdie's troubled relationship with the world he leaves behind, and to the vexed question of authenticity (both cultural and musical) is evident in his constant, almost fretting references to Indian religions and to India, in the tyranny of the guru figures his singer heroine Vina Apsara patronizes - figures who hold the key to a culture that is in equal parts represented as beguiling and sinister -, in Vina's helpless but untrained fascination with the dizzy Indian mix of Bollywood lyrics, raga-based ghazals and Sufi music, and in the male lead Ormus Cama's other wordly messiah features. Overwhelmed by this too-muchness, bidding India farewell, the author, like Ormus Cama, attempts to break free onto the global stage through the apparently more liberating idiom of late '60s rock. Seth's novel, while it does not deal with India or Indians, also reflects his involvement with the issue of the dominating mentor, in this case, his protagonist Michael's violin teacher Carl Kall. It is important to remember that Seth himself is trained in vocal raga music, and having grown up in India, certainly knew of the *guru-shishya* tradition even if he may not personally have had to deal with its more challenging requirements. Several passages in the novel ruminate angrily on Kall's idiosyncrasies, Michael's inability to deal with them, and his subsequent break down. It is Kall's behaviour that drives Michael away from Vienna and causes his love relationship with a fellow music student, Julia, to fall apart. The book depicts a series of student teacher relationships, and suggests alternative mentor and facilitator figures, people far less demanding and erratic, like Mrs. Formby, who gifts her old Tononi violin to Michael, as also the ways other than formal training (radio, records)

in which young people might internalize classical music in small town England in the 1970s and 80s. In its depiction of Schubert and the lied, the novel gestures towards the importance of spontaneity and individual development within a potentially less confining and less consumer-dictated musical culture. Yet in its final valorization of Bach and the Art of Fugue, *An Equal Music* ends on the conservative note that readers might expect in writing that is at heart a celebration of western art music and the Enlightenment values it incorporates and exemplifies.

Finally, in Chapter Four I examine two novels that deal with raga-based devotional music in the context of Gandhian politics. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1932) delineates the Gandhian formula of deploying music as a unifying political force. In the previous chapters I have argued that authors of Indian English fiction and fictionalized auto/biography are often in conflict with their own selves over the guru's domination. Here I examine the position of Gandhi, India's foremost political guru, his contribution to ideas about *bhakti* music, and what I read as Nagarkar's attempt to fashion a progressive version of Gandhian ideology through the figures of the 16th century singer-saint-poet Mira and her Rajput husband, whose narrative voice and third person consciousness bring her story to us. Some of the potency of Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement derived from the fact that women participated in significant numbers, and the village *bhajan* or devotional sing-song was the natural locus for such mobilization.<sup>4</sup> Even before the anti-colonial players make their appearance, we see the political capability of music latent in the influence that devotional reading, chanting and singing have on the villagers, especially

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<sup>4</sup> Rumina Sethi argues that these numbers look bigger today than was actually the case since later historians, she feels, tend to exaggerate Gandhi's impact on women's politicization. While there may be some truth to Sethi's assertion, a useful counterargument comes from Tanika Sarkar, and is elaborated on in Chapter 4.

women, for whom it is an approved activity because it is usually regulated by a male priest or singer-chanter-commentator.

In her monograph on *Kanthapura*, Rumina Sethi warns against the contemporary dangers of Rao's aggressive version of Hinduism, one that looks back to Gandhi's controversial ideal of *ram rajya*, the rule of the Hindu epic hero Ram. In set against *Kanthapura* and *ram rajya*, Kiran Nagarkar's 1996 novel *The Cuckold*. Nagarkar retells the story of Mira in a novel that makes a serious attempt to engage with some of the problems of modern India: divisive communal politics, and severe caste, class, and gender oppression. Mira is a renegade poet, a compulsive singer, a self-taught composer, and a self-willed woman. There is no guru figure she reveres; no guru is required, nor will suffice to contain her. Through the new lyrics Nagarkar writes for her, music and musical performance become key sites for the contest between a variety of new gender-based possibilities, and for the emergence of a call for a more responsible politics that eschews both sectarian violence and easy labels. In retelling also the story of her husband, the "cuckolded" and thoughtful prince, Nagarkar outlines an alternative vision of *bhakti*, which aims to show how the dilution of hierarchy inherent in Gandhian notions of androgyny and caste equality can be reworked in a less assertively majoritarian way to better serve the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This synopsis of my Nagarkar chapter allows us to segue into my secondary argument, which is situated in issues of audience and local relevance. In her essay "The Anxiety of Indianness", Meenakshi Mukherjee writes that

...the normal ground conditions of literary production, where a culture and its variations, a language and its dialects, centuries of oral tradition and written literature, all interact to create a new text--do not exist in the case of English in India....An O. V. Vijayan or a Bhalachandra Nemade knows his exact constituency

and is secure in the knowledge of the shades of response his associative word-play or ironic under-statement will evoke in Malayalam or Marathi readers who are equipped with the keys for decoding these oblique messages. But R. K. Narayan's audience is spread wide and far, within India and outside, hence the need for an even-toned minimalistic representation that will not depend too much on the intricacies and contradictions in the culture and the inflections of voice which only an insider can decipher. (1993: 2609)

If this critique tends to focus on style, on the thematic side Tabish Khair, positing a rather limited divide between Indians as a minority of westernized, middle and upper class *babus* and a majority of traditional, lower class *coolies*, situates Indian English writing within the elite *babu* fold and thus argues for its essential irrelevance to the Indian world that it purportedly represents. These ideas, which reflect those of an influential section of Indian academia, have been ably and variously challenged by scholars such as Deepika Bahri who offers the concept of “native intelligence” as opposed to the function of the native informant, by Priya Joshi who shows how the Indian English novel has been gradually indigenized to meet the changing needs of the postcolony, and by several lesser known academics who emphasize the critical role of Indian English as part of a continuously adaptive contact literature. Given the scope of my dissertation, I am not as focused as some of these critics are on the issues of Indian English imitativeness/creativity, elitism/parochialism, and superficiality/authenticity that such discussions invariably raise. What is of more interest to me is the way in which the language of music and questions related to how it is learned or taught allow authors like Nagarkar and Deshpande, and to a lesser extent also Chaudhuri, to write novels that talk to a somewhat wider audience than Mukherjee or Khair or others following that line of thinking may have envisaged. Nagarkar and Deshpande particularly are authors with a strong sense of their growing domestic audience, as well of the social and political

influence that audience wields even as a small English-reading minority in mostly vernacular India. While opinion in India is certainly not formed exclusively or even largely by speakers of English, due to a number of fairly obvious historical circumstances, that category does enjoy more clout in the area of opinion-making and legislation than its numbers might imply.<sup>5</sup> Given its pan-Indian character, that category were it to be properly primed, could make a concerted and effective attempt to counter reactionary religious fundamentalist / discriminatory, caste, and patriarchal ideas. Indian music, as we have seen, has had a fairly contentious past in terms of ownership and appropriative battles along religious lines. But because, as in many cultures, Indian music - whether spontaneous *bhakti* or formal raga music - makes claims to reaching the divine, its history and the politics of its struggles offer a particularly useful metaphor in any literary effort to engage with religious conflict in India. As my final chapter shows, if Gandhi continues to be an ideological reality for 21<sup>st</sup> century Indians, music as figured by Gandhi gives Nagarkar an entry point into the ideological debates of his own time, even if Nagarkar's ideas about *bhakti* seem to be rather different from those Gandhi expressed.

Before closing, a few words on Ravi Shankar. Because Shankar's name is so well known internationally, indeed was whether or not deservedly almost synonymous from the late '60 through the '70s with the self-help spiritual possibilities of Indian music, it might seem logical for me to analyze in detail his two autobiographies and the many biographical works on him. I offer here my reasons for not doing so. Firstly, works by and on Shankar are numerous and lengthy enough to merit a separate dissertation. Shankar is already the single most important figure in this connection; nothing I could

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<sup>5</sup> For a sense of the sheer numbers involved, see the 'Cultures and Canons' and 'World Englishes' sections of *World Englishes* Ed. Kingsley Bolton and Braj B. Kachru (2006) and essays by Braj B. Kachru, Charles A. Ferguson, and Richard W. Bailey in *South Asian English* Ed. Robert J. Baumgardner (1996).

say here would add to the already substantial corpus of knowledge about his stature both as someone who popularized instrumental raga music widely abroad, and as the first post-war music guru to all sorts of western performers keen on exploring the liberating spiritual potential of ragas. But Shankar, though he announced himself with some justification as the representative of an ancient tradition of spiritual music, was never really seen as a spiritual/quasi-spiritual guru in the sense that Inayat Khan before him was, nor did he himself claim to be one; it was Mahesh Maharishi who wore that label and attracted groups such as the Beatles with it. Also, while Shankar continues to have a huge international following, within India he has been the object of severe critique from classical aficionados. While these savants admit to his tremendous talent, they are very disapproving of his flamboyant and, it is thought, opportunistic preoccupation with western attention, of the star-system that his success encouraged, his many romantic dalliances, his popularization of stage “stunts” at the expense of the more thoughtful playing considered necessary to proper raga development, and his consequent perceived dilution of the strict standards of Hindustani music and its performance traditions.

As I have shown earlier, much of the tension in debates over Hindustani music has to do with the purity/authenticity issue, one related to the entertainment/worship dichotomy. Shankar, having taken severe flak as the first to transgress, is outside these debates today; living and teaching in California and rarely performing in India, he has crossed all boundaries real or perceived and no rules seem to have applied to him for several decades now. If he continues to represent instrumental raga music, that is more the case outside India than within it. At home, other brilliant and innovative sitar players willing to stay closer to the bounds of convention, and, while often performing abroad, equally securing

safe ground for themselves with a following among cognoscenti in India, seem to command greater respect. Though Shankar remains a larger than life figure, that figure is an endlessly controversial one rather than the object of *guru-bhakti* or guru-worship. Indeed, given the unfair penchant to judge him by his sexual morals only because his musical morals have upset so many purists, attitudes towards him are often explicitly at odds with those generally expected in regard to musicians at the highest level.

The last paragraph of Shankar's early autobiography *My Music, My Life* (1968) reveals his own awareness of his anomalous position: "I am being criticized in my own country for "prostituting" my music and commercializing it, for being a big hero only to the hippies, for associating my music with drugs, and for encouraging dissatisfied youths from the West to flock to India (Shankar, 1968:96)". This first autobiography, a curious mixture of life-story, sitar manual, and two thousand years of compressed music history, modest in its production values but introduced by Yehudi Menuhin, has certainly influenced others after it, works written for international audiences by musicians anxious to provide the fullest context in which they live and perform. The second effort, *Ragamala: The Autobiography of Ravi Shankar* (1997), edited and introduced by George Harrison, with (now Lord) Menuhin adding an afterword, is a far more luxurious offering of glossy plates, insets and headers in gold print, and chapters elegantly named after ragas, evidently designed and edited by highly paid professionals. Here, Harrison interjects from time to time with combative declarations: "Many critics...assumed Ravi had found the lure of American wealth too tempting and had sold out. 'From Ragas to Riches' ran the headlines, seeking to bury him by misrepresentation. To Ravi, though the money was naturally welcome, it was not the point" (1997: 208). In an era more inclined

to accept the inevitability of cultural hybridity and the seductions of an international market, the 1999 award of the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian honour, does indicate some degree of relaxation in establishment opinion from the time Shankar rued its castigations. Yet for all the reasons given above, while Shankar comes from a distinguished instrumental *gharana* and acknowledges his debt to his own musical guru Baba Allaudin Khan with orthodox reverence, he cannot himself count among canonized gurus in the sense that this work reads them. In that context, the figures of Tagore and Inayat Khan before him, who set the stage for his eventual international apotheosis as the ultimate Indian cultural icon, are a lot more rewarding to read.

To recapitulate then, the sudden appearance of a cluster of Indian English books on music has to do with a number of developments: a new consciousness on the part of young upper and upper middle class urban Indians about the value of their musical heritage, the politicization of music by various interested constituencies, the growing market for music both in the domestic sphere and internationally, the increasing appropriation of devotional *bhakti* music as a vehicle of dissent for "low" castes and women, the demarcation of music ownership along religious lines and thus, paradoxically, its growing potential as a metaphor for peaceful co-existence between majority and minorities, and the debate about the *gharana* and the role of the music guru in national cultural revitalization. Each writer responds differently to the music guru; it is the sum of these responses that maps for us both the guru's complex position in Indian music today as well as the crucial way in which guru worship (or the formal need for it) frames Indian English writers' approach to musical tradition. All the factors listed above also combine to make the discourse around music a more accessible common

denominator for new kinds of both urban and small-town English readers in India, readers gradually becoming comfortable with the language not as one of stiff academic requirement but as a tool being slowly moulded to the needs of leisure reading as much as of workplace and virtual interaction. Deshpande, Nagarkar, and sometimes Chaudhuri attempt to speak to such readers by recourse to musical forms in which all, writers and readers alike, share both an emotional investment and a structure of understanding. These authors thus offer their audience another linguistically accessible way to approach the ever present necessity of negotiating tradition and the past while living in today's reality.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE SPIRITUAL GURU: EARLY INDIAN MUSIC IN THE WEST

Early 20th century literature on Indian music that was produced for international readers tended to emphasize the connection between Indian music (particularly raga music), mysticism, and the guru figure. By doing so, such writing helped to create and popularize notions of a New Age Indian music: of universal relevance, essentially quietist, free from caste and class biases, informal and participatory, traditionally imbued with healing and balancing qualities, and removed for all intents and purposes from the sphere of practical politics. This is in sharp contrast with the way in which, at the same historical moment, ownership of raga music was actually being furiously contested between Muslim *ustads* and Brahmin pundits in India, and all forms of *bhakti* and raga music being politicized by a generation of nationalist leaders and musical sanitizer-pioneers. This combine worked to shape raga music into a conservative, high cultural, “classical” concert art form that could rival its sophisticated western counterpart and provide a focus for national pride and nationalist cultural activity.<sup>6</sup> In this chapter I analyze the role of the guru figure in the international depoliticizing of Indian music by reading three early 20<sup>th</sup> century texts: Tagore’s English translations of his own lyrics in the *Gitanjali* (1912), literally “Song Offering”, the anthology which first brought him to public attention in the west, (with special attention to Yeats’s Introduction), extracts from various published lectures of the Sufi musician and spiritual teacher ‘Hazrat’ (“Saint”)

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<sup>6</sup> See music historians Janaki Bakhle (*Two Men and Music*) and Amlan Dasgupta (*Music and Modernity*) (on Hindustani or North Indian raga music, Lakshmi Subramanian (*From the Tanjore Court to the Madras Music Academy*) on Carnatic or South Indian *katcheri* music, and various works by John Stratton Hawley (*Three Bhakti Voices*), Parita Mukta (*Upholding the Common Life*), Nancy Martin-Kershaw (*Dyed in the Colour of her Lord*), Kumkum Sangari (“Mirabai and the Spiritual Economy of Bhakti”) on *bhakti* or raga-based devotional) music.

Inayat Khan, and - for reasons soon to become clear - E.M.Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924).

Srinivas Aravamudan's *Guru English*, which examines the "commodifiable cosmopolitanism" in the discourse of the Indian guru figure abroad, briefly references Rabindranath Tagore. *Guru English* deals in more detail with other international gurus like the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Swami Vivekananda and the more recent Mahesh Maharishi and Osho Rajneesh, whose strong religious affiliations and/or efforts to proselytize were not in keeping with Tagore's style of self-presentation whether in India or at home, and who set themselves up far more obviously as spiritual or spiritual-moral mentors. Aravamudan locates Tagore in a phase of "partial disappearance" of the Guru English discourse in roughly the period between 1905-1947 when the nationalist movement under Gandhism overwhelmed other religious-cosmopolitan agendas, though these cosmopolitan agendas continued to exist below the surface. In his Introduction Aravamudan observes however that Theosophy was growing in popularity in Asia, Europe and the Americas till the late 1920s (17). In this chapter I intend to magnify and examine some of what was going on below that surface. While *Guru English* focuses on the language of Indian religious and spiritual proselytization abroad, I will look more closely at the space where this discourse intersects with that of Indian music as it was presented to an international audience.

Both Tagore in those of his writings published in Europe and in the US, and Khan in his lectures, seem to have actively targeted the international reader who saw the East and Eastern religions as founts of mystical and largely pacifist energies. Music in those of their writings and lectures that became popular in Europe and in the US holds out Romantic-utopian possibilities of universal harmony, oneness with the divine, and with

that in humans which tends towards the divine. This was particularly well received abroad, especially amongst the modernist avant garde on both sides of the Atlantic, looking toward Eastern spirituality for a way out of their sense of cultural and spiritual crisis. While by definition, universal love ought to require a belief in universal equality, neither thinker's writing, however - as it reached the Western world in these forms - presented music as something that could be used in subversive ways, or ways hostile to the coloniser. Gerry Farrell maintains that in the early twentieth century, "(M)ovements in (Indian) music did not share the radicalism of those in the visual arts" or literature. In contrast, Farrell observes: "Once Western orientalist's intellectual control over the perception of Indian history and culture in the nineteenth century had been grasped, new resurgent forms of Indian art and literature were used to criticize and destabilize colonialism" (146). Though Bakhle, Subramanian, and Dasgupta all argue that within India itself, music was certainly deployed to anti-colonial purposes, it also seems a point of general agreement between music historians that this resuscitation of traditional musical forms was largely the work of a socially conservative, often western-educated, upper class and upper middle class nationalist establishment. This establishment, as Bahkle and Subramaniam separately emphasize, was eager to prove not just Indian cultural self-sufficiency, but also its own qualifications as the future Indian ruling class. It did so by intently distancing itself from other sections of Indian society, clustering, among other symbols of culture, around a new "classical" raga and raga-based devotional music. It was this class of reformer-sanitizers who forcibly appropriated raga music from its courtesan performers, bringing it out from the brothels and dancing halls of aristocratic patrons onto the public concert stage, a stage from which courtesans were

banned, as indeed they later were from the official airwaves of All India Radio. (Bakhle, Dasgupta, Subramaniam) While we can and will look at points of convergence between raga music as it was disseminated in India and outside it, internationally, as we shall see, there is no doubt that music and the literature related to it remained areas in which, for many decades, what appear to be compromises to the international market, in particular to an appetite for mysticism, remained the order of the day.

In my introduction I outlined some of the tensions in debates over Indian music as well as some of the basic ideas and concepts on account of which attitudes to Indian music continue to be inflected by its origins in religious ritual. As we shall see, the market for this music in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was partly the outcome of the ways in which culturally influential Indians consciously or otherwise represented their music abroad, and partly the result of a growing international preoccupation with what was seen as Asia's healing influence, one well expressed in Romain Rolland's 1919 words to Tagore "After the disaster of this world war which marked Europe's failure, it has become evident that Europe alone cannot save herself. Her thought is in need of Asia's thought....These are the two hemispheres of the brain of mankind" (Aronson and Kripalani 25-26). Tagore and Inayat Khan were important figures in laying the basis for the conflation of Indian music with a peculiarly modernist combination of mysticism, self development and spiritual healing. Forster's novel, while it acknowledges the religious/spiritual aspects of such music, foregrounds the connections he experiences between Indian music and mystery of another kind, the unknowable Indian "muddle", or everything that tends towards disorganization and mismanagement. Professor Narayan Godbole, the guru prototype in *A Passage*, refuses to simplify things for his western

listeners, and is thus unable to “explain” Indian music to them in the easy terms that actual gurus like Inayat Khan were doing in real life. I argue that read together in the context of their colonial time, these three works served to segregate music from the arena of effective anti-colonial politics, and to relegate it to the confines of the purely personal. Indian music and Indian musical gurus and mentors were, as Rolland put it, part of the eastern “brain hemisphere”, one that could provide spiritual wisdom but not political acumen, that would be the healing influence during and after the business of the other more powerful half of the globe: territorial conquest, administration, and economic domination.

It is important to understand exactly why reading Tagore, Forster and Inayat Khan together is crucial to any study of the literature about music at the time. A.H.Fox-Strangways’ 1914 study *The Music of Hindustan* features a drawing of Tagore as the frontispiece, and Fox-Strangways describes him as “one who more than any other may be said to personify Indian music in its broadest sense” (vii). Tagore not only wrote more than 2500 songs, but also plays and dance dramas which contained songs, novels and short stories that have since become films which include his songs, and innumerable essays, articles, and occasional pieces on a variety of subjects of cultural and political interest. While his international reputation has waned considerably in recent years, as a high canonical intellectual figure he continues to be controversial in India, especially in his native state of Bengal, being variously viewed as poet sublime, patriot, and visionary by some, as elitist anglophile by others, and by still others, more recently, as an early anti-statist. What cannot be ignored is the continuing popular influence of his songs, consciously or unconsciously learnt and sung by almost everybody who speaks the

Bengali language. Indeed, for the Indian listener, and particularly for Bengalis of the time, through his early patriotic songs - which indicted the coloniser as violent, self-serving and rapacious, and most often figured colonisation as slavery - Tagore played a significant if brief role in the struggle for freedom from British rule. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson point out that at the height of the 1905 *swadeshi* non-cooperation movement protesting the British Viceroy's partition of Bengal, he composed a series of patriotic songs, an amazing 23 altogether, in just over a month from mid-September. This list includes the ever-popular "*Jodi tor dak dhune keu na ashe tobe ekla cholo re*" ("If no one answers your call, walk alone"), later a favourite of Mahatma Gandhi's, "*Banglar mati, Banglar jal*" ("The soil of Bengal, the water of Bengal") and "*Bidhir bandhon bhangbe*" ("Breaking a bond decreed by Fate") (144). Highlighting his role in the political mobilization of Bengalis, Subramanian writes "...poetry and Tagore had sung Bengal into a nation" (139). This is in direct contrast to Tagore's image outside India as a woolly and benevolent Eastern mystic. Tagore also wrote in English, often translating his own songs, poetry, and prose, becoming one of the early representatives of Indian culture to the West in the decades before independence from British rule. As a result, the songs he selected for dissemination in the West, what he had to say to readers of these translated songs, and how his message was understood, are vital to this analysis.

I choose to include E.M.Forster in this dissertation because, apart from writing his "Indian" novel - and its earliest version, published much after the success of the novel, his Indian letters home in *The Hill of Devi* (1953) -, he was also a music critic who wrote several pieces on the role of music in contemporary society. In 1969, Benjamin Britten described him as "our most musical novelist" (81). Forster collaborated with Eric Crozier

to write the libretto for Britten's opera *Billy Budd*. He has also arguably been seen as among the - if not the - most liberal and sympathetic of the British writers of the time who undertook to explore the subject of cross-cultural (mis)communication between colonizer and colonized. For reasons partly private and personal, and partly public and political, his writing gives evidence of an effort to understand and empathize with the Indians he interacted with, people whose treatment at the hands of British colonial officialdom always horrified him. The music discussed by Forster in *The Hill of Devi*, and in his Indian journal, which becomes the model for that heard and experienced by Fielding - Forster's fictional alter ego in *A Passage to India* - and what Fielding makes of that music are therefore germane to this discussion. And finally, I have included Hazrat Inayat Khan because his early work in disseminating Indian music in the West, his later Sufi teachings, and his canny feel for the cultural-spiritual market together established a relationship between Indian music and the healer-mystic-guru tradition that long outlived him and that continues to surface in global culture to the present day. Khan is also the perfect example of the way in which, as Aravamudan describes it, Islamic Guru English exists within the more audible/visible Hindu version.

In Forster's case, the "failure" of music in his Indian writings is closely related to his notion of form, and the particular role accorded to music within that notion. Forster's writings outside India express a deep belief in music as both a transforming and an organizing principle. In the essay 'Not Listening to Music', written shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, he says: "In these days I am always thinking of it (music) with relief. It can never be ruined or nationalised" (*Two Cheers for Democracy* 138). The goblin that Helen Schlegel imagines when listening to Beethoven's Fifth

Symphony in the famous *Howard's End* section is initially an objective correlative for "panic and emptiness". But the transitional drum passage before the finale in C Major powerfully evokes the spirit of the composer, exorcises the goblin from the world, and allows Helen to believe again in the possibility of human courage and faith. Forster's ideas about music are, it would appear, closely linked to his ideas about the importance of form: "Form is important today, when the human race is trying to ride the worldwind" (*Two Cheers* 103). In the same piece he says that he continues to practice the piano himself, no matter how amateur his efforts, because it helps him develop a sense of structure in his writing. Elsewhere, in "A Note on the Way" (1936) he writes: "If public violence increases and Geneva itself disappears – who is going to prop our minds? The great minds of the past?... Yes, they are going to do something. If we have read them, or listened to good music, it is going to be of some use" (*Abinger Harvest* 1987). Order, then, may be threatened, but can be re-established by recourse to form as it is realized in great ideas and great music.

Yet, as Alex Aronson (1980), Linda Hutcheon (1982) and David Medalie (2002) point out, there is a certain incompatibility between this view and Forster's stated preference for "music which is untrammelled and untainted by reference... obviously the best sort of music to listen to; we get nearer the centre of reality" (*Two Cheers* 124). Discussing the shifting reasons why Forster gives music "exalted status", Hutcheon writes: "Sometimes he held the view that it was the form or the order of the art... At other times he also seemed to want to attribute music's power to something that reminded him of something else, or even to something ineffable, almost mystical in it. The formal and the impressionistic impulses seem to be at war in Forster" (1982:85). Medalie points out that

Forster treats this ambivalence himself in ‘Not Listening to Music’ where he says he hears two kinds of music simultaneously, one kind being “music that reminds me of something” - which he calls “wool-gathering”, as opposed to - rather less clearly - “music itself” (Two Cheers 122-124). It is this ambivalence between the formal and the impressionistic that accounts for the very different possible readings of the music sequences in *A Passage to India*. On the one hand, the sections which describe music are read by some critics as possible answers to the “muddle”-some questions India poses. On the other, these passages can be connected quite logically to the “muddle” itself, to the echo that the Marabar caves emit. I lean towards the latter reading, and will now explain how Forster’s ideas about music are central to this interpretation.

For the purpose of our discussion, I would like to focus on Forster’s particular way of looking at “music itself” as architectural, as having an impact that he describes as “rhythmic”, an impact which makes the sum of a musical composition more than its parts. We will then look at how this idea works in the connections between *A Passage to India*, *The Hill of Devi*, and his Indian journal. In *Aspects of the Novel* Forster says: “Is there any effect in novels comparable to the effect of the Fifth Symphony...where, when the orchestra stops we hear something that has never been played? (The movements)...all enter the mind at once and extend one another into a common entity...(T)his new thing, the symphony as a whole, has been achieved mainly...by the relation between...blocks of sound....I am calling this relation ‘rhythmic’” (115-6). Again, in the essay “Raison d’Etre of Criticism in the Arts” he writes: “I can conceive myself hearing a piece...as it goes by and also when it is finished. In the latter case I should hear it as an entity, as a piece of sound architecture, not as a sound sequence, not as something divisible into bars. Yet it

would be organically connected with the concert-hall performance” (TCD 116). Medalie highlights this idea to discuss the sonata-like structure of *A Passage to India*, a novel divided into three sections, Mosque, Cave, and Temple, each of which works “rhythmically” with the others to form the whole (126). I would like to bring this idea of sonic accumulation to bear on the relationship between Forster’s descriptions of Indian music in the *Hill of Devi*, his Indian journal, and *A Passage to India*. I suggest that the idea of music which continues to be heard after it has actually stopped playing is closely related to the novel’s ominously echoing “boum”, and to the ultimate failure of cross-cultural communion in the novel, even though this communion is something Forster deeply desired.

The two books and the journal have a complex relationship and critics warn us against any easy identification of characters or experiences between them. James McConkey observes that “the letters collected in *The Hill of Devi*, which was written in 1921, three years before the completion of the novel only show “India experienced” in all its immediacy. The novel is an artistic expression of India remembered – in England – and therefore the attempt to relate the letters to the visionary quality of *A Passage to India* is clearly illogical.” McConkey’s words of caution are telling, because they draw attention to something that Forster, as we have seen, himself notices: the difference between what he hears in the concert hall - here, the “immediacy” of India – and what we must understand as his fuller understanding of that which he hears, only available in retrospect. But it is important to point out that Foster also stresses the “organic connection” between the recollection and the concert-hall performance, and it is the organicity of this connection that I wish to highlight in this analysis. In her introduction to *The Hill of Devi*

Elizabeth Heine notes that the “multiplicity of analogues between the characters of the novel and Forster and his friends...defeats the critic in search of exact single models” (xxiv). We cannot, however, say quite the same thing of the novel’s descriptions of music. Both Professor Godbole’s song for Fielding as well as his ecstatic singing and dancing at the Gokul Ashtami (Krishna) festival celebrations in the fictional princely state of Mau have clear analogues in Forster’s Indian experiences as he relates them to his correspondents. But, as we shall see, how those experiences get translated into fiction – in particular, the condensation of much that the journal describes into two or three small segments in the novel - reveals much about Forster’s attitude to the music he heard.

Because Forster had a keen ear generally, and for music more particularly, as well as for what effect music had on any situation, the journal and letters written over several trips to India between 1912 and 1945 contain no less than twenty four references to music, musicians, and musical instruments. These vary considerably in length and detail, from stray one-line mentions of musicians glimpsed or instruments heard in the background, to half paragraphs on the quality of musical entertainment offered, to descriptions extended over several pages, as in the case of the Krishna festival, and the celebrations to mark the birth of a royal baby in Dewas, a princely state outside British India where Forster briefly worked as private secretary to the Maharajah. The author refers to music in positive or complimentary terms in only four places, and most often these relate to formal classical performances by professional singers. Five brief references are value neutral. The rest, fifteen in all, relate either to participative religious music, or to nautch, courtesan, and folk entertainments at court. Forster is ruthlessly

critical of the latter kinds of entertainment. Describing the Holi celebrations, when Dewas is at its “most Dionysiac”, he writes disapprovingly of its tasteless eunuch singer:

A tall scraggy man with a moustache then appeared, dressed in a pink sari, and paid grotesque and unwelcome attentions to such members of the audience as H.H. indicated. – This seemed to be a recognized turn.- Squatting beside his victim, the hideous creature sang and mopped and mowed while the court applauded....Since both the (other) performers were male, H.H. considered that the proprieties had been observed....he commanded a repeat performance. (Journal entry, April 6<sup>th</sup> 1912, Heine 36)

Elsewhere, relating the welcome ceremonies for the new born princess, he remarks on the terrific noise and the peculiar mixture of eastern and western music that the Maharajah sees fit to inflict on his court.

The birth of a Little Baby has turned everything upside down, so far as it wasn't already in that position. The rites...are extraordinary, and seem designed to cause the greatest possible discomfort to mother and child. The unfortunate pair have to listen to music outside their door for nearly fifteen days. It began with fireworks and a discharge of rifles from the entire army in batches; then drums, trumpets, stringed instruments and singing....(for) fifteen (H.H.) must sleep in the compound where her house stands and his friends and attendants stay with him and listen to the continual music....The courtyard is tidier than it was, but the first night we lay with bullocks all around. Yesterday being the fifth day the music did really go on all night. Nautch girls and boys dressed as girls howled, there were farces, dialogues, dances, the military band moaned western melodies. (Letter of 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1921, Heine 45)

Here, of course, Forster describes a situation that could only have obtained in princely India. Greg Booth (2005) and Janaki Bakhle (2005) both testify to the prestige that attached to the maintenance of a European band by Indian princes. Used to impress subjects at state occasions, their effect, as Forster witnesses, was more often than not ludicrous to outsiders, particularly Europeans. (At one point, while elephants bellow, the band plays “‘Nights of Gladness’ as loudly as possible” (66).) We must also allow here for the mandatory drollness of letters from the colonies to elderly female relatives, as

well as to the stereotypes of bulls on Indian roads and in Indian households that such letters both engendered and were expected to uphold.

The band and its cacophonies however, are but one aspect of the manifold unease that Forster's passages about music in India reveal. Other sections sometimes imply and sometimes admit quite honestly to complete confusion about the way in which music appears to work for Indians. Even where Forster acknowledges that the music can be beautiful, he emphasizes how little it helps him understand the Indian mind. Continuing the above passage, he writes:

...at 3.0 a.m. something unusual aroused me – the music became beautiful;...H.H.was asleep...the townsfolk had gone...only a few experts survived. Why save your best singers until 3.0 a.m.? “Ask India another” is the only answer to such a question! I am as far as ever from understanding Indian singing, but have no doubt that I was listening to great art, it was so complicated and yet so passionate. The singer (man) and the drummer were of almost equal importance and wove around the chord of C Major elaborate patterns that came to an end at the same moment – at least that's as near as I can explain it; it was like Western music reflected in trembling water, and it continued in a single burst for half an hour. The words were unimportant, mere excuses for the voice to function.(para) But what fun the lady and the little baby get out of the above I don't know. H.H. quite agrees that it is monstrous – he has all the right feelings – but says tradition is too strong to be changed! At one time the band was actually in the bedroom. (Letter of 9<sup>th</sup> May, 1921, Heine 45)

Here Forster outlines quite accurately the singing of a classical *khayal*, and is clearly approving of the coordination between singer and drummer, understanding how crucial this is to the effect of *khayal* singing. He also correctly identifies the relative importance of words in the typical *khayal* scheme. Forster was also aware of some of the controversies around classical music due to its practitioners largely being courtesans, for he wrote to Florence Barger in September 1921:

The music – some singers are good but most that I have heard are not, and all become bawdy at the least encouragement. It is a great misfortune for art to be associated with prostitution, not for moral reasons but because every flight to beauty or fancy is apt to be cut short. H.H. leads a “good” life as it is called, and our singing parties at the palace are only a debauch to the superficial observer. But there is much verbal and histrionic indecency which amused me at first, not now, because I see that it takes the place of so much that I value. I am afraid that Indian singing is doomed for this reason, because all the reformers and westernizers will have none of it. And it is, or has been, a great art. (Heine 75)

In the shift from “it is” to “or has been” we see that Forster agrees – though primarily for aesthetic rather than moral reasons - with the Indian reformers of classical music who were occupied, at the time, with removing that music from the brothels and bringing it out onto the concert stage and into the living rooms of educated middle class connoisseurs.

But the concession of “great art” notwithstanding, as Medalie points out, like most Europeans Forster was mystified by the absence of tonality in Hindustani classical music, a reaction that is explicitly rendered in the two musical episodes with Professor Godbole. Analyzing Fielding’s response to Godbole’s singing in *A Passage*, Medalie observes: “This song satisfies none of the Western expectations regarding aesthetic form: it is without a clearly delineated beginning and end, it attains no climaxes, and it seems to promise the consolations of rhythm and ‘Western melody’ only to disappoint...” (145). Something of Fielding’s puzzlement, as well as that of Ronny, Adela and Mrs. Moore, the other western listeners, is born in the moment when Forster refers to the singing above as being “like Western music reflected in trembling water”. Godbole is generally acknowledged as a focal figure in terms of Forster’s response to Hinduism. He is a professor and Fielding’s subordinate in the local college of the British Indian town of Chandrapur, who later goes on to become Minister of Education in the princely state of

Mau, Forster's fictional version of Dewas. This professor is a Deccani (Southern) Brahmin, i.e. of a caste traditionally thought to possess both textual learning and practical wiliness, and his name literally means "sweet-speaking". (The pun on "God" in English and "sweet" in Marathi has not been lost on critics as they emphasize Godbole's importance as the foremost representative and spokesperson for Hinduism in this novel.) Godbole is deeply religious, often inscrutable, thought to be very wise, and given to speaking in aphorisms. His worship is expressed, among other things, in song. Forster describes him in detail: "He wore a turban that looked like pale purple macaroni, coat, waistcoat, dhoti, socks with clocks. The clocks matched the turban and his whole appearance suggested harmony, as if he had reconciled the products of East and West, mental as well as physical, and could never be discomposed. The ladies were interested in him and hoped that he would...(say) something about religion" (72-3). Godbole, thus harmonized, is the perfectly qualified and capable candidate for an early fictional Indian musical-spiritual mentor persona. Yet when he chooses to oblige the ladies he sings, and his singing, as unexpected as it is inexplicable, signals a moment where communication closes down:

His thin voice rose and gave out one sound after another. At times there seemed rhythm, at times there seemed the illusion of a Western melody. But the ear, baffled repeatedly, soon lost any clue, and wandered in a maze of noises, none harsh or unpleasant, none intelligible. It was the song of an unknown bird. Only the servants understood it. They began to whisper to one another. The man who was gathering water chestnut came naked out of the tank, his lips parted with delight, disclosing his scarlet tongue. The sounds continued and ceased after a few moments, as casually as they had begun – apparently half through a bar, and upon the subdominant. (79)

The cultural gap between Godbole and his western listeners is emphasized by the mention of the servants who are "delighted" by what they hear. For the others, Godbole's

performance is merely a series of sounds, not just untranslatable in terms of language, but also the more incomprehensible on account of their lack of any sequence that might put them into a coherent frame of reference for Fielding and Mrs. Moore, who nonetheless make a brave attempt to interpret what they have heard:

“Thanks so much, what was that?” asked Fielding. “I will explain in detail. It was a religious song. I placed myself in the position of a milkmaid. I say to Shri Krishna, ‘Come! Come to me only.’ The god refuses to come. I grow humble and say: ‘Do not come to me only, multiply yourself into a hundred Krishnas, and let one go to each of my hundred companions, but one, O Lord of the Universe, come to me.’ He refuses to come. This is repeated several times. The song is composed in a raga appropriate to the present hour, which is the evening.” “But He comes in another song, I hope?” said Mrs. Moore gently. “Oh no, he refuses to come,” repeated Godbole, perhaps not understanding her question. “I say to Him, Come, come, come, come, come, come. He neglects to come.” Ronnie’s steps had died away, and there was a moment of absolute silence. No ripple disturbed the water, no leaf stirred. (79-80)

Clearly, over and above its technical or stylistic differences with western music, the religious thematic of Indian music too requires explanation in further “detail”. But this is not an explanation that Godbole sees as necessary, for if he is a guru, he is not yet one to westerners. He stops short at the literal translation and does not see fit to offer any philosophical interpretation of the lyrics that might better enlighten his listeners.

After the stillness of this almost complete incomprehension, our next extended encounter with the enigmatic Godbole is in the climactic sequence in Mau, where he is now the Minister of Education, and one of the chief celebrants at the Krishna festival held under the auspices of the palace. Critic after critic has asserted that it is in this section that Forster comes closest to understanding the Hindu sensibility. The writing here hovers between observation and participation:

(At) midnight...the conch broke forth,...the trumpeting of elephants; all who had packets of powder threw them at the altar, and in the rosy dust and incense, and clanging and shouts, Infinite Love took upon itself the form of SHRI KRISHNA, and saved the world. All sorrow was annihilated, not only for Indians, but for foreigners, birds, caves, railways and the stars; all became joy, all laughter; there had never been disease nor doubt, misunderstanding, cruelty, fear. (287-8)

In Godbole's ecstatic frenzy, his Krishna worship becomes an all-encompassing love for all living things from the now dead Mrs. Moore to the wasp he sees in the temple hall. Yet even while Forster sees and empathizes with Godbole's feelings, I argue that this happens despite, rather than because of the effect of the religious music. And I would also suggest that this was Forster's fictional reworking of a situation that he did not read with quite the same empathy when it was actually taking place. To better understand this, we need to go back to the journal and to the Hill letters, and see how music and the aural are addressed there. We will see, there, how Indian religious music, and the rituals it accompanies, become irritants and stumbling blocks even for Forster. We will also see that because he writes for an audience of one, his voice is a lot less open and sympathetic. Finally, we will see the genesis of the connection between the aural chaos at Dewas and the malignant "boum", the echo that follows Mrs. Moore. I argue that this echo was Forster's emotional and literary displacement of a confusion that grew out of the extraordinary wall of Indian sounds he encountered, particularly those which, for him, merely went by the name of music, and which he found too difficult to deal with in any other way.

Both in the Journal and in the letters, Forster bemoans what he sees as a lack of aesthetic sense in Indians in general - whether in the princely states or in British India - and in the Maharajah in particular. In an early letter, he complains: "But oh the pictures! The dear creature has not a glimmer of taste and on the dark wooden pillars are hung

“Love me Love my dog” or Xmas plates from the Graphic. Even when the subjects are Hindu they are cheap prints, and he has actually put glass balls to swing from the ceiling” (Letter of March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1913, Heine 11). Understanding that some of this may have to do with the personality of the Maharajah, he is nevertheless unable to shake off the idea that this lack of taste might be a failure of Indian aesthetics in general. “I cannot yet discover how much of it is traditional and how much due to H.H.”, he writes, beginning to relate his Gokul Ashtami (Krishna Festival) experience. “What troubles me”, he continues, “is that every detail, almost without exception, is fatuous, and in bad taste....everything bad” (Letter of August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1921, Heine 64). Trying to communicate his need to find a comprehensible shape in the chaos he observes, he says: “I tap about over this place and wonder whether I grow deaf or whether there really is no echo. Except in the direction of religion, where I allow them much, these people don’t seem to move towards anything important; there is no art, the literature is racial and I suspect its value, there is no intellectual interest, although His Highness at least has an excellent intellect” (Letter of September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1921, Heine 75). (We must, of course, read this praise of H.H.’s intellect in the context of the latter’s blind eye in public to Forster’s open-secret sexual liaison with his man servant at court, something the author was always grateful to him for (Heine xl).) In a May 1921 letter to Lowes Dickinson, Forster writes: “In fact I was coming around a little to your view of the Indian or anyhow the Hindu character – that it is unaesthetic. One is starved by the absence of beauty. The one beautiful object I can see is something that no Indian has made or can touch – the constellation of the Scorpion....I look forward to it as to a theatre or picture gallery after the constant imperfections of the day” (Heine 52). The perceived lack of aesthetic value would have been bad enough by

itself; what makes it worse for Forster is that it accompanies clear signs of financial and other mismanagement in the Dewas palace, and these two threads of thought are intertwined in his writing:

...slabs of marble lie about, roads lead nowhere, costly fruit trees die for want of water, and... 1000 worth...of electric batteries lie in a room near at hand and will spoil unless fixed promptly. I can't start now on the inside of the palace – two pianos (one a grand), a harmonium and a dulciphone, all new and all unplayable, their notes sticking and their frames warped by the dryness....I don't know what to do about it all, and scarcely what to feel. It's no good trying to make something different out of it, for it is as profoundly Indian as an Indian temple. I tell H.H. about the worst things, and he is delighted with me, and I wire for a piano-tuner from Bombay, and say that all work must be stopped until the power-house is enlarged and the batteries installed. But already I have no illusions. (Letter of April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1921, Heine 32)

The neglected pianos in the “profoundly Indian” confusion of the palace require the attention of a British-trained tuner from Bombay, the richest city in British India, just as much as H.H., as far as Forster can understand, requires a dose of European good taste and money management skills.

During the Krishna festival, admitting that the music and the religious ceremonies it accompanies, however tasteless to his own ear and eye, certainly have a beatific effect on the worshippers, including the Maharajah, Forster quickly distances himself from them:

I cannot see the point of this...I suppose that if you believe your drunkenness proceeds from God it becomes more enjoyable. Yet I am very much *muddled* in my own mind about it all, for H.H. has what one understands by the religious sense and it comes out all through his life. He is always thinking of others and refusing to take advantage of his position...The heat is immense and since, H.H. disdains adventitious comforts, he has the electric fans turned off when his time comes to sing.- I don't think I can describe it better than this, and it is difficult to make vivid what seems so fatuous. There is no dignity, no taste, *no form*, and though I am dressed as a Hindu I shall never become one. I don't think one ought to be irritated with Idolatory because one can see from the faces of the people that it touches something very deep in their hearts. *But is is natural that Missionaries, who think*

*these ceremonies wrong as well as inartistic, should lose their tempers*” (italics mine) (Letter of August 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1921, Heine 64).

And finally, tellingly, of the tremendous impact of singing, braying elephants and brass bands, he writes: “I shall never be at an end of the queernesses.... It is *the noise, the noise, the noise, the noise which sucks one into a whirlpool*, from which there is no re-emerging. *The whole of what one understands by music seems lost for ever, or rather seems never to have existed* (italics mine) (ibid). Here we are at the enervating moment where the religious ceremony begins to merge in Forster’s mind with the experience of the cave and the sound of the echo, a place where senselessness and sameness reign. With a candour that is withheld from us in the novel, he winds up the letter with the following words: “But by now you will have heard enough of religions of sorts. I have, and am ashamed that the good people here should have felt I was so sympathetic. The mere fact that I did not hold myself aloof seemed enough – they did not the least mind my saying that it all meant nothing to me” (Letter of August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1921, Heine 68).

Adela’s traumatic cave experience in *The Passage* too, has more than one real life original, one of which deals with the heat and the irritation of bad music.<sup>7</sup> In his journal entry of March 29<sup>th</sup>, 1913, Forster describes a visit to the Ajanta and Ellora caves:

Went over hillside to Buddhist group. No beauty as at Gaya or Sarnath. Giants round their seated master. The Hindu caves, very different, had no beauty either: the

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<sup>7</sup> Heine’s editorial notes include a reference on pg. 335 to the first of these real life incidents. On Dec 14<sup>th</sup>, 1921 in Gangawati (near Hyderabad) Forster insisted on climbing a cactus covered hill to visit Mudgal fort and later gave Adela his own misfortune, an extremely unpleasant encounter with the cactus needles he fell down on. This is recorded in the accompanying Divisional Inspector Ali Akbar’s memoir. Forster himself does not mention the incident to his aunt in the letter he was writing at the time. Was it too traumatic? What did he learn from it, or wish to avoid?

brute aroused instead of somnolent: that was all....(The guide) sang Hindi love-songs to us in the Indra sabha cave – Indra, said S., was fond of music. The heat great and we had no thermos. S. and M.I., who don't care for sightseeing, especially when the sight is Hindu, didn't want me to stop behind....S. and I got slightly askew: he would guard and order me and invent imaginary perils of beast and reptile...“You have got a wrong idea of the Indians; they are sensitive but not foolishly sensitive” (he said) when we got home. (Heine 225-6)

The guide's singing, fatuous and unnecessary to Forster's ear in the heat and darkness of the cave, make Syed Ross Masood ('S's) mention of the Hindu god Indra even more repellant: Indra exemplifies “the brute aroused”. The cave becomes the repository of “perils”, even if imaginary ones, and Indians are “foolishly sensitive.” As we know, Forster thought himself - and continues to be regarded as - sympathetic to Indians and to their need for independence from an increasingly heavy-handed British rule, and this reputation finds some basis in his other writings. But running very close to that sympathy is a vein of incomprehension, a vein clearly influenced by his aural experience in India. His letters are addressed to others who share not just his aesthetic values - and Forster was certainly more liberal than many Englishmen on this score - but also his English ideas on organization and efficient administration, all of which are confounded by the India he encounters. He might not join the missionaries in wanting to convert India to Christianity, but he understands at least some of their difficulties. While he makes no critical comment about the nationalist struggle even when in British India, where the freedom movement was far more intense than in the mostly loyalist princely states, his writing provides evidence, in the musical and other “muddles” it highlights, of his deepseated doubts about the Indian capacity for self-governance. Though he presents us with a learned musical figure in Godbole, whether because in the first case Godbole will not oblige, or because later Forster/Fielding is ultimately unreceptive to Godbole's

version of Hindu wisdom sung, the moment of possibly meaningful communication between them is lost.

If Godbole, though he has all the makings of a guru, is unwilling to have guru-ness thrust upon him, we cannot say the same thing of Rabindranath Tagore. Yeats' very admiring, almost worshipful introduction to the *Gitanjali* gives us some clues as to why Tagore's image abroad became what it did. In Bengal, Tagore is still reverently called 'Gurudev', a title that combines "guru", or teacher, with "dev", or God. It is understandable that a sense of his special spirituality would transmit itself to Western readers, particularly since the focus of the *Gitanjali*'s songs is on the relationship of man to divinity. But the Tagore persona in the West retained only these spiritual and mystical aspects of the whole, what can be described as the 'Gurudev' aspects only, of a far more fleshed out writer of a huge variety of songs secular and religious, composer of popular music, author of deeply thoughtful and analytical essays and novels, committed social reformer, and finely nuanced, politically aware Indian thinker. Symptomatic of extant notions of Tagore, a "distinguished Bengali doctor" is quoted by Yeats in his 1912 Introduction to the *Gitanjali*: 'He (Rabindranath) is as great in music as in poetry....He is the first among our saints who has not refused to live, but has spoken out of Life itself, and that is why we give him our love" (viii-ix). What made Tagore "saintly"? Even discounting the hyperbole, what does it mean to "refuse to live"? Practice celibacy? Not enjoy the material luxuries? None of which, of course, Tagore, who came from an affluent family and had several children, would countenance (see biographers Uma Dasgupta, and Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson). He writes in Song 73 "Deliverance

is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight....No, I will never shut the doors of my senses.”

The pre-publicity for Tagore in the West, however, verged on describing him as quasi-divine, and in a very singular way, a way unlike that of traditional holy men. The Bengali doctor goes on to say that like Tagore, he too belongs to the Brahmo Samaj, a religious reform society founded by Rammohan Roy in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that Tagore’s grandfather Dwarkanath Tagore had played a part in popularising: “...(W)e of the Brahmo Samaj”, the doctor proudly announces, “use your word ‘church’ in English” (x). This apparently makes things a little clearer to the outsider: Tagore then, must be a Brahmo saint. The Brahmo Samaj, under the influence of Roy’s adopted Unitarian Christianity, had been willing – at the cost of severe ostracism by conservative Hindus - to give up idol worship and adopt a creed in some ways similar to the Christian monotheistic model, which they saw as an updated version of the essentially monotheistic belief of the Vedas. By the time of Tagore’s coming to maturity though, many of the Samaj’s social battles had already been fought. Certainly Tagore himself and the Brahmos he socialized with - thanks to plentiful incomes from businesses and properties in rural Bengal (in the Tagore’s case, the Shilaidaha *zamindari* (estate)) as well as in Calcutta, even after the recession of the mid-1830s badly hit several families’ fortunes - paid a very small price for their families’ religious choices. Also, we cannot forget that the Brahmo Samaj did not reflect the ideas of the majority of Indians, or even of the Indian upper classes in general, but merely those of a miniscule western-educated section of the Bengali elite. How did Tagore then come to represent India and all Indians?

Yeats hears of how many great men have been born into the Tagore family: religious reformers, artists, philosophers. His response, the irony of which he was clearly oblivious to, is: “In the East you know how to keep a family illustrious” (xi). It has been remarked time and again that Tagore belonged to a family that was wealthy enough not to worry about making a living, and could dabble in the arts and philosophy in the certainty of comfortable annual dividends and incomes from their rural properties. In this, Tagore joins the ranks of aristocratic writers across cultures and centuries. What distinguishes him from many of them, though, is the idea, again frequently invoked in Bengal while referring to his exceptional polymathic abilities, that he was the flower, the acme, the most evolved and talented of an already outstandingly talented family, and that each of his family members contributed something of their abilities and characteristics – verse, drama, debate, music, spirituality, empathy with the cause of women’s rights, love of nature - to the creation of young Rabindranath’s almost mythicized perfect whole self. Yeats then goes on to praise the “abundance” and “simplicity” of Tagore’s poetry, as opposed to work undertaken in response to “propagandist writing” and “criticism”, both, according to Yeats, taking away four-fifths of the time that Western writers could more productively spend in the really important creative activity. Tagore, it is implied, comes from a milieu so steeped in aesthetic elegance that no “quarrel with bad taste” is necessary to negotiate the literary, dramatic and musical marketplaces, if indeed such a crassly commercial term could be used to describe that rarefied “supreme culture” (xii-xiii). Dutta and Robinson note that in spite of the popularity of Tagore’s work, his royalties from writing were in fact always quite modest, certainly not the kind of earnings he might have lived off, even had he not been, as he was, used to a luxurious lifestyle

(140). In reply to the question whether India had no propagandist writing, Yeats quotes the Bengali doctor as replying: "...we too have our propagandist writing. In the villages they recite long mythological poems adapted from the Sanscrit in the Middle Ages, and they often insert passages telling the people that they must do their duties" (xiii). The two "they"s in this sentence are not the same; the first refers to the villagers who were in the habit of singing or chanting from the epics, and the second alludes to their masters, for whom religious texts were, of course, the first and easiest instruments of indoctrination and exploitation. "Propagandist writing" in Tagore's case then, something Yeats fails to see or acknowledge, was clearly not a hindrance; in fact, it was largely responsible for producing the circumstances that allowed Tagore to write. In a book tellingly entitled *Partner of Empire*, Blair Kling details the rise of the Tagore family to the role of the "Calcutta Medicis", from obscurity as "low" Piral Brahmins in Jessore, only allowed to conduct religious services for the lower castes, to the glorious cosmopolitan days of the enterprising Dwarkanath, who amassed money enough for several generations to squander by providing supplies to the commissariat of the East India Company at Fort William (10).

The second section of Yeats's Introduction is an extended paean to Tagore's work. He acknowledges that everything he knows of the originals is secondhand knowledge. The reader, who does not know his informants - "his" Indians- , must take their opinion on trust because it comes to them in the form of his, Yeats', own recommendation.: "These lyrics – which are in the original, my Indians tell me, full of subtlety of rhythm, of untranslatable delicacies of colour, of metrical invention – display in their thought a world I have dreamt of all my life long. (They are) The work of a supreme culture...."

(xiii). Already, the inadequacies of translation are an issue, as of course they must be in practically any translated work. Here too, the joys of rhyme must be abandoned, as also the satisfactions of alliteration. But as Nabaneeta Deb Sen points out, what aggravated these inadequacies were Tagore's own translations. Now this may not have been a problem under normal circumstances. Who better to translate a poem or lyric than the author himself, who would best know what he meant to say in the original? But this assumption also includes the corollary assumptions that a) the author has quite as strong a command over the second language and b) he is equally capable of rendering poetry as poetry in that language. And, as subsequent dialogues between Yeats and their mutual friend William Rothenstein would reveal, while Tagore's English prose was outstanding for a non-native speaker, his abilities with English did not answer the poetic requirements of the work he took on for the *Gitanjali*. As a result, Tagore, himself quite aware of his failings as an English poet, chose to translate the songs in prose. This had disastrous effects, as Leonard Woolf was to observe in a 1924 article: "...in the original his poems may be real and great poetry; in English they have a thin weakness..." (*The Nation and The Athenaeum*, 1924). Ezra Pound, who, with Yeats, was assigned the task of correcting Tagore's first publications in English, wrote to Harriet Monroe bemoaning the fact that in selecting songs or poems to translate, Tagore had not chosen the best pieces, and remarking that without the "rime and rhytm" of the original song-poems, Tagore's writing was "just more theosophy" (Pound, *Letters*, 55). In the introduction to his recent prose translations of the *Gitanjali* lyrics Joe Winter points out that 50 of the 103 *Gitanjali* prose poems are from other books: "The fifty three that justify the title...represent only a third of the Bengali./Gitanjali, or rather less, as he truncated so many....The chief

difference however, is in the sharp sense of the individual that the original carries; its joy, its immediacy; its keener and fuller exploration of the self as spirit; and overwhelmingly in the quality of the poetry” (14-15). Moreover, Dutta and Robinson, Dasgupta, and Winter all stress the fact that Tagore chose the most spiritual and unobjectionable of his poems, those that he thought would go down well with London readers, selecting largely on a thematic rather than stylistic basis. Most critics agree that the poet’s recent experiences of death - his wife and daughter – had made him melancholy at the time, possibly one of the causes for him to select the more metaphysical pieces for translation. Winter observes that the original *Gitanjali* songs were till recently thought of as practically untranslatable; even the most celebrated Tagore scholar and translator William Radice did not attempt to work with them in his *Selected Poems* (15-16). Yet, it was these songs that Tagore chose as the most appropriate way to represent himself and his culture to an international readership.

With each of these problems: selection, translation, and conversion into prose, the songs as they are presented to the foreign reader, move further and further away from the original *Gitanjali*, as well as the other two of his collections (*Naivedya* and *Kheya*) that Tagore selected from in compiling the collection eventually to go by the name of *Gitanjali*, that he sent Rothenstein and Yeats. The final blow comes in the fact of the songs being read rather than heard as sung music. Winter notes that “(t)here is in fact a distinction of meaning between poem and song though they may use the same words. The intellectual drive that can exist low-key in lyric poetry is noticeable in a good many of the... pieces; while in the songs it naturally falls away to some extent though never absent” (16). I would argue that Tagore translations, in fact, work to move the songs

away from their original intellectual content and endow them instead, with a heightened emotional religiosity, something his international readers immediately homed in on. In contrast, his domestic readers, who sang his songs, as well as understood his intellectual bent far more thoroughly than did the audience of the translated *Gitanjali*, were able to see the songs as one aspect of a mind that was not always steeped in metaphysics, that understood as equally real the material social issues of his time, and that could draw sharp distinctions between the spiritual and the secular.

In the pieces selected for the *Gitanjali*, Tagore identifies himself time and again as a writer and singer of songs rather than as just a poet. It has, of course, been common in several literary cultures for poets to speak of what flows from their pens as song, but Tagore's *Gitanjali* lyrics go substantially above and beyond this poetic tradition. 21 of the 113 pieces make explicit reference to music and songs, many of them alluding to musical composition and performance as Tagore's own special mode of worship. Song 2, reproduced here in full, is a perfect example:

When thou commandest me to sing it seems that my heart would break  
with pride; and I look to thy face, and tears come to my eyes.

All that is harsh and dissonant in my life melts into one sweet harmony –  
and my adoration spreads wings like a glad bird on its flight across the sea.

I know thou takest pleasure in my singing. I know that only as a singer I  
come before thy presence.

I touch by the edge of the far spreading wing of my song thy feet which I  
could never aspire to reach.

Drunk with the joy of singing I forget myself and call thee friend who art  
my lord.

In Song 7, he writes:

My song has put off her adornments...Ornaments would mar our union,  
they would come between thee and me....

Only let me make my life simple and straight, like a flute of reed for thee  
to fill with music.

And again, here is Song 15 in its entirety:

I am here to sing thee songs. In this hall of thine I have a corner seat.

In thy world I have no work to do; my useless life can only break out in  
tunes without a purpose.

When the hour strikes for thy silent worship at the dark temple of  
midnight, command me, my master, to stand before thee to sing.

When in the morning air the golden harp is tuned, honour me,  
commanding my presence.

Envisioning union with God as a secret voyage “to no country and no end”, Song 42  
hopes for a time when “In that shoreless ocean, at thy silently listening smile my songs  
would swell in melodies, free as waves, free from all bondage of words.” Song 49  
celebrates the fact that the singer-poet has been singled out for special attention: “I was  
singing all alone in a corner, and the melody caught your ear. You came down and stood  
at my cottage door.....the simple carol of this novice struck at your love. One plaintive  
little strain mingled with the great music of the world....”

And finally, Song 101, also quoted here in full, refers to a joyful ending:

Ever in my life have I sought thee with my songs. It was they who led me  
from door to door, and with them have I felt about me, searching and  
touching my world.

It was my songs that taught me all the lessons I ever learnt; they showed  
me secret paths, they brought before my sight many a star on the horizon  
of my heart.

They guided me all the day long to the mysteries of the country of pleasure and pain, and, at last, to what palace gate have they brought me in the evening at the end of my journey?

The thrust of my argument here is based on Tagore's insistence, in these lyrics, of having found the way to the presence of divinity through song. For the western reader, for whom he is first and foremost a sage and mystical teacher, he becomes someone who can guide others to the same door, perhaps by the same musical means. The intensity of the songs serves to elide the distinction between feeling - or saying - that one has found god, and actually having "found" that entity, whatever that might mean. Songs, Tagore says, are not just his means of earning "honour", wordly and otherwise, but his best teachers, his way of "searching and touching" his world, his intoxicating connection, through divine command, with a "listening smil(ing)" godhead.

It is significant that it was Yeats this message first made itself clearest to, attuned as he was to the beauty of Irish music, and the tremendous evocative power, cultural and political, of regional languages set to regional tunes. He points out how much more moving Tagore's lyrics would have been as songs to someone who could understand Bengali. Invoking the memory of bards and troubadors, and lamenting the loss of poetry set to music in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, he writes with a prescience that Bengali mainstream culture was to fully vindicate:

When there was but one mind in England, Chaucer wrote his *Troilus and Cressida*, and though he had written to be read, or...read out – for our time was coming on apace – he was sung by minstrels for a while....Tagore – like Chaucer's forerunners, writes music for his words....These verses will not lie in little well-printed books upon ladies' tables...or be carried about by students...to be laid aside when the work of life begins, but as the generations pass, travellers will hum them on the highway and men rowing upon rivers. Lovers, while they await one another,

shall find, in murmuring them this love of God a magic gulf wherein their own more bitter passion may bathe and renew its youth. (xvi)

Tagore's songs do indeed, have a very special place in the Bengali psyche, whether amongst the vast majority that learns and sings *Rabindrasangeet* (literally "Rabindra-music" as it is known) in neighbourhood music schools and homes across Bengal and the Bengali diaspora in India and abroad, or the very small - usually young and urban - minority, who testify equally to the importance of the genre by rebelling against it in composing what are very selfconsciously contemporary *jibonmukhi* ("life-facing") lyrics. Few Bengali homes do not possess a copy of the *Gitobitan* (the collected songs of Tagore) and very many also have a photograph of the aging Rabindranath on some focal wall. In these pictures he is always snowy-haired, bearded, thoughtful, intense. When not shot close-up in three-quarter profile - one popular favourite sold widely, that flatters an already handsome and aquiline face - his tall frame, hands judiciously held behind it, is clad much more gracefully than most holy men, in luxuriantly flowing robes of auspicious ochre or maroon. Some of this clothing - exceptional, extravagantly romantic even in the poet's own day - is reverently displayed at the Shantiniketan museum, ensembles complete with tall hats and matching embroidered velvet slippers; schoolchildren file past them daily, enjoined to be awestruck. Several *Rabindrasangeet* pieces are inspired by folk tunes and lyrics, including the boatmen's songs heard on the Ganges and the Padma, but whether boatmen have actually sung Tagore's songs is doubtful. In every other respect however, Yeats' prediction turns out to be absolutely accurate. Prospective Bengali grooms and their parents visiting the homes of possible inlaws brighten up at the sight of the harmonium and the sound of Tagore - at their specific request - from the would-be bride. Tagore's birthday is a state holiday and is

marked by official ceremonies throughout the country. His death anniversary often coincides with *Barsha Mangal* concerts in Bengal, when the advent of the rains is celebrated. In keeping with his iconic status, he was named India's national poet after independence, and his *Jana Gana Mana* is the national anthem. He is also associated in a musical capacity with what can be called the first rallying cry of anticolonial freedom fighters, the slogan of "*Vande Mataram*" ("Hail to the Mother(land)") that was taken from Anandamath, by India's first novelist, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. It was Tagore who set the verses of '*Vande Mataram*' to music, and he who sang them in public for the first time before the 12th session of the Indian National Congress in 1896.

What Yeats goes on to say, however, is not quite as clear-sighted. Tagore becomes, in Yeats' impassioned recommendation, the authentic representative of what appears to be a particularly limited notion of India and Indian culture: "A whole people, a whole civilization, immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into this imagination;" Yeats writes, "and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image, as though we had walked in Rossetti's willow wood, or heard, perhaps for the first time in literature, our voice as in a dream" (xvi-xvii). That Yeats should see Tagore's work as "in (the) image" of his own culture is hardly surprising, Tagore was deeply influenced by English poets. The Romantics, particularly Wordsworth and Shelley, and the Victorians were great favourites with him. As a result, his poetry, including much of the *Gitanjali*, exhibits his use of Romantic ideas about nature and the immanent, Romantic imagery and synaesthetic tropes, and Browningesque invocations of death as a glorious finale. This is, quite naturally, even more apparent in his English translations. In Song 3, he writes in praise of his divine master:

“The light of thy music illumines the world. The life-breath of thy music runs from sky to sky. The holy stream of thy music breaks through all stony obstacles and rushes on.” (3)

Yeats could not - or should not - have failed to recognize Wordsworth here.

Song 19 is another good example of the influences on Tagore’s poetry, and I reproduce it in its entirety: “If thou speakest not I will fill my heart with thy silence and endure it. I will keep still and wait like the night with starry vigil. / The morning will surely come, the darkness will vanish, and thy voice pour down in golden streams breaking through the sky./ Then thy words will take wing in songs from every one of my birds’ nests, and thy melodies will break forth in flowers in all my forest groves” (16). What in this lyric is different from anything a Romantic western poet might have written? Certainly it cannot be said to be emblematic of any one culture. The synaesthetic elements in the song are powerfully Romantic. Also striking is the similarity with Christian worship poetry. This song could well have been a Christian hymn, and with good reason. Tagore’s Brahmo Samaj upbringing made him visualize the single and invisible divine in terms that were very close to the Christian god, but with a nicely trendy Vedantic-pantheistic touch, something that the Romantics – from Schiller, Schlegel, Herder, and Schopenhauer – had long identified as one of the most attractive aspects of their readings in the Vedanta, the widest-read Hindu texts among scholars of the time. (Richard King 118-9, Aravamudan 64). Identifying Tagore, Bankim Chandra, and the revolutionary-turned-sage-and-mystic Sri Aurobindo, as the most influential “participants in the Janus-faced project of (Indian) romantic nationalism”, Aravamudan writes:

(L)acking a life of its own, Indian Romanticism was a graft onto the already hybrid trunk of British colonialism... Romantic interpretations of pantheistic monism and mysticism...(had) help(ed) propel the abstract philosophy of Advaita Vedanta into the position of prime representative of the construct called “Hinduism.” The extended result of this operation was the prosthetic limb of the Bengal Renaissance that would twitch in response to a long-distance Romantically-inspired language, generating the reformatory religious vocabularies that would later be variously named “neo-Hindusim”, “semitized Hindusim”, “universal Hinduism”, and “syndicated Hinduism”. (64)

It is vital to point out here, that Tagore himself, not even formally a Hindu, never subscribed to any theories of religious chauvinism, or attempted to proselytize on behalf of either Hinduism or his own Brahmo faith. On the contrary, by all biographical accounts, and certainly from his own writing, particularly in *The Religion of Man*, and in novels like *Gora* and *Ghare Baire*, we have evidence of his abiding eclecticism, abhorrence of dogma, and faith in universal humanism. He would have been horrified at being classed as, in Aravamudan’s terms, a proto-“semitic-Hindu”. But the details Aravamudan provides are relevant to our discussion of Tagore as a crucial prophetic figure in the spread of a popular international Hinduism, and to our consequent understanding of how Indian music intersects with that diffusion through an individual who straddled both literary and musical worlds.

Tagore’s brand of Brahmo belief was sometimes labelled “Hindu Brahmoism” because, in keeping with his family’s tradition, he had moved closer to Hindu ideas about worship than many Brahmos. This was part of a long history of debate and fluctuation amongst Brahmos about exactly what level of influence from Western ideas was acceptable at a time when the Westerner was also the coloniser. While Orientalist scholars were aware of the antiquity of both Hindu and Muslim religious texts, the general lay colonial attitude towards both religions as interestingly colourful but savage

and heathen, needing salvation by Christian effort, was naturally galling to the majority of Indians. In his history of Brahma thought, David Kopf writes in depth about the “conflict of modernizing alternatives between Westernizers and Orientalists” and shows the many turns Rabindranath’s ideas took over a long public career, from the extreme of militant nationalism, forsaken through a range of modifications, to his final views about the necessity of universal humanism (Kopf 287-310). His Brahma-ness was tempered by more Hindu thought than early Brahmos may have considered appropriate, and Kopf emphasizes his “rational theistic approach to classical themes in Hinduism” (298).

But in their public and ceremonial aspect, Tagore’s Brahma activities seemed to be more aligned with Christianity than with Hinduism. This was not unusual for Brahmos, and other Brahma factions made no secret of their preference for worship in the Christian style. P.C.Majumdar, for example, led a Good Friday service in 1901, and another to celebrate “Christmas Utsab” in 1903, declaring in a lecture entitled ‘The Meaning and Message of Good Friday’, that “Jesus Christ...was no mere prophet among prophets, but was the universal man, the universal prophet” (Kopf 23). The *Puja* or “Worship” section of Tagore’s *Gitobitan* overlaps with another category called *Brahma Sangeet*, songs written by Rabindranath (and other prominent Brahmos, published elsewhere) for use during weekly Samaj services. These ceremonies were very unlike traditional Hindu *pujas*, and were quite consciously conducted along the lines of Christian Sunday services, with a formal sermon to a seated congregation. The difference between the role of the preacher here and in the Christian church was that he need not have been a religious functionary by profession. Any Samaj member who was articulate and personable enough could take the pulpit as the *acharya* or teacher in his turn. Naturally, Tagore himself read

sermons at the Samaj temple on several occasions and the Bengali doctor of Yeats' Introduction mentions that the poet drew packed galleries in this role (x). Kopf who identifies Tagore as the last charismatic Samaj leader, notes that he threw himself into the task of revitalizing the Samaj, delivering several sermons and lectures from its pulpit between 1908 and 1911, just a year before the publication of the *Gitanjali* in England (Kopf, 298). Though Yeats probably did not know, or if he knew, did not take the fact into consideration, songs at the Samaj temple were sung to the accompaniment of the hand held harmonium (a modification of an instrument Christian missionaries brought to India, which traditional Hindus long boycotted after independence), and the piano organ, also a Western import (ref. official Samaj website).

Inevitably, the songs Tagore wrote in the period leading up to this time, and more particularly, their English translations - replete with tell-tale archaic forms of addressing the divine - often read more like Christian hymns than Hindu devotionals. Yeats heard the voice of his own culture "as in a dream"; this was a voice that synthesized much that was, indeed, part of European culture, but certainly not all of that which was Indian. The sense of Islam too, is far less apparent in what Yeats took to be a complete and accurate reflection of Indian mainstream religious belief. While Tagore's references to his deity as "friend" (Song 23), "lover" (Songs 41 and 56), "brother" (Song 77) and "bridegroom" (Song 91), show the influence of Sufism, they could also well be traced to *bhakti* thought, which had pervaded Hinduism from the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and which, particularly in its East Indian Vaishnav version, Tagore had assimilated in the form of the *kirtan* style of some of his songs. In *The Religion of Man*, Tagore claimed to be the product of "a confluence of three cultures, Hindu, Mohammedan and British", his grandfather Dwarkanath was

known for his command over Arabic and Persian, and the Tagore family was generally familiar with and tolerant of Islamic traditions (105). But the *Gitanjali* displays much less of the Islamic third of this synthesis than should have been the case for any writing said to represent India. Readers of the songs could be forgiven for taking them to be the creations of a mind invested in the Vedas and the Bible only, the last of the three cultures, the British third, being powerfully visible in Tagore's translations. Kopf argues that it was Orientalist scholarship in the Vedanta that gave Raja Rammohun Roy, the founder of the Samaj, "the building blocks necessary for his ideological reconstruction of Hindu society and faith" (10). It is hardly astonishing then, that the writing of Rabindranath as a Samaj preacher, songwriter, and reformer, should, even a century later, reflect the Vedas read alongside the Bible.

But the *Gitanjali* and the hype that surrounded Tagore for some time after its publication in England misrepresented Indian music, and indeed Tagore himself, in even more fundamental ways. To some extent Yeats's reverence is understandable because it was only in keeping with the Indian tradition of canonizing elder teacher figures, "guru"-izing them, as it were, shaping their iconicity through an incense-redolent hyperbole that is widely regarded as their due. Moreover, the pantheistic and humanistic ideas of the *Gitanjali*, made it even easier for foreign readers to see Tagore as a benevolent but somewhat woolly sage, mystic, and proponent of universal love, whose own goals were focussed on nature worship and union with his *jibondebata* (life-god), and whose political ideas could only tend towards quietism. Yet this was certainly not all there was, or even principally what there was, of Tagore's thought. Amartya Sen writes: "The contrast between Tagore's commanding presence in Bengali literature and culture and his

near-total eclipse in the rest of the world is perhaps less interesting than the distinction between the view of Tagore as a deeply relevant and many-sided contemporary thinker in Bangladesh and India, and his image in the West as a repetitive and remote spiritualist” (“Tagore and his India”, 56). Sen, and several other prominent Indian scholars including the Marxist historian Sumit Sarkar, the cultural critic Asish Nandy, and the art historian Geeta Kapur, agree on Tagore’s foundational role in the shaping of Indian cultural and political modernity. Writing about his novels *Ghare Baire* and *Gora*, Sarkar and Nandy testify to his very early understanding of the destructive nature of nationalism, both in its European forms, and the Indian versions they inspired, under the guise of which majoritarian Hindus had begun in his time, and still continue to impose their will on minority communities.

As these and a proliferation of other books and articles on Tagore written in the last two decades show, Tagore’s writings in Bengali, surprisingly resuscitated by a new breed of left-leaning critics, are now regarded as solid evidence of his eclecticism, his rational and scientific approach to a broad range of subjects including self-government, education and women’s rights, his espousal – after his early experience with the *swadeshi* non-cooperation movement following the partition of Bengal in 1905 - of a creed of universal humanism over and above the patriotism that was fashionable at the time, his nuanced distinction between the injustices of Western colonialism on the one hand and the virtues of Western liberal thought on the other, and his concomitant steadfast refusal to malign all things Western as corrupt or harmful to Indian culture and the Indian body politic. Geeta Kapur writes of the long term influence of his retreat and university at Shantiniketan on creative personalities like the artists Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij,

and filmmakers Satyajit Ray and Ritwick Ghatak, all of whom came to be included amongst the Indian avant garde. Discussing Tagore's "*Sahitye Aitihāsikata*", or 'Historicality in Literature' (1941), Ranajit Guha foregrounds the subalternist affinities with Tagore's late critique of historiography, his enthusiasm for the "little histories" of rural Bengal, and his injunctions to recapture the past of "experience and wonder".<sup>8</sup>

What are we to make, then, of the ways in which his international readership came to view Tagore? Was it only the fact of a ready and amenable foreign market for his brand of mystical lyrics, or something of his own doing, or a combination of the two? Helping to confirm Aravamudan's identification of Tagore as an early guru, Sen remarks that Tagore's physical appearance was very much a part of his romantic reputation and his intellectual glamour, and quotes Yasunari Kawabata, the first Japanese Nobel laureate in Literature: "His (Tagore's) white hair flowed softly down both sides of his forehead...he gave an impression, to the boy I was then, of some ancient Oriental wizard" (64). Frances Cornford apparently described her feelings after meeting Tagore to Rothenstein: "I can now imagine a powerful and gentle Christ, which I never could before" (Sen, 64). One possible answer to these questions is provided by Gerry Farrell in *Indian Music and the West*. Farrell examines the careers of three personalities, self-appointed cultural ambassadors, with whom Indian music made its first formal travels to the West in a capacity more developed than the occasional music-hall oddities and empire-exhibits of the past: Rabindranath Tagore, Hazrat Inayat Khan, and the dancer Uday Shankar. I will leave Uday Shankar out of this analysis not merely because he worked with dance rather

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<sup>8</sup> For an interesting take on Guha's and other recent returns to Tagore, including those of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, and Gayatri Spivak, see Rosinka Chaudhuri's "The Flute, Gerontion and Subalternist Misreadings of Tagore", *Social Text* 22.1 (200.4) 103-122

than music, but also because though his choreography and the music he danced to naturally made reference to India's religious traditions, neither he nor his audiences saw his work as that of a teacher, mentor, or healer. But while Tagore and the musician Inayat Khan had very different overall trajectories, the general impressions about them in the West throw up some startling similarities.

Both Tagore and Khan emphasized the potential of music in self development and in discovery of the divine, and thus both came to be regarded, albeit in different ways, as holy men. Here are two pictures of Rabindranath, the second one taken during the 1912 "Gitanjali tour", on which Tagore was a guest of Rothenstein's at Hempstead, and often met Eliot and Pound, who, their host remembers, sat "at his feet" to hear him recite (Rothenstein 264). Note the flowing beard, the graceful robes, the piercing eyes. Most educated or upper class Indian men traveling abroad wore western clothing and used chairs. Seating oneself on the floor has connotations of humility, but it is also associated with eastern prayer and meditation postures. Judging only by his robes and his position on the floor, it seems that Tagore made little effort to correct those who thought of him as a sage or religious teacher, or at the very least, a man both very much in touch with his own spiritual traditions and confident enough of himself and his audience members not to imagine they would consider him gauche for being different from them in these respects.

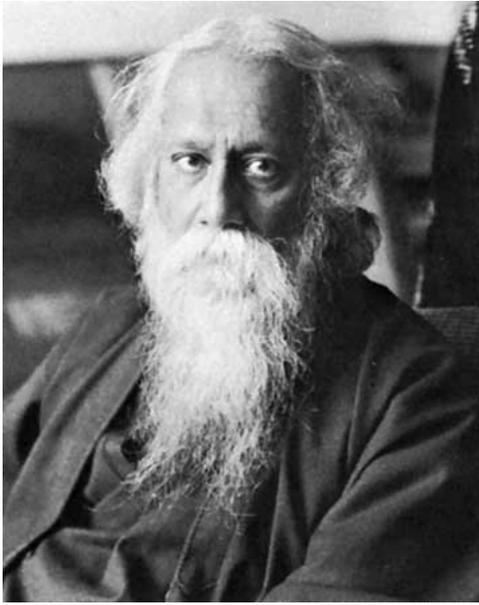
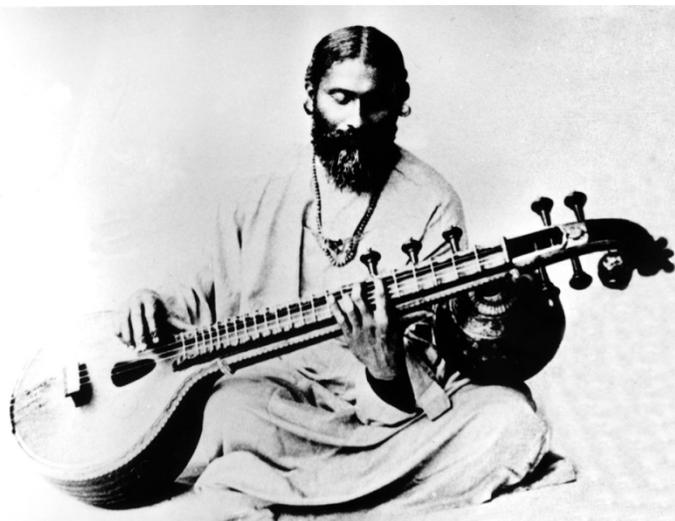
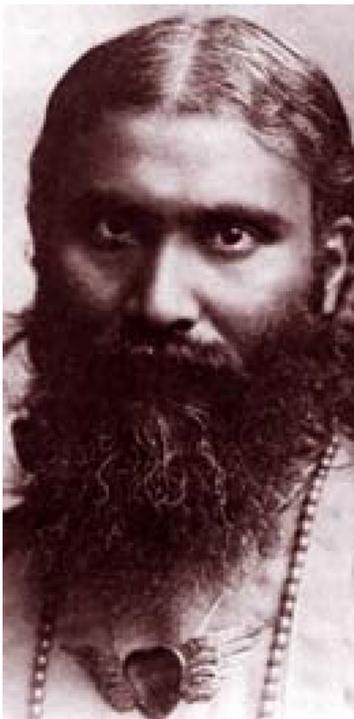


Photo courtesy of Sir John Rothstein  
Rabindranath Tagore, Hampstead, London, 1912

Let us now turn to two photographs of the *vina* player and Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan (1882-1927). Again, note the flowing beard, the graceful robes, the piercing eyes. And this time, crucially, also the musical instrument.



Inayat Khan became famous for being what W. A. Mathieu, describes as “the only holy man I know who delivers an authentic and inclusive spiritual message from a musical sensibility. He does this rigorously, poetically, and spontaneously, until we perceive our own actions as music”<sup>9</sup> (leading blurb on Shambala’s Inayat Khan book). It was Inayat Khan’s lessons and lectures in the USA and the UK that first connected Indian music and the healing powers of Indian religions in the popular mind. I argue that in an international culture hungry for New Age healers, Tagore’s reputation as, among other things, a writer and composer of songs, took on and retained some of the same contours as that of Inayat Khan. Inayat Khan’s message of the spiritual and bodily transformational possibilities of music, long predates what is traditionally thought of as the beginning of the popular “guru connection” with music, i.e. the Beatles’ widely publicized flirtation with Indian spirituality through Mahesh Maharishi, Ravi Shankar, and raga music on the sitar. Since then, many other Indian spiritual masters in the West, prominent among them being Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada of ISKCON (1896-1977) and Osho Rajneesh (1931-90), have used music – both sung and/or danced to - as an integral part of their program. Many scenes in Mike Myers’s 2008 film *The Love Guru* capitalize on precisely this century-old connection between real or fraudulent New Age healing and music.<sup>10</sup> The “guru” (played by Myers himself) is a leering, sexually frustrated sitar player with affected Indian English and an eye on royalties, who bumbles his way to solutions in spite of terrific and obvious shortcomings. His every pronouncement is bracketed by the loud comic appearance of the letters “TM” that evoke not just the

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<sup>9</sup> William Allaudin Mathieu (1937 - ); composer, music teacher, pianist, and author of the Shambala publications *The Listening Book* and *The Musical Life*.

<sup>10</sup> Co-starring, among others, Ben Kingsley in a Gandhi take-off, and Deepak Chopra as himself.

Maharishi and transcendental meditation, but also the warning of the trademarked product, the injunction against piracy included in the books and lectures of the most successful of Indian New Age self-help teachers, and Myers's cinematic nemesis, Deepak Chopra.

To be fair to Inayat Khan though, his credentials both as a *vina* player and as an informed representative of the Hindustani classical music of his time were quite impeccable. He received his musical training in the princely state of Baroda (part of modern Gujarat) from his maternal grandfather Maula Baksh who led the musicians patronized by the Gaekwad ruler. It was Maula Baksh who began to improvise the scheme for notating raga music on the Western model that was later taken up by the modernizers Bhatkhande and Paluskar (Bakhle 47-8, Elisabeth de Jong-Keesing 46). Khan, therefore, was also very much an insider to the Europeanized modernization of Hindustani music. In the late 1800s, Khan's uncle Allaudin Khan aka Dr.A.M.Pathan, fresh from training in England, began the innovative move to organize the Baroda Gaekwad's classical musicians, till then part of a traditional *gayanshala* or music school, into a band along Western lines, one of the first such in the princely states. Young Inayat himself was a genuinely talented singer, composer, and later music teacher of both traditional and "modern" versions, and played several instruments with ease, though his favourite became the *vina*. This choice, as we shall see, would stand him in good stead in the days when he was to become both musical mentor and spiritual guide.

Insisting on Khan's qualifications for spiritual leadership, his biographers emphasize his exposure to a Chistyia Sufi *murshid* (master teacher), S.M.Abu Hashim Madani, for at least five years, a period which many may not regard as long enough to attain

enlightenment, but which appears to have equipped him with the basic theoretical wherewithal for future mentorship (Bloch 11, De Jong-Keesing 19). He is now recognized as a *murshid* himself by the Geneva-based International Sufi Movement, and is the only 20<sup>th</sup> century Asian representative in one of the first relevant sourcebooks, Joscelyn Godwin's *Music, Mysticism and Magic* (1986), joining such names there as George Gurdjieff and Karlheinz Stockhausen. The only other Easterners in this book's listing of 62 such musicians, teachers, and mystics (including Plato, Dionysius the Aeropagite, Agrippa, Novalis and George Sand), are those who fall into the traditional Judaic-Islamic category: the two Al-Ghazalis, Suhrawardi and Rumi. It seems fitting that Inayat Khan is not among the Islamic or even among Sufi names. This is not just because his dates and his location (outside the middle-Eastern world) aren't "right", or because Sufism is not in itself syncretic, which it powerfully is, but because his version of the message of music's transcendental powers - and particularly his way of disseminating it, so consciously and openly different from that of the unworldly Sufi dervish of old - is peculiarly twentieth century in its orientation and specifically aimed at a non-Muslim, usually western audience.

On their first trip abroad to America in 1910, before he began to become the Sufi mystic, Khan and his brothers formed a band called 'The Royal Musicians of Hindustan'. While they were favourably received by musicologists like Cornelios Rybner, Head of Columbia's music department, they did not find many takers for their kind of slow and meditative music in the world of commercial entertainment (De Jong-Keesing 62). Among their first contracts was one to accompany the troupe of Ruth St. Denis, a dancer who concocted exotic "eastern" performances called 'Egypt' and 'Radha' from pictures

she had seen in Turkish cigarette advertisements and an India exhibition on Coney Island (St.Denis 42-55, cited by Farrell 150). Analyzing this example of “cultural and artistic reification”, Farrell observes that in joining her, Khan “moved away from the world of academic music appreciation to the realm of popular orientalism” (150). Elisabeth de Jong-Keesing, Khan’s somewhat more admiring biographer, describes St.Denis as a “serious artiste”, though not “thorough” or “constant” (91). Khan, she writes, bemoaned the fact that their music, required in very short and stereotypical “eastern” snatches “became as a colour and fragrance to an imitation flower”. In France, a couple of years later, the ‘Royal Musicians’ would go backstage to accompany no less than Mata Hari herself. As De Jong-Keesing notes “...after all, they had to live” (94). In New York, magazines in 1911 advised players not to call themselves musicians or music teachers; to get ahead, they should say instead that they were “in the music business” (*The Musician*, March 1911, cited by de Jong Keesing 90-2). Khan, scion of one of the most prominent musical families to be patronized by princely rulers in India, was to remember well these early lessons in marketplace wisdom

As we shall see from the reading I have selected, the first section of Khan’s *The Mysticism of Sound and Music: The Sufi Teaching of Inayat Khan* (1991), Aravamudan’s characterization of the register of Guru English as “transidiomatic” and “theolinguistic” is particularly apposite in Khan’s case. *Teaching* (as we shall call it from here) consists of lectures delivered by Khan from roughly 1918 to his death in 1927 and represents what we may think of as his most mature ideas. Aravamudan, who makes no mention of Khan or any other Muslim teacher in a book whose focus is plainly neo-Hinduism, sees instead “an Islam sitting within a Guru English” which he admits “might seem inadequate to

those who want a fuller accounting of Islam (and the gamut of non-Hindu religions in South Asia)... (but that) these overlaps are an important beginning to understand common lines of flight” (24). “Gurus” he continues, “are to be studied more carefully for their transidiomatic suppleness, their rhetorical persuasiveness, their translatability, their commodifiability, and their consumability...how versatile and mobile these discourses...are” (24). While Khan cannot be described as a particularly supple practitioner in his early days, clearly his eventual stature in the Sufi movement and the testimony of adoring disciples should tell us something about his rhetorical persuasiveness. What is also important is the evident effort to reach across cultural lines, yet retain, at the same time, the particular flavours of the Indian languages, another similarity with Guru English. The first section of *Teaching*, which I shall focus on, is entitled ‘Music’. I choose this text (instead of Barrie and Rockcliff’s compendious fourteen volume *Sufi Message of Hazrat Inayat Khan, 1960-1969*) because it claims to consist of Khan’s transcribed lectures - lectures that along with his *vina* playing, first popularized him as a teacher in the west - “intact in their natural rhythm and with their authentic sequence” (viii). A revised and expanded edition of the second volume in that larger series, *Teaching* explains Khan’s ideas about the relationship between music and mysticism, which is my focus in this chapter.

The Shambala format of presenting the lectures of *Teaching* is curious enough to be remarked on, and raises interesting questions about what other earlier formats might have looked like. Possibly in keeping with a broad policy towards all such “exotic” spiritual texts, the actual individual editors remain unnamed. As a result, there is a strange but effective seamlessness between their preface, an intervening page on the transcription of

oriental terms, and Khan's own voice which appears in a prologue, so that we begin to hear him as if through a timeless haze, introduced by a throng of humbly invisible disciples: "I gave up my music because I had received from it all I had to receive....To serve God...I sacrificed my music, the dearest thing to me....Now...(I) tune souls instead of instruments,... harmonize people instead of notes....I have become His flute, and when He chooses He plays His music" (xi). Khan's words, if his biographers are to be believed, were the more popular for their marked simplicity. De Jong-Keesing offers one explanation: from early on, Khan consciously made an effort to simplify Sufi concepts before audiences he believed were not ready for the full impact of traditional Sufi teachings. De Jong-Keesing writes of his "simplified mysticism, an abc of inner development for laymen and laywomen, which could make Westerners into more complete beings" (99). The Shambala editors, who admit to omitting repetitions, joining together short talks, and inserting pieces where appropriate, make it a point to mention that they have tried to "preserve the Master's melodious phrasing, the radiance of his personality" by not meddling with his actual words in any effort to turn his "highly personal and colourful language into idiomatically unimpeachable English" (vii). They thus provide a second plausible reason for the simplification: Khan, a musician by profession, who, as a child in a provincial Indian town, had shown a restless dislike for school, knew enough English to get by, but not enough to make his lectures too complicated (De Jong-Keesing 19). The simplicity that charmed so many was then, quite possibly, a virtue born of necessity. But Khan was a quick learner, probably acquired more English from the American woman he married in 1913, and, most importantly, had got his finger both on what people wanted to hear from him and how they wanted to hear

it. We can therefore reasonably suppose these, his later lectures, to be relatively sophisticated versions of the ones not transcribed, which he must have delivered more haltingly when he started public talks after his concerts in 1911-12. Khan thus qualifies as a very early, if not the earliest, musical practitioner of Guru English.

Let us look at some examples of Khan's "simplified mysticism" as it addresses the role of music in human life and the human relation to the divine. The crux of these teachings, repeated several times across and within the lectures, revolves around the connection between music and natural rhythms:

among all the different arts, the art of music has been especially considered divine, because it is the exact miniature of the law working through the whole universe....the beats of the pulse and of the heart, the inhaling and exhaling of the breath, are all the work of rhythm....Breath manifests as voice, as word, as sound. This shows that there is music outside and music within ourselves. (3)

The special role of music in the spiritual life of man is underlined: "...in fact, music excels religion, for music raises the soul of man even higher than the so-called external for of religion" (4). Music is intrinsic to man's development because music is intricately connected with creation itself: "it is the source of creation and the means of absorbing it" (5).<sup>11</sup> However, care is taken to foreground the importance of man's selective and guided association with the uplifting powers of music: "But it must not be understood that music can take the place of religion, for every soul is not necessarily tuned to that pitch where it can really benefit from music" (4). Only the elect, then, whose souls are "tuned" to the right pitch, can open themselves to the transformations that music can effect. We are just four pages away from the Prologue in which Khan describes himself as a tuner of souls.

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<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere: explaining the Hindu term 'Nada Brahma' or, as he defines it "sound is the creator", he says, also reminding us of the Biblical stress on the Word, that "the origin of the whole creation is sound"

The message is clear enough by this stage, but the lecture continues: “That is why in ancient times the greatest prophets were great musicians” (4). In a hodgepodge of ideas taken from Hinduism that is recurrent in the lectures, and typical of New Age mishmashes even a decade into our own century, Khan goes on to describe the “inventor of the sacred *vina*”, the Hindu god Shiva, as “a godlike prophet” (4).<sup>12</sup> Already, the connections are evident: music can save people, people’s souls are generally not yet ready to be saved, and providence - in the form of modern prophets bearing sacred *vinas* - can still do the job for the lucky few. The message is hammered in, lecture after lecture, sometimes in metaphors that barely conceal Khan’s market-savvy thought processes: “...the world today needs harmony more than ever before. So if the musician understands this, his *customer* will be the whole world” (italics mine) (7). Sufis often used the terms of the marketplace of the world to make their meaning clear, but given the context, these words cannot be as simply construed.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, not only are saints and prophets musicians, but the reverse is also true: “*Almost all the great musicians in the Orient have become great saints through the power*

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<sup>12</sup> In other passages he refers to Shiva as an “incarnation of god” (9), a “Yogi teacher” (54), and an “avatar” (67). In fact there is no tradition within Hinduism of Shiva being anything but part of the *trimurti*, the high trinity of Brahma-Vishnu -Maheshwara (the last being another name for Shiva), a trinity which, unlike the Christian one, does not include a human manifestation. Sufism is more elastic than is mainstream Islam about accepting and incorporating concepts or beliefs from outside Islam, and there seem to have been some approaches in common between Trika or Kashmiri Shaivism as expressed by the *vaakh* or poetic pronouncements of the 14 century saint-poetess Lal Ded and Sufism in Kashmir; perhaps it is this tradition Khan may have drawn on with the allusions to Shiva, though the connection is tenuous at best.

<sup>13</sup> See also Hugh B. Urban on the *baul*, *shahebdhani* and *kartabhaja* folk singers of Bengal, in whose songs both lower class protest and a reaching out for divine/human love is channelled through the marketplace metaphor. All three categories of singers have many similarities with Sufis, the most important being the insistence on a direct one-on-one relationship with God, expressed in a colloquial, sometimes humorous, and sometimes apparently irreverent idiom.

*of music*”, and “ Music being the most exalted of arts, *the work of a composer of music is no less than the work of a saint*” (italics mine) (10, 101). As might be expected from even a casual glance at modern-day “holistic” healing systems, an India-made-easy version of Indian culture, a *mélange* that includes not just Chistya Sufism, but also the Vedas, *prana* and *mantra* yoga, and the related art/science of vibrations and breath control, is frequently invoked in the lectures. Lecture topics include: ‘The Ancient Music’, ‘The Divinity of Indian Music’, ‘The Use Made of Music by The Sufis of the Chisti Order’, ‘The Use Made of Music by the Dancing Dervishes’, ‘The Science and Art of Hindu Music’, ‘The Vina’, and ‘The Healing Power of Music.’ The claim of science on the attention of listeners is particularly iterated, as is the claim (which would have endeared Khan to the most fanatical Hindu nationalists then and today, had they but heard him), that ancient Sanskrit treatises are the foundation of modern music, mathematics, astrology, philosophy, etc. in short, all knowledge worth its name. Again, Aravamudan provides several examples of the spread of such ideas in the teachings of both Vivekananda and Yogananda.

Khan’s pitch can be even more unsubtle: “The science of sound can be used in education, in business, in industry, in commerce, in politics, in order to bring about desired results. But the best use of this science is made in spiritual evolution” (77). The powers of this science do not always sound benevolent, and sometimes reflect what readers may be forgiven for suspecting is Khan’s own interpersonal method with disciples: “...the knowledge of sound can place in the hand of a person a magical instrument with which to wind, tune, *control and utilize the life of another person to the best advantage*” (italics mine) (83). It is entirely possible, of course, to give Khan the

benefit of doubt. A man from a family of classical musicians with a spiritual bent is not the worst equipped to become a teacher in the powers of music as a medium to a higher consciousness. Quite possibly, given his wanderings among Sufi dervishes back in India, and his exposure to Hindu schools in Varanasi, and to Carnatic music in South India, music which is Hindu and deeply religious in its themes, he himself believed in the message he was imparting, and in a rather more complex form than these lectures reveal. The same ideas could well come from the most innocuous and genuinely well meaning person, someone committed to helping as many people as he could by pointing them in the right direction. To attribute these teachings in Khan's case, to malafide fake-guru intent is perhaps to read him retrospectively through his successors in the lucrative guru business.

Khan could certainly take recourse to a tradition of music therapy in Islam that dates at least as far back as the Arab philosopher al-Kindi (801-873) and was developed and recorded by later Muslim physicians including Ibn Al-Jazzar of Qayrawan (d 979) and the Turk Al-Kahhal of Anatolia (d 1320) (Charles Burnett 85-91, Lawrence Sullivan 2). Ideas about the relation of the well tempered human spirit to universal harmonies and the music of the planets had also been part of western culture from Plato's *Republic*, in the work of Rufus of Ephesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, through the neo-Platonism of Boethius's 6<sup>th</sup> century *De Musica*, and, most compellingly, in the writing of Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), whose 1489 treatise *De Vita Libri Tres* was largely inspired by Plato and Al-Kindi, and sought to theorize and spread musical healing as an organized discipline in Renaissance Europe (Burnett, Penelope Gouk, Sullivan). Arguing that many modern psychiatric practices originated in medieval Turkish asylums, Burnett points out that a

considerable corpus of earlier Arabic literature on musical therapy did not reach Europe at the time that other less controversial work was being transmitted. Scholars translating into the Latin were wary of the Church, which controlled medicine closely, and regarded musical healing – something the Arabs referred to as *al-tibb al-ruhani*, or “spiritual medicine” - as too dangerously close to magic and the black arts (88). Penelope Gouk holds that the life imprisonment for heresy of Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639) on account of his effort to revive Ficino’s ideas is evidence that till very recently Neoplatonism – and within it, the notion of the connection between bodily and cosmic rhythms - has remained on the margins of European thought (18). In her analysis of a 1948 collection of essays and papers entitled *Music and Medicine*, Gouk reveals that even at that late moment, though music had begun to be used in asylums and clinics as a supplementary tool, there was still considerable difference of opinion within the medical disciplines, and between doctors, academics and musician-composers, on the origins, efficacy, and legitimacy of music as a healing practice (171-196). Gouk writes

The search for a proper theory and an appropriate identity has obsessed the music-therapy profession from its beginnings....In societies where the cure of bodies is seen as wholly independent of the cure of souls, there is bound to be ambiguity about a praxis which occupies a liminal position between these realms. Apollo is indeed the god of both music and medicine, and Orpheus, Pythagorus and King David are...celebrated for their extraordinary musico-therapeutic skills.... But for a medical community which explicitly disassociates itself from the supernatural there is something deeply problematic about identifying too closely with pagan gods and semi-mythological figures that are implicated in theurgic cults.... Caught between the archetypes of rational doctor, priest and divinely (or demonically) inspired musician, the identity of the musical healer is inevitably compromised. (172)

The same analysis also highlights an unsurprising suspicion, even hostility, towards non-western modes of musical healing. Inayat Khan, it would seem from this, would have required considerable persuasive skills to succeed in the business of music therapy in

New York. Some factors, however, were in his favour. His Columbia debut quite possibly put him in touch with people interested in the idea of musical healing. Building on the pioneering work of Eva Vescelius, who founded the National Therapeutic Society of New York in 1903, Margaret Anderton organized and taught the first ever formal western university course in music therapy at Columbia in 1919, at around the same time that Khan graduated to representing himself as a religio-musical figure rather than merely an entertainer. In 1926, shortly before his death, when his recital-lectures had begun drawing larger audiences on both sides of the Atlantic, Ilsa Maud Ilsen established the US National Association for Music in Hospitals. Gouk notes that all these figures, as well as Harriet Seymour in the 1940s, were women, which should also give us some idea as to the relative status accorded to music as a healing possibility in early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century New York (189-90).

What Khan could - and did - also utilize, along with this growing interest in alternative holistic practices, which included musical healing, was his expertise on the *vina*. An ancient complex of associations in both the Hellenic and the Islamic traditions connected the sound of the early stringed instruments, the Greek lyre and the Arabic *'ud* (from which the modern lute derives), with calming and beneficial spiritual/mental/emotional effects. On the Greek side, the lyre was associated with Apollo, and this positive connection came to be particularly attached to all instruments with sympathetic strings. In this tradition, the wind instruments were always attributed with darker Dionysian possibilities, since they were regarded as alluring and seductive, and therefore most likely to make human beings lose their sense of right and wrong. The shape of the early lute, whose broad base and belly and narrow neck gave it a

resemblance to the human body, as well as Arabic legends about its creation in the human likeness, also contributed to its higher spiritual status, especially among performers of religious music. The sympathetic strings, which vibrated with each other automatically, heightened the 'ud/lute's connection with Neoplatonic ideas about human souls vibrating as part of one universal rhythm. Because Khan also constantly mentioned Hindu deities, his *vina* connected him with Hindu ideas about the power of sound. In *Sonic Theology: Hindusim and Sacred Sound*, Guy Beck foregrounds "the central role of sonic cosmologies and meditations, of mystical analyses of internal language, and of acoustical embodiments of divine beings....(all) Hindus...agree that sonority inaugurates and sustains the soteriological quest toward the desired god, goddess, or connection. Sound is, at its base, sacred in origin, and sacrality in its root expression, is sonorous." (Beck 1993, 213, cited in Sullivan 7)<sup>14</sup>

What is of importance to us here is the aura of mysticism that begins to surround discussions of Indian music abroad. And this is where the Tagore connection becomes apparent. Khan and Tagore certainly did not start out occupying the same or even similar places in the international imagination. When Khan met Tagore, as Farrell points out, Tagore was a Nobel Prize winning writer, not, like Khan, "a pilgrim-musician" who had to settle for embarrassingly sub-optimal contracts to pay the bills and grapple for such visibility as they could afford him (156). At the time, Khan had not yet been promoted to a 'Hazrat' (saint) by any disciples and his 'Royal Musicians' dressed in western clothes

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<sup>14</sup> Versions of the *vina* are also associated with Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning, who is most often represented carrying the instrument, and, of course, with Rudra or Shiva; players may perform on what are called *saraswati vinas* or *rudra vinas*. Some theories ascribe the origin of *rudra* here to the Persian word *rud* or "string", rather than to *Rudra* an early Vedic name for Shiva, emphasizing the *vina*'s relationship to the Arab lute, the 'ud. (See Eckhard Neubauer) More commonly though, the word 'ud is thought to originate in the Arabic *al-ud* or the strip of wood on which the strings are mounted.

except for the occasions when they donned shiny Indian court regalia, turbans and all, for some of their performances. It is quite possibly, among other influences, the vastly more famous and successful Tagore's flowing sartorial choices that helped Inayat Khan decide to make the move to the robes he had acquired by 1917. Khan himself was quick to highlight any connection between the two of them. In the Teaching he specifically relates his music to Tagore's poetry and issues dire warnings about the neglect of the former: "Maybe one day the Western world will awaken to India's music, as now the West is awakening to the poetry of the East, and beginning to appreciate such works as those of Rabindranath Tagore. There will come a time when they ask for music of that kind, and then it will not be found; it will be too late" (73).<sup>15</sup> Well into his last years, Khan was still pleased at the idea that Tagore and he were in some way associated in the public mind. Citing the memoirs of his last secretary Kismet Stam, De Jong-Keesing narrates the incident where Khan was mistaken for Tagore at a railway station during his final journeys in India in 1926-27. Khan told the "radiant" young person who asked him if he was Tagore: "All helpers of men resemble each other" (258). Clearly, elevating Tagore to the status of "helper of men" helped Khan to equate himself with Tagore. It is ironical, then, that in 1935, twenty years after his first success in the west and the award of the Nobel Prize, Tagore should write with retrospective frankness in a letter to Rothenstein:

I ought never to have intruded into your realm of glory with my offerings hastily giving them a foreign shine and certain assumed gestures familiar to you. I have done thereby injustice to myself and the shrine of (the) Muse which proudly claims flowers from its own climate and culture. There is something humiliating in such an

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<sup>15</sup> He continues, in a traditionalist comment that bears mention here: "But there is no doubt that, if that music which is magic, which is built upon a psychological basis, is introduced in the West, it will root out all such things as jazz. People seem to spoil their senses; this jazz music is destroying people's delicacy of sense" (73).

indecent hurry of impatient clamouring for one's immediate dues in wrong times and out of the way places. (Cited in Winter 19; Winter remarks on Tagore's "sense of self-betrayal in anxiety for Western recognition".)

However, the reverse process of association was also at work. The Gitanjali, as we have seen, had already helped to publicize the spiritual and musical aspects of Tagore's personality. But after Inayat Khan achieved some popularity as a Sufi mentor and classical musician, and the title of Hazrat became attached to his name, the rub-off effect was vice versa too, not so much on Tagore himself, but on the figure, now becoming popular, of the musical-mystic prophet-guru.. Khan's calling attention to the similarities he perceived, and wished others to perceive, between his work and Tagore's, enhanced the connections between Tagore's music and poetry with the mystic healing traditions of the East. This idea did not do Tagore justice even from a musical perspective. While Khan had become conversant with Western music, met composers like Scriabin and Debussy, and played western-inspired tunes in his early days in India and abroad, the music he played in his Sufi years was always Hindustani or Carnatic classical. Tagore, on the other hand, for all his prejudices about other Asian music, notably - and notoriously - Japanese music, often used foreign melodies in his compositions and was, till the end, far less hidebound about new musical forms. His musical style and compositions were thus very unusual in Indian terms, blending elements of Hindustani, Carnatic, Bengali folk and devotional music, as well as Western music (Farrell 156-8). Khan's remark about jazz is as surprising as Tagore's that the Japanese had "forsaken their own music because it is not great in itself", but it is arguably one that Tagore was unlikely to have agreed with, given his normally eclectic musical choices and his stand on the emancipation of African Americans (Devi, 102). But I argue that Khan's conscious promotion of his own

capability to guide and heal through a spiritualized music was certainly among the catalysts that worked to move Tagore into the musician-mystic-healer category.

There were, of course, also other factors at work. The need of the day for readers and listeners in the USA and in Britain - unlike for people in many other parts of the world, particularly the colonies - was reassurance from the East that did not originate in the hope of revolution or other political change. It was easier to celebrate and co-opt Tagore as a mystic and healer than to publicize him as a modern, rational, anti-colonial, even if, in his later years, also often anti-nationalist thinker. (Yeats's Irish identity sets up a whole string of related questions, but those are at a tangent to this dissertation, and require separate detailed analysis.) Under these circumstances, Khan's selfpromotion, his insistence on the "saintly" nature of the creative compositional act, and his persistent evocation of Vedantic thought, facilitated the taming and co-opting of Tagore as sage, musical-poetical-mystic and guide to spiritual evolution a la Brahma Vedantism. As Richard King writes:

The privatization of mysticism – that is, the increasing tendency to locate the mystical in the psychological realm of personal experiences – serves to exclude it from political issues such as social justice. Mysticism thus becomes seen as a personal matter of cultivating inner states of tranquillity and equanimity, which, rather than seeking to transform the world, serve to accommodate the individual to the status quo through the alleviation of anxiety and stress. In this way, mysticism becomes thoroughly domesticated. (21)

In the musical writings of Tagore and Inayat Khan then, the West appeared to ask for and was given what Romain Rolland had prescribed: the soothing ideas of its apparently more evolved and conveniently less aggressive Eastern brain-hemisphere. When we read the work of Tagore and Khan alongside that of Forster, in whose view Indian music as

represented by the teacher figure of Godbole becomes symbolic not just of Indian religiosity in the *bhakti* mould, but also, primarily of an impenetrable and irremediable Indian confusion and mismanagement, we see the almost complete taming and depoliticization of Indian music on the international stage.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MUSIC GURU: HINDUSTANI RAGA MUSIC, AUTO/BIOGRAPHY, POSTCOLONIAL SELF-FASHIONING

In Chapter 1 we saw how Rabindranath Tagore and Inayat Khan highlighted for their western readers the dual spiritual and musical roles of Indian music gurus. In this second chapter we start from a narrative point about thirty odd years after Tagore's and Khan's work to look at the music guru in independent India and see how this figure has developed in Indian English literature from that starting point to the current day. As the chapter progresses, it will become evident that there is some context for at least a few of Tagore's and Khan's claims for the spiritually elevated status of musical gurus, a context to be found both in early Indian Sanskrit and vernacular literature on *margi*/classical or raga music and in the almost hagiographical biographies of the best known 20th century classical musicians and musician-gurus. We will look at these ideas and how they play themselves out in a young postcolonial society, one in which complex issues of cultural and social self-definition, preservation of "ancient" tradition, religious differences, the secular/spiritual divide, class, and gender are intimately imbricated. These questions are both exacerbated and made freshly apparent by the transfer of political and social power to a western-educated upper middle class and the new circumstances of such "self"-rule. Because two of the gurus written about are women, as indeed are three of our four authors, we will look closely at the complex and anomalous position occupied by the woman guru, a figure often at once abased and revered. We will also analyze the way in which the institution of the *gharana*, denoting a musical "family/ house" or stylistic lineage, complicates the politics of this pedagogy, and how this dynamic gets inscribed

into the part-fact and part-fiction around it. Finally, we will examine the close relationship between post-independence writing about raga music, musical pedagogy, and the auto/biographical urge.

This chapter treats several primary texts: Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raag* (1993) and *The Immortals* (2009), Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000), Sheila Dhar's *Raga' n Josh* (2005), and Namita Devidayal's *The Music Room* (2007). In my reading of these books I argue that the auto/biographies are conflicted in their approach to the issues raised and hover around a form of reverence to the music guru that is at some times willingly traditional, and at other times almost forced, sometimes negated, and at other times anxiously questioned and secularized. All the authors show themselves to be aware of the special ideological and quasi-spiritual role that the music guru occupies in independent India as the agent of vital cultural continuity and transmitter of ancient Indian musical subtlety and sophistication. Yet at the same time these authors cannot, in spite of themselves, completely ignore the social realities of the music guru's changed post-independence circumstances and of the aesthetic and other shifts that modern gurus-turned-mere-music-instructors must make to accommodate these changes. Dhar, Chaudhuri, and Devidayal are also intensely aware - if not always immediately responsive to the demands of - their own individual responsibility as links in a long and venerated tradition that must be carried forward. Thus, the memoirs/auto/biographies, though they cannot blind themselves to much they would rather avoid dealing with, often endorse traditional values in an effort to preserve and defend the "resuscitated" art of raga music. Chaudhuri's *The Immortals* in the final analysis, while it is somewhat more clear-sighted about the guru persona than *Afternoon Raga*, joins in the celebration, not least

because the glories of Indian classical and *bhakti* music are viewed through the eyes of an adolescent rebelling self-consciously against a colonial-style education that pushes young people towards the perceived shallowness of manageriality and corporate life. The fiction, however, though it traffics in its own way in the auto/biographical genre, pulls away completely from the guru-worship mode to suggest other possibilities. In Chaudhuri's later work, and even more prominently in Deshpande's novel, we see a committed attempt to demystify the music guru, to highlight what is retrograde within the classical tradition, in particular the entrenched gendered and communalized divisions within it, and to suggest the potential for and the directions of change.

While scholars like Parita Mukta and Rashmi Bhatnagar hold that *bhakti* lyrics continue to be a vehicle, however compromised, of lower class and gender protest (and this will be discussed in detail in my final chapter), classical or raga music has, predictably enough, followed a more conservative trajectory, and its propagandists cannot be said to have had any formal political agenda except national integration. As Janaki Bakhle and Lakshmi Subramanian have separately argued in the case of Hindustani (North Indian) and Karnataki (South Indian) music respectively, the project of standardizing and disseminating raga music among the educated classes, which reached its high point in the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was closely related to the need to present raga music as a high cultural "classical" art form that could rival its sophisticated western counterpart, and provide a focus for national pride and nationalist cultural activity.<sup>16</sup> Prior to the nationalist interest in it, raga music was the preserve of what was

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<sup>16</sup> This is particularly ironic in the context of early 20<sup>th</sup> century British India, since British musical nationalism back home was making furious attempts to emancipate itself from Teutonic cultural hegemony at the time. In 1911, Cecil Forsyth, known for his vehement anti-German stance, wrote in *Music and Nationalism*: "How long will it be before we realize the fact that where the foreign musician is there is the

labeled the courtesan class, and had almost continuous royal, aristocratic, or other wealthy patronage. Both formal orientalist musicologists and amateurs documented its “discovery” by the British, and later made efforts to organize and codify it through a notation system. This effort, combined with a determined sanitizing programme, was soon taken over by Indians in search of a respectable and universally acceptable “national” culture.<sup>17</sup> While there are some similarities with the way *bhakti* music was appropriated by nationalist leaders, the difference lies both in the degree to which classical music was wrangled over and modified, and in the forcible manner in which it was taken away from the people who had been its practitioners for over 500 years, if not more, by a new, very self-conscious, and very upper class/upper middle-class connoisseurship. The process, as Bakhle and Subramanian see it, was fuelled by a felt and openly expressed need on the part of upper class Indians to self-fashion and self-represent as an integral part of the struggle for independence from British rule. Such self-fashioning and self-representation were, therefore, complex two-way processes. The new connoisseur-pundits needed the buy-in of large numbers of the educated middle-class, particularly those capable of speaking English and therefore of communicating on a pan-Indian basis. This class could then impress upon other Indians and westerners, the value of India’s ancient and “rediscovered” musical tradition.

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enemy? He may come to this island in shoals but he comes for one purpose only – the money he can take back across the water, and he knows well that the surest way he can make his position firm here is to denationalize our music.” (260)

<sup>17</sup> In their introduction to *Musical Constructions of Nationalism*, Harry White and Michael Murphy draw our attention to Friedrich Meinecke’s useful early (1907) distinction between *Kultur*nations and *Staats*nations, nations based on a sense of a common cultural heritage on the one hand, and political nationalism on the other. The modern Indian nation may fairly be said to combine some characteristics of both, given that British rule had already endowed it with a formal political entity and a countrywide administrative framework. But the heterogeneity of its early 20<sup>th</sup> century constituents - linguistically disparate states, small ‘independent’ principalities nominally under *rajās* and *nawābs*, and sharp caste and religious divides across both – called for emphasis on an enabling common cultural consciousness as the basis for nationalist dissemination of the ideal of pan-Indian political unity and sovereignty.

Crucial to my chapter, in this context, is the fact that the five Indian English literary texts which treat raga music and its teaching in great detail deal primarily with the biographical or autobiographical. The chapter will examine the relation between the need for self-fashioning and the urge to record the resultant process in the autobiographical mode. All the books are written at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in and about a time when the “rehabilitation” process - the process of wresting raga music away from its mainly courtesan performers - had already long culminated in this genre becoming a high cultural educated upper middle class preserve. The writing of our five texts in English at this culminating juncture makes them particularly complex studies from a class point of view. On the one hand, raga music now belongs to the class that the writers come from, which differentiates itself from its one-time colonial rulers by, among other things, its stress on Indian art forms. On the other hand, this is also clearly the comprador class that has most benefited from globalization, has wide access to and contributes to the newly popularized genre of World Music, governs the country based on its access to western education, and writes in English for its own pleasure and edification. Chaudhuri’s and Dhar’s works are clearly meant for a mixed readership, a substantial constituency of which is made up of western readers relatively unfamiliar with Indian culture. Deshpande, on the other hand, writes for a much smaller category, the domestic English readership, using a language that emphasizes the local and the vernacular. Devidayal’s work, as we shall see, occupies a niche somewhere in between these two positions.

Chaudhuri’s early book *Afternoon Raag* presents us with an Oxford setting, where a graduate student writing a thesis on Hardy remembers the music learned in his boyhood. Oxford, a locus of rarefied privilege even in England, is a university that only a very tiny

and very affluent set of Indians can attend. It is Oxford's academic denizens, more particularly the literary among them who can discern the musical pattern to his writing that Chaudhuri's extended nostalgic soliloquy implicitly addresses. His recent novel, *The Immortals*, has a rather different focus, and attempts to address some of the issues that the poetic genuflections of the previous work elided. Dhar's influential position in New Delhi political circles and her stays in the US as the wife of a UN economic advisor make her audience, too, a small and select minority. The asymmetry in the readership envisioned by the four authors makes the crucial difference between the ways in which these works question or accept the status quo. Writing to illustrate and explain to western and very westernized and/or affluent Indian readers the beauties of raga music, the richness of Indian musical traditions, and the need to preserve both, Dhar's and Devidayal's work as well as Chaudhuri's Afternoon Raga enact several conservative nationalist cultural moves typical of the half century between 1930 to 1975-80. Deshpande however, writing of a small-town milieu, shares with her domestic "English-medium" readers - including a large percentage of women - an understanding of the culture she depicts, as well as the role of music within it. She is therefore able to question both sets of mores more effectively, and thereby envision change as part of the project of social progress.

It is important to locate the five works in their various positions on the (auto)biographical continuum, as well as to provide brief biographical details on the authors. Sheila Dhar's book is explicitly acknowledged as a memoir, and is a collection of the essays and occasional pieces she published over the years in newspapers and magazines, pieces about her childhood, and various people - musicians, administrators,

and politicians - that she came into contact with. The new version, *Raga'N Josh: Stories from a Musical Life* (2005), contains all the essays included in her older book, *Here's Someone I'd Like You To Meet: Tales of Innocents, Musicians and Bureaucrats* (1995), along with a section of Dhar's recent work entitled 'The Cooking of Music and Other Essays'. Dhar, the oldest of our four authors, had an M.A. in English from Boston University, worked for the Indian government's publications division, and died in 2001. She was a classical singer of the Kirana *gharana*, becoming a regular artiste on All India Radio, the government's official network, then the only one in India. Brought up in colonial Delhi in an affluent family of the Mathur Kayastha caste, she was married to an economist and academic, who later rose to a position of some power as advisor to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.<sup>18</sup> Her upbringing, a combination of inherited Mathur Kayastha and proudly adopted Anglophile, receives extensive treatment. She announces with typical lack of apology that her family comes from "a long line of British loyalists" and that their huge household, headed by her barrister grandfather, lived on a large piece of land gifted by the British government to "an ancestor, presumably for services rendered" (3). The three branches of the family that make this move eventually grow to fill "...twenty-four colonial style houses surrounded by lawns and gardens...in the spacious and elegant area, where highly-placed civil servants of the British Government lived."

This extended family leads a "new" lifestyle, eating

eggs, toast and jam, ...even the women had begun to use spoons, ...cakes and sandwiches instead of *samosas* and *barfi*....Scotch whisky and soda...instead of *keora sharbat*....tennis, billiards and bridge in the clubs instead of chess and

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<sup>18</sup> Dhar was a skilled mimic and raconteuse, and a talented cook, for both of which she found many admirers amongst the New Delhi literati. The later book seems to have been published at the behest of her husband to include all her writings in one volume, but two obituaries at the end, by a reputed journalist, and by her publisher, bear witness to the willing assistance of close associates who appear to remember her stories, her food, and her singing - all of which are closely connected in the book - with nostalgic affection.

*ganjufa*...These were big changes, and intimidating ones, specially for the women....They had been grappling with their improved Westernized style of life for almost ten years when I was born. (2-3)

The last line of this passage might be read, if the reader were so inclined - and encouraged to so incline by other portions of the text - as evidence of a certain tongue-in-cheek postcolonial humour. But while the Mathur Kayastha community's affluent anglophilia is also referenced elsewhere in the amused tone of one who knows better, the critique hinted at in the line above is not borne out consistently by Dhar's other descriptions of her early life at home. In a moment of what is perhaps unintentional irony, describing the haphazard way in which the grandfather extends the house they live in, she writes: "The colonial-style pillars were perfectly fashioned and that successfully masked the crudities and arbitrariness of the internal structure" (6). Yet the manner in which Dhar embraces Hindustani classical music and her reasons for doing so indicate a complex mixture of personal motives, familial obligation, and an artistic response that for all practical purposes can be called postcolonial. This raises interesting questions, which the chapter will also explore, about the relationship of postcoloniality, cultural consciousness, and agency.

Because this chapter is concerned with the musical guru in auto/biography, more biographical details than are usually called for may be necessary to a proper understanding of my argument. Amit Chaudhuri's *Afternoon Raga*, the most stylized of the works analyzed here, is autobiographical and narrated in the first person, but presented in the form of fiction. Chaudhuri, the son of a singer of Tagore songs who is also classically trained, has a Ph.D. in English from Oxford. The unnamed young man in the novel looks back at his days at Oxford, and before that, to his years growing up in an

upper-middle class home in Calcutta and Mumbai. Prominent among the earlier memories are images of his mother singing under the tutelage of a maestro who also taught the boy at a later stage. These become the occasion for an extended homage to the teacher who initiates mother and son into the classical vocal style of the Kunwar Shyam *gharana*. His second work on the guru, *The Immortals*, is set in Mumbai and is a far more prosaic and realistic exploration of the issues surrounding the teaching of raga music in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Chaudhuri, who delivers the occasional classical concert, also leads a band that has performed what he calls This Is Not Fusion on an eponymous 2005 CD and in concerts in India and the UK. This music throws ragas together with jazz, pop, and rock, and acknowledges the influence of Clapton, the Beatles, Jethro Tull, and Gershwin.<sup>19</sup>

Classical training is a rarity in most well known young authors who write in English on the subcontinent, particularly when it is combined with some knowledge of western music and its performative traditions. The only other widely recognized Indian author who claims any such training, and a similar familiarity with western music, is Vikram

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<sup>19</sup> Chaudhuri's musical skills can be described as more proficient than inspirational. Of his western music, former Granta editor Ian Jack, who he quotes to a recent interviewer, is reputed to have said: "The big surprise to me is that such a finely-boned Bengali should have such a big rock-and-roller's voice", a statement that is, in itself, a telling comment on East-West musical logic. Chaudhuri's very infrequent classical concerts are most often attended by small, curious audiences more interested in his writing than his music. Observers of popular culture like Ananda Lal, university drama professor and western music critic in Calcutta, have commented favourably on the ways in which the music of the "Not-Fusion" ensemble transcends the "shallowness" of fusion, where a small menu of familiar motifs is regularly trotted out to evoke eastern musical traditions. The not-fusion lyrics aim at profundity through a sparse sort of nostalgic playfulness and are similar in some respects to those of the *jibonmukhi* ("life-facing") genre of modern Bengali music that looks towards both Indian folk forms and western pop and rock for musical models, but whose subject matter is wholly local and contemporary. Surprisingly for Chaudhuri, whose narrative style is leisurely and wordy, the Not-Fusion lyrics verge on the simplistic. 'Moral Education' enjoins children to wash their faces and say *namaste* to their elders in language reminiscent of what Chaudhuri explains are "the illustrated English-language charts sold on pavements and sometimes hung up in classrooms in municipal (free government) schools". A song on truckers works on the 'OK Tata' legend ubiquitous on the backs of Indian trucks. Another, called 'Dotara' ("two-stringed", the name for a *baul* folk instrument in rural Bengal) puns on its title in multiple ways by including the twanging sound of the stringed *dunuri*, a cotton-fluffing implement often heard on Calcutta streets.

Seth. Seth, however, has a much sketchier background in Hindustani music, probably learning the basics as a child or young adult, certainly not enough to give his own recitals. What appears to be most noteworthy about Chaudhuri's not-fusion is that it highlights in a knowledgeable way the similarities between the western jazz/blues pentatonic scale and ragas like Jog and Malkauns. These similarities, as well as more general affinities between the improvisatory aspects of raga music and jazz, are certainly not new discoveries. But the album appears to enjoy a certain reputation on account of being - or at least claiming to be - the first that brings the "metaphor of travel from one musical system to another" alive in this explicit way before the westernized urban Indian listener as well as the more eclectic rock or pop aficionado abroad, both of whom may be unfamiliar with raga music, but are attracted to it and respectful of Chaudhuri's comfort with its syntax. That said, the author's long and evidently sincere involvement with Hindustani music places him in a unique position in regard to literary representations of Indian music and musicians in English. Critics and interviewers focus on his oeuvre, both literary and musical, as emblematic of a quintessentially contemporary and eclectic urban Indian sensibility, to which he responds with the observation that for him, as for others of his generation and background, "'Western' and 'Eastern' are not part of two different worlds, but a common inheritance, and have been inlaid into different parts of a single self, a single memory. It's this memory, where what's 'foreign' and what 'native' is constantly realigned, redefined, that this music wishes to explore."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Chaudhuri is among the most frequently interviewed younger Indian writers. His interviews and reviews of his books present rich material for analysis. In a world that fetishizes fusion, interviewers quite often use that word to allude to his music even when he specifically repudiates it. Despite his assertions on the eclectic nature of his cultural inheritance, the raga connection adheres to his international reputation and often subsumes the western influences he is at pains to adapt and emphasize in his group's music. Reviewing his *Freedom Song*, Michiko Kakutani describes it as "a seamless piece of music, not one of those "straight, angular" compositions of the West, carefully rendered like "print upon a page," but

Shashi Deshpande's novel *Small Remedies* depicts a woman journalist who travels to a small town to interview and write the biography of a Hindustani vocal classical doyenne of the Gwalior *gharana*. The journalist, Madhu Saptarishi, faces the usual problems of the biographer: not just what to include and what not to, but also what to make of the elisions in the story she is told. This is where the novel moves between the biographical and the "autobiographical", because we come to know that the singer's life has briefly intersected with Madhu's. The singer, Savitri Bai Indorekar, has a daughter who used to be Madhu's playmate in her own small-town childhood. Bai appears not to remember Madhu. Her retelling of her tale, presumably intended to reach in print the same public she has fascinated on stage, refuses to acknowledge the existence of the daughter, born of a Muslim lover, as well as the infant son by a husband who she leaves behind to pursue her musical ambitions. Madhu has recently lost her teenage son in a communal riot and is unable to comprehend Bai's decisions as a mother. Her representation of Bai is threatened by the resultant haze of grief and anger. The novel is also simultaneously preoccupied with Leela, Madhu's aunt and beloved foster mother, a Communist party worker in Mumbai, who defies convention in her own way, a way very different from Bai's, but that equally demands a social and familial price.

Deshpande is the daughter of Sriranga, a well-known Kannada dramatist and Sanskrit scholar. Unlike Chaudhuri and Dhar, Deshpande completed her education in India, earning degrees in Law and Economics, and later a diploma in journalism that started her off on a career in writing. Her low-key persona is at odds with her prolific and critically acclaimed career as a writer. She is the author of eight novels in international publication,

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something closer to the curving lines from an Indian raag that read like "longhand writing drawn upon the air."

almost all translated into various European and Indian languages, (including *That Long Silence* (1988), which won the Sahita Akademy Award, India's most prestigious literary prize), six collections of short stories and four books for children. Ritu Menon attributes Deshpande's low visibility to her distance from the literary metropolises, her rootedness in the local, and her firm refusal to either explain or exoticise her Indian context for the Western reader:

no magic realism, no concessions to "marketability", no themes or situations that pander to a...Western audience, no adapting her style to...a target readership...(no National Geographic-land-and-its-people...treatment of the unfamiliar...(She) assumes her readers' familiarity with the everyday ingredients of her offerings....Her writing style is marked by an absence of flamboyance or literary flourish. Nor does she beguile us with a Merchant Ivory-like gloss on "Indian culture". (In Malashri Lal, 4)

Finally, a much briefer introduction to Namita Devidayal, a first-time book-length author and journalist by profession, about whom much less is known than about our other authors. The Music Room is a formal memoir of Devidayal's time under the instruction of her female guru Dhondutai Kulkarni of the Jaipur gharana, as well as a biographical eulogy of earlier Jaipur stalwarts, including the gharana's founder Alladiya Khan and its fiery and path-breaking diva Kesarbai Kerkar, Dhondutai's own one-time guru. Devidayal, the youngest of the four authors, comes from an affluent North Indian business family based in Mumbai, went to an elite English-medium school, started training under Dhondutai at the age of ten at the insistence of her mother, and later graduated from Princeton University before returning to India to work, marry, raise a child and - not quite incidentally, but also evidently not with specific intent - resume her musical training with her aging but still inspiring teacher. She thus has in common with Dhar and Chaudhuri not just her very upper class English-medium education, but also the

experience of university life abroad, a background that factors into the three authors' shared and explicit need both to celebrate and preserve from within the musical culture of which they see themselves as modern representatives, as well as to explain and defend its tenets to outsider observers.

Because class, caste and religion play a defining role in Indian society, scholars of its literature often need to define or clarify the class-caste-religious positions of their authors. Providing biographical details may not have been necessary if readers outside India were assumed to be aware of them. Including too much of this material, on the other hand, lays the dissertation open to accusations of native informant virtuosity. Where is it adequate to draw the line on contextual information and begin close reading and then theorizing? Does one lump all the necessary information into some introductory paragraphs and then dive into one's reading hoping one's audience can piece it all together? Or does one provide that information on a piecemeal basis wherever it is called for, whether in the body of the chapter, or in the necessarily copious footnotes, no matter how this interrupts the flow of the argument? While some of this is true of almost all scholarly writing, because of the unfamiliar context the postcolonial scholar is especially forced to negotiate a balance between these requirements in ways that can frequently be paralyzing from both the analytical and creative perspectives. The temptations and dangers of oversimplification lurk very close to this birthing process. The problem is exacerbated when we deal with the auto/biographical postcolonial text, where the connections between the self-representing individual persona and the (therefore) self-representing postcolonial society are decidedly more complex.

I begin my argument with readings of some passages from Chaudhuri's *Afternoon*

*Raga*. An epigraphical poem straddling three pages honours the music guru whose presence pervades the book's many lyrical and ever backward-moving sojourns into remembrance. The inscription, "in memory of Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale (1941 - 1988)", makes apparent the eulogistic nature of what is to follow. The poem describes the guru in afternoon training sessions with the author's mother. The guru is figured as smiling and benign, embodying not just knowledge but also comfort, his music a refuge from a difficult world. The poem contrasts the simplicity of his smile with the "complicated tune" he hums, and then immediately throws the holistic peace he represents ("his body is smiling") into relief against the outside, where "wind, light and rain revolve the landscape in a / shifting treadmill of shadow." But it is not merely the guru's presence, or the purity and sophistication of his singing that shelter the singer and the watching son, for the poem continues:

Inside, in the cool room, my mother and the music-  
 teacher sit on the carpet, as usual,  
 enclosed, in the drawing-room, by sofas and tables and  
 paintings and curios. (vii)

If Bakhle and Subramanian talk about the post-independence English-speaking upper middle class deploying classical music to prop up its own new ascendance, here is the almost perfect symptom of such deployment. A "cool room" in a tropical country provides a sequestered and privileged space for the learning of music. The teacher and student sit on the floor to sing, as is traditional, but it is a carpeted floor in a luxurious "drawing room", and the use of this western term is telling. This is a home that reveres the traditional in culture but that self-consciously receives polite company in a version of an English "drawing room" furnished with "sofas and tables and paintings and curios". The construction of the line, which closes the poem's first stanza, ensures that it is not the

walls that enclose the people in this room, but rather its well-appointed trappings that join to form a circle of comfort and security around the singing pair.

Tied into this comfort and security is also the idea of propriety. While one aspect of the furnishings certainly has to do with a display of relative affluence, a certain looking back to Victorian Galsworthy-esque saddle-of-mutton solidity (the Bengali middle- and upper middle-class obsession with things Victorian is well documented), there is more than just this meaning here. The novel is set a mere fifty years since classical music had become a sanctioned artistic outlet for respectable Hindu women. The unchaperoned Bengali wife and mother in the presence of a male guru and a male tabla player would certainly have caused comment in an earlier time. For people of a more conservative generation, far too many mental associations still connected the learning of classical music by a woman, the sharing of romantic *khayal bandish* set pieces and the risqué double entendres of *thumri* lyrics with the *kotha* or the courtesan's salon. The furniture, paintings, and curios are therefore not just property, but also, quite literally, props in another context, props that speak of an older anxiety, creating "neutral" western-influenced turf, thus staging respectability in a situation once fraught with uncomfortable possibilities.

The poem then goes on to describe the playing of the harmonium that accompanies the singing. This prefigures the extended paean to the harmonium that Chaudhuri rather self-indulgently embroiders on at several points in the novel. Indeed, the poem carries the seeds of almost all the tropes that the book itself deals with, one such being the connection between music and architecture, the building of houses and the construction of instruments. The mother's "fingers on the black and white keys make, of her hand, a

temple with many doors” (vii). The Biblical reference deepens the texture of the reverence in which the author evidently holds the act of music creation, and also introduces the father, absent from the immediate scene, but whose sanction and support are necessary for pupil and teacher to come together in this many-doored mansion. When the teacher joins in the singing even intermittently, the metaphor of architecture is expanded upon: his voice is a “tiny instrument in the throat” with “its hidden universe of notes, its delicate inscrutable laws” (vii). The human voice is at once connected backwards to the fragile and delicately balanced inner mechanism of the harmonium, and forwards to what the instrument builds: “(a) raag, spacious as the mansion the rain builds, enfolds” (vii).<sup>21</sup> The stanza is then gathered up into its conclusion:

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<sup>21</sup> Chaudhuri’s insistence on the connection between the harmonium and the human voice is at a curious angle to a long public argument over the harmonium as a classical accompaniment. The harmonium works as a particularly apt symbol for the ways in which our authors regard change or innovation that originates in the West. The harmonium was brought to India by 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionaries as an alternative to the cumbersome and heat-susceptible organ and piano. While Indian instruments are designed to replicate the human voice, the harmonium does not do so. Unlike stringed instruments, its notes are considered too jerky and discontinuous for *meends* or glissandos, and too persistent for the oscillatory semi-tonal *gamaks*. Traditional accompaniments have been the stringed *sarangi*, and earlier the *vina*. Dhar is specific in her critique: “Hindustani music does not isolate individual notes of the scale, but glides over the intervals that separate them....there is no exact universally accepted system of notation....keyboard instruments are considered to be unsuitable (RJ, 219).” She stresses that classical musicians are “free to explore the areas in between the rigid ‘notes’ of the keyboard and free from objective time. (RJ, 223)” The skeptical single inverted commas here are in keeping with the notion of the *jagah* or ‘place’ in a raga’s scale as “not a point but a musical area that must be explored anew each time and brought to life in the living moment (RJ, 225).” In her early chapters she describes the harmonium as part of the “basic musical equipment” in a typical Mathur Kayastha household, but is certainly not enamored of the sound of their instrument, associating it with the unmusical voice of her first teacher, Mohan Babu: “The way he used to beat out the melody on the slightly squeaky and off-key harmonium was without joy or charm (RJ, 41).” New brides, she observes, took pains to sing with the *tanpura* “as is the practice in the best musical circles, and not with the lowly, crude harmonium (RJ, 43).” Where she admits to being seduced, after a long musical drought in New York, by the sound of “even” a well tuned harmonium, there is a pitying comment on the loneliness of immigrant life (RJ, 281-287). Dhar’s approach to the harmonium, a western object that she sees as both limited and limiting, makes quite a contrast to Chaudhuri’s sexualized lyricism as he describes Sohanlal, the accompanist for his mother’s lessons, cleaning their instrument: “It is a harmonium made... by Pakrashi, and he takes care to probe, his fingers shrouded with the handkerchief, each English letter of PAKRASHI carved largely on the wood, blowing sensuously on the angular K and tracing the curves of the P and the R till he is satisfied...inside the two rows of innumerable reeds lie bone-white, each reed a delicate white splinter with a pinhead on one end and a flat metal strip on the belly. Sohanlal blows quietly upon them, as if they were on fire; how silent music is as it rests in these reeds, white paper-thin wands! He replaces the cover because it is almost unpleasant to watch, the inner nakedness of a harmonium

Inside the great architecture of the raag, through the  
 clear archway of notes, world without humans,  
 two figures sit, each alone  
 - my mother and the music-teacher – enclosed by sofas  
 and paintings and curios. (vii)

The repetitive insistence of the sofas and paintings and curios seems almost inevitable here, so close is the focus on the house, and within it the room, and within it the sacred space of song. Several critics have commented on the fact that the book's movements adopt the slow, meditative, and improvisatory development of the typical *khayaal*. Here, the poem joins in that scheme with its gradual inward circling into combinations of predefined ideas. Discussing "the burden of representation borne by a certain kind of postcolonial text through its casting as native informancy and its reception as ethnographic and ideologically saturated text", Deepika Bahri suggests the more hopeful possibility of "native intelligence...as a "hermeneutic stance (which) permits a conception of literature as simultaneously embedded in a real reified world of commodities and in potential tension with it by virtue of its native regime of aesthetic and formal organization" (Bahri 4,7). While this may hold true for some of the magical realist postcolonial novels that Bahri proceeds to read, in Chaudhuri's novel the *khayaal* form repeatedly highlights crucial aspects of the Indian classical musical traditions without posing the questions that could/should follow. (This process recurs in Chaudhuri's

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(AR, 27-28)." Devidayal takes the traditional approach, explaining the idea of the 22 *shrutis* or microtones that the harmonium cannot reproduce. Deshpande does not view the harmonium through the lens of this argument. In her novel, where gender figures more significantly than in Chaudhuri or Dhar, the harmonium, like many western ideas in an eastern context, enables a woman to find and hone her skills, acting as a door through which Bai's young disciple Hasina forces an entry into the male world of formal musical training. Even though she is the favourite grand daughter of a senior *tabla* teacher, Hasina is bound by the proscriptions against music imposed on respectable Muslim women. The adolescent Hasina manages to scramble her way into the music room and then into playing the harmonium because the boys learning the *tabla* from her grandfather ask her to hold down the keys so they can tune their instruments (SR, 275).



we might look askance at the “moment perfected...by mortality”, we pause to consider more closely “the mortal moment repeating...its own life.” This is particularly apt in the context of *khayaal* singing, where an incremental repetition is crucial to improvisational development – *vistaar*, literally ‘spread’ - of raga form. The guru’s music is not immortal - or he through it – merely because he may have been recorded, or even because his art lives on in the body of his disciple. His immortality is also assured because his voice enters and remains in the world of sound, where nothing dies. Friedrich Kittler reminds us that in the early days of sound recording, it was thought that a powerful enough machine could locate and record the voices of dead people, because, theoretically, these sounds had never disappeared and were merely circulating as echoes somewhere in space. Chaudhuri’s “mortal moment” appears to be straining towards something of that infinite life. Kittler’s reference is a particularly useful way of reading Chaudhuri’s poem in particular and his memoir as a whole. While all literature seeks to keep its subject alive in the imagination, memoirs, biographies and autobiographies are especially focused on such preservation. The opening poem evokes a certain fractal aspect of musical memory, the notion of one sound pattern that repeats itself in endless self-similar cycles. The implied challenge of the fractal, to zoom in and check if the pattern is perfectly replicated each time, is the ultimate conceptual defiance of mortality. The last lines also assume a special poignancy given the guru’s relation to the small and not very well known Kunwar Shyam *gharana*. Pandit Govind Prasad Jaipurwale, Chaudhuri’s guru, was the son and only disciple of Pandit Lakshman Prasad Jaipurwale, whose own guru was the *gharana*’s founder, Kunwar Shyam. Releasing the first CD to commemorate the achievements of the three singers, Chaudhuri says in the online write-up:

Lakshman Prasad did not live long, and Govindji had an even shorter span of life, dying 11 years after I first saw him in our house, in 1988, when I was writing a doctoral dissertation at Oxford. But, by then, he – like his father, one of the great singers of the 20th century – had given me enough to keep this most wonderful but elusive of gharanas alive to those who care to listen; his son and Bhavdeep and I are now the only ones of our generation to sing those ragas and *bandishes*.

We can now read the title of the later The Immortals not just as a sign of Chaudhuri's reverence for his guru's music, which makes the latter immortal in one sense, but also as a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the need to additionally immortalize him in writing.

A passage from Dhar can be read against Chaudhuri's anxieties:

Our music could not have evolved to the degree to which it has without preserving in some form the achievements of the past....In fact, recordings of all significant work done in the field are constantly in use, even though they are not electronic recordings but only recordings that exist in the mind....(T)hese 'mental recordings' of great masters form the heart of musical awareness in India and exercise a far greater influence on creative activity than any physical records could possibly do.... (Through) this form of recording in musical lore and collective memory...the present generation of performers can still be nourished and inspired by giants who were never recorded electronically (RJ, 249-50).

For both Dhar and Chaudhuri then, what is vital is the preservation of Hindustani classical music in its oldest extant forms, forms that can now often only be recreated through memory.

While Dhar is somewhat more eclectic than Chaudhuri over what aspect or style of classical music she herself feels individually responsible to preserve, and does not define her own musical project quite so much in *gharana* terms, Chaudhuri's anxieties on this account are shared by Devidayal. In *The Music Room* Devidayal voices and clearly seconds her female guru Dhondutai's feelings: "The scene was changing too rapidly. Orthodox classicism was being overtaken by a new romanticism in music that was breaking the boundaries of the traditional gharana. Vocal music was being sidelined by instruments like the sitar, sarod, and santoor, which the younger audiences found easier to

appreciate (266)”. Dhondutai invests her *gharana* responsibilities with the seriousness of the sacred, adhering to a puritanical repertoire, and distancing herself from the more erotic lighter musical forms like the *thumri* sung by the courtesans of old: “If you want to sing *thumris*”, she tells her student, “go to some bai.’ She stops performing *thumris* because “a man in the audience had thrown a scented floral string towards her and slurred, ‘Please sing a thumri’. She was horrified. She had spent her entire life perfecting the slow, resonant, disciplined khayal. She was a spokesperson for a great classical *gharana*, and in one swift stroke some drunk dimwit was trying to take all this away from her and turn her into a mere singing girl in a salon (211).” Devidayal is Dhondutai’s favourite pupil, and thus, though herself female, the logical *gharana* successor for an unmarried and childless female guru. She readily accepts guilt at not fulfilling her own early promise whether in terms of skill or dedication, and thus disappointing Dhondutai, who nevertheless treats her like a daughter: “Dhondutai continued to harbor dreams....And I? I tried but could not devote the time, the unconditional commitment it takes, and kept faltering; missing my lessons because of a late night, one cigarette too many, or a work deadline (194). *The Music Room*’s quite traditional telling of the lives of Alladiya Khan and Kesarbai, stories told to Devidayal by Dhondutai over cups of tea between practice sessions, thus becomes simultaneously both semi-hagiographic chronicle (especially in the case of the much older Khansahib) of the *gharana* greats and compensatory act of personal expiation.

*Gharana* is a collective noun denoting lineage or kinship from the Sanskrit *griha* or home, through the Hindi *ghar*. Daniel Neuman argues that the solidification of *gharana* structure as it is recognized today is a late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> century development, one

that took place under the pressure of heightened competition in an age where securing royal or aristocratic patronage was the only means of survival for musicians' extended families (146-7). Writing on the notion of hereditary musicianship, in which the idea of the *gharana* finds its origins, Deepak Raja sums up the facts in a chapter ('A Requiem for the Gharanas') that it is worth quoting at length from:

Hereditary musicianship was a creation of genetic, familial, and economic factors....The notion of the art as an asset, and the desire to keep it "in the family" encouraged in-breeding....The chances of bequeathing the patronage asset were perceived to be the greatest if (musicians) could turn their children into their own musical clones. The patron's heir, also chosen by heredity, and aesthetically nurtured on the senior musician's art, would - in all likelihood - also accept the heir to the musician's stylistic legacy....This process struck deep roots in the musical culture because the "market" - feudal patrons - rewarded its products. It often became a matter of "national" pride. A king could legitimately boast of his army, his elephants, his jewels, his palaces, and even his *gharana* of music. Even without its cloning intentions, hereditary musicianship would have qualified as an eminently suitable vehicle for the Hindustani tradition, which requires the musician to perform the simultaneous roles of composer and performer. The demands of this duality have grown exponentially over the second millennium....The notion of a *raga* has risen to progressively higher levels of abstraction. The combination of these tendencies has left the art with no effective mode of transmission other than the aural. Involuntary familial exposure to the art during the most formative years, accompanied or followed by a voluntary submission to the rigors of grooming, was therefore uniquely promising as a pedagogical culture. (74-76)

Heredity musicianship alone however, did not prove to be a reliable guarantee of talent. Pushed by patrons for whom musicianship held more value than bloodlines, musicians had perforce to initiate and train capable, usually ambitious and diligent, outsiders. But "since the nature of the art demanded intensive and involuntary exposure, and the "market" demanded stylistic continuity" such training ideally began very early and had its own set of strict rules, "the mentor-pupil relationship cast(ing) itself into the parent-child model of cohabitation, (demanding) total subordination verging on servility" (Raja 76). Raja's analysis touches on several of our concerns. He highlights the shaping

fact of traditionally aural transmission in an increasingly improvisatory musical culture, the stress on stylistic continuity and purity/authenticity as vital indicators of both dedicated teaching and true discipleship, the idea of an old and unique musical tradition as a matter of national pride, and the culminating sense that the guru, as head or even primary resident representative of the *gharana* or musical family, one in a line of revered musicians before him, is both preceptor and father, to be unquestioningly obeyed and to whom every service and obeisance is everlastingly due. Yet, as the work of scholars like Neuman and Raja also emphasizes, the concept of the *gharana* is not as old as it is generally represented as being, and though it continues to be validated in theory - if today primarily as an authenticator, a “brand” with commercial value - is fast losing its relevance in practice. Raja holds that the *gharana* has ceased to be an effective disciplining institution in an age of recorded and widely disseminated music. The secrecy with which families guarded their legacy of *bandishes/cheezes* or compositions and their methods of attaining expertise in particular genres is no longer relevant, and younger artistes have achieved popularity in spite of - perhaps because of - their open (though usually not formally acknowledged) propensity to deploy a blend of compositions and stylistic elements from various *gharanas*.

But the value of the *gharana* “brand” resonates across the spectrum of performers who make claims to serious musicianship. The leading female Agra *gharana* singer Subhra Guha, who made history by being the first female guru at the prestigious corporate sponsored Sangeet Research Academy, which seeks to replicate the *guru-shishya* model, and who is often accorded the title of *vidushi* or “learned woman” (in place of the male *pandit* or *ustad*), speaks to fans from a home page on which the top left corner

prominently features the late Faiyaz Khan, the most celebrated Agra singer, from whom Guha herself never learned, but who had taught her gurus. Faiyaz Khan was given the title ‘Aftaab-e-Mousiqi’ or ‘Moon of the Musical Firmament’ and his biographers claim for him, as is almost customary in the case of all great *gharana* singers, descent from the famed Mughal court singer Tansen. The position accorded to Faiyaz Khan on Guha’s page is thus in consonance with both *gharana* reverence for a mythologized musical ancestor as well as the continuing practice of formally announcing *gharana* links as proof of musical pedigree. Here, also, is an extract from the homepage of the much younger Manjiri Asanare, reputed to be the “next Kesarbai” of the Jaipur-Atrauli *gharana*: “Discerning cognoscenti in music will not miss (the) finer shades and (the) aristocracy of traditions set by stalwarts like Kesarbai Kerkar, Master Krishnarao, and Pt. Gajananrao Joshi in Manjiri’s renditions. Her Guru Pt. Kanetkar has inherited some rare and precious compositions from Prof. B.R.Deodhar, Shri Gulubhai Jasdhanwala, and Baba Azizuddin Kansaheb (The grandson of Late Ustad Alladian Khansaheb) and has bequeathed them to Manjiri.” The list - and number - of names reeled off is significant; Alladiya Khan, we may recall, is the Jaipur *gharana* founder, separated from Asanare, as from Devidayal, by two intervening generations. Lest these be seen purely as instances of women seeking older male authority for their performances - and certainly that aspect cannot be ignored - the young Ustad Rashid Khan’s website gives evidence that this phenomenon straddles gender: a four-page section on his site offers detailed information on the geographical origin, style, history and genealogy of his Rampur Sahaswan *gharana*. Chaudhuri’s and Devidayal’s openly expressed anxiety to stay connected to - and particularly in Chaudhuri’s case, to keep alive - their respective *gharanas*, must be read in this context.

Firstly, both authors prove their musical seriousness by showing how they, though rank outsiders, have been chosen by *gharana* teachers. Secondly, therefore, the guru for them becomes not just the alternative parent, but a parent they could potentially betray by letting slip the *gharana* thread, handed with such hope into their infinitely less capable hands. Finally, as writers fluent in an international language, for them the *gharana* responsibility thus handed down also becomes, effectively, a collective literary mission: telling the story of raga music, as related to them individually in the form of *gharana* history, to a world not fully or even significantly aware of its subtlety and richness.

As with music in many other cultures, Indian raga music traces its origins to ancient religious ritual and chant. The earliest texts accepted as authoritative are attributed to *munis* or *rishis*, sages and functionaries at ritual sacrifices who laid down precise syllables, rhythms, and pronunciations. *Gandharva* and then *margi* or the more formal, composed, and strictly monitored genres of music – as opposed to the less regulated, popular, “common” vernacular *gana* and *deshi* genres – continued to be in priestly hands for longer than in most other cultures. Whether due to this, or because the heightened and communally divided politics of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century nationalist moment demanded a return to what were seen as ancient Hindu truths, the idea that the highest and truest Indian classical music had - and could only - come from persons of sage-like depth, knowledge, and religiosity struck deep roots in the minds of a middle class converting to the newly sanitized beauties of ragas. Lewis Rowell discusses the intimate etymological connection between early ideas about music, dance, and theater - always studied and analyzed together in ancient India - and a sense of national or cultural pride. The oldest known treatise on these arts is the *Natya Shastra* generally dated at 200 AD, and

attributed to the legendary sage Bharata, whose name, significantly, is also the origin of the Hindu word for India, *Bhaarat*, a word still in common currency. Rowell details an old and widely-held belief among Indian musicians that the classical Sanskrit definition of *sangita* (the closest equivalent to the Western concept of music) involves three aspects from which the word *bharata* was derived: *bha* from *bhava* or emotion, *ra* from *raga*, and *ta* from *tala* (rhythm and meter) (10). The literal meaning of *bharata*, Rowell writes, is “he who is to be maintained”:

The reference is to Agni, the god of fire, by whose agency the sacrificial offerings are conveyed to the other gods.... the word came to refer to the priests who maintained the sacred fire, and thence to anyone responsible for preserving the world order. Many Indian rulers took the name Bharata, but the specific Bharata invoked in the definition of *sangita* is...the author of the *Natya Shastra*. It is in this sense that the word *bharata* also means an actor or a dancer. In a derivative form,...*Bhaarata* signifies the descendants of the Bharatas and the land they inhabit...*Bharata* (also) symbolizes the essential contribution from...the three performing arts: from drama, emotion, from music, melody, and from dance, rhythm. The subconscious message embedded in this semantic cluster is that India’s music is one of its national treasures....that music and the associated arts are traditions to be preserved not replaced in waves of new styles or with technological innovations. (11)

It is in this context, then, that we must read the urgent contemporary need on the part of a new generation of trained and western-educated Indian musicians, classical and otherwise, to be active participants in the project of national cultural preservation. It is also in this context that we must understand the complex and crucial role of the music guru in national cultural politics, a role consciously inherited from the sage and priest of old.

The modern guru’s role is further complicated, though, by the fact that the sage and priest were not, of course, the only models available to teachers of music in ancient India. Research in the lighter improvisatory *gana* or *deshi* forms emphasizes the progressively

growing influence of the sage-priest's secular counterpart, the theatrical producer-director of ancient Sanskrit drama. Rowell comments in this regard on the contrast between musical asceticism and hedonism, sensory control and sensory surrender, the pursuit of *moksa* (liberation) and *kama* (pleasure). This contrast has led to a permanent tension in Indian musical ideology, where the value of music is seen not merely in its enjoyment as sensory experience but also in its potential for access to a spiritual-mystical reality beyond the reach of the senses (18). This divide has been interpreted and developed on in several ways in 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian thought. Probably the most unfortunate and dangerous of these interpretations has been the tendency to attribute all degeneration in the ancient Hindu tradition of raga music to the decadence of Muslim social and cultural practices. The Muslims, who constituted the ruling class in large parts of the subcontinent from the first quarter of the second millennium to British times, are frequently held responsible for the adulteration of what was once purely religious *gandharva* or *margi* music with elements from the *gana* or *deshi* forms, and for the physical transfer of this new composite raga music from the temple to the court, and worse, to the salons of dancer-courtesans. In this view, therefore, the raga musician under Muslim influence began to sing not to worship god, but to entertain a human ruler and his immoral and promiscuous courtiers. Concomitant with this perceived degeneration, came a rise in the popularity of the more improvisatory *khayaal* form (traditionally first taught by the Muslim poet and musician Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) which began to threaten and then occupy much of the space once secured for the relatively fixed compositions of the more somber and Hindu-identified *dhrupad*. Modern proponents of the *dhrupad*'s mystic syllables and its

more cerebral melodic movements most often unhesitatingly identify the move from *dhrupad* to *khayal* as deterioration in musical tastes and standards.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of classical music and particularly the dance forms related to it as integral parts of ancient *devadasi* or Hindu temple courtesan culture, despite the irony of the *dhrupad* being nurtured and safeguarded in Muslim hands (the best known contemporary *dhrupad* singers, the Dagar brothers, are Muslim), despite the many forms of Islamic religious music prevalent probably before and certainly from Khusrau's time, and despite the considerable aesthetic enrichment of raga music by the lyricism, sensuousness, and artistic freedom of the *khayal*, conservative Hindu efforts for at least half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were focused on "liberating" classical music from what was seen as the secretive stranglehold of Muslim teachers or *ustads*, and in particular - since they were the easiest targets - from Muslim and other courtesans. Since, at the highest levels of proficiency, this stranglehold was exercised under the *gharana* rubric, the exclusivity, capriciousness, and secrecy surrounding *gharana* training came under attack from the Brahmin modernizer pandits Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande (1860-1936) and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (1872-1931). Janaki Bakhle's *Two Men and Music* gives us an eminently readable and impressively researched account of the times. Bhatkhande and Paluskar mounted a two-pronged attack. Bhatkhande devoured the old Sanskrit treatises and toured the country widely, collecting as many classical compositions as he could beg or steal from aristocratic *jalsaghar* music rooms and royal courts. He wrangled with Muslim *ustads*, setting raga music to notation, delineating the hitherto only verbally taught contours of hundreds of ragas in writing, and offering his final opus, the four-volume Marathi language *Hindustani Sangeet Paddhati* (1910-35) for

the musical education of the public at large, a work still considered the standard text in North Indian classical music. Paluskar focused on the thematic content and the actual teaching of this music, purging it of its sensuous elements, emphasizing and reviving its connections with *bhakti* or worship, and encouraging women from middle and upper class families to learn it, a revolutionary development. He sang tirelessly for recordings, on the radio, and at devotional *bhajan* meetings, and set up the Gandharva Sangeet Vidyalayas, a chain of music schools across the then undivided country that brought the newly respectable classical music into staid middle class homes.

The functions of the *gharana* and the guru today thus emerge from these complex and often contradictory developments in North Indian classical music over two millennia. The felt need for a guru in a time of recorded and documented music bears witness to the fact that Bhatkhande and Paluskar's project of disseminating classical music through modern pedagogic methods, a project perhaps well-intentioned in some respects from the musical perspective, if often hostile to particular musical interests, has not been wholly successful.<sup>23</sup> The foremost musicians today invariably owe allegiance to *gharana ustads* or gurus. The respect accorded to the *gharana* as a nursery of talent is thus, in a sense, both a sign of recognition of the effectiveness of *gharana* methods and of a curious rebellion against the admittedly more democratic modern ideal of music for all.

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<sup>23</sup> Though Lakshmi Subramanian writes about Carnatic or South Indian classical music, where slightly different circumstances obtained, some of her comments are relevant to developments in the North. Subramanian describes as "schizoid" the agenda of the Madras nationalists in their effort to modernize the teaching of an art form that they sought, simultaneously, to revive as a glorious ancient tradition. She writes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century transfer of classical music from the court and temple to the modern *katcheri* or concert hall: "...the *katcheri* had to be constructed for the performer and for his audience as an enchanted space, vibrant with meaning and teeming with cultural signification (2008:30)." Clearly this was at odds with the nationalist effort to demystify, document, and bureaucratize the process of musical training. Subramanian's chapter 'From the Gurukula to the University' provides a detailed account of the related pedagogical politics in the South, where we also see many of the same problems related to the change from the *guru-shishya* tradition to more contemporary modes that we have seen in the North.

Corporate sponsors of classical music have tended more and more to encourage the teaching of subsidized protégés in the live-in guru-*shishya* mode. Nevertheless, the sanitizing *bhakti* effects of Paluskar's work and the formal notations and raga descriptions of Bhatkhande's text have left a deep imprint on Hindustani classical music as played and sung today, and this analysis of music gurus in Indian English writing must take that imprint into account.<sup>24</sup>

Chaudhuri's identification as a metropolitan author certainly fits in with his broad interest in the inner life of the middle class, but it is also something he seems to want to put to the test, even challenge, in inspecting his own notions of why music is important to him. Describing his visits to the homes of relatives in Calcutta, he writes in *Afternoon Raga* of the East Bengal village their forefathers had left behind:

It is a Bengal that missed the changes taking place elsewhere, the middle-class reforms of Brahmoism, the intellectual movements in Hinduism. More important, there than the secular nationalist figures, Rammohun Roy and Tagore, initiators of modern Bengali culture, was a native strain of Vaishnavism, the worship of Krishna, Ganesh, Parvati, an ecstatic love of their images, sung out in unwritten songs and poems. (89-90)

While Chaudhuri's mother trained in Hindustani classical music, she is better known as an exponent of Tagore's songs. But again, it seems important for the son to distinguish between her music, both classical and Tagorean, and that of his Calcutta relatives, who are closer to their village roots and whose singing harks back to its rural devotional origins:

Their love of poetry was not created in the new secular reverence for culture and literature that came with Tagore, but was an indigenous offshoot of a long line of ecstatic worship and craftsmanship....(they) sang with little prompting, from a vast

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<sup>24</sup> Unlike Raja, Bakhle attests to the ultimate "triumph" of *gharanas* and *ustads* as evidenced by the personal histories of the leading modern day classical singers, but points out at the same time that "the audience for the refashioned *ustads* was produced by precisely the musicologists they despised" (*Two Men*, 253).

repertoire of songs...Hindi and Bengali, some...composed (by) themselves. An anxious, child-like joy in their creations lived in that house....Creation was worship....I could see where my own private joys came from – the love of songs, of music, of pride and delight in creation. That delight is my family’s gift. (90)

This ingenuous joy in the “family gift” – genuine though that gift may be – can hardly obscure the bigger picture that Chaudhuri can no doubt himself see: music as it is learned, performed, sponsored, appreciated and theorized in postcolonial India has moved some distance from the innocence and childlike delight that he describes. While he seeks to link his own music to an unsophisticated, indeed, explicitly rural, Vaishnav *bhakti* tradition, and we cannot deny that there is a powerful connection, the novel’s depiction of the social aspect of raga music sometimes pulls away from that older, unselfconscious connection. Let us look, for example, at the scene in which Chaudhuri describes his somewhat less sophisticated Oxford neighbour Sharma, who comes from a North Indian village, responding to his music as he practices:

...he would sit quietly on a chair and nod and shake his head, in vigorous appreciation as I sang. The irrepressible bodily meaning of the words ‘to be moved’, which we have come to associate with mental and aesthetic response, was apparent when one looked at him listening to music. Sometimes he would keep rhythm to the songs, arbitrarily temporal divisions that he slapped and pounded on the table, and when I had finished he would still be doing this, as if he could no longer stop. Later, he would walk around the room possessively, tapping the keys of my typewriter and reading aloud all the titles of the books on my shelf in order to make himself more conversant with the English language. (8)

The comparison offered is quite clear: Chaudhuri’s friendly but superior tone is apparently justified on account of his comfort with the English language and his knowledge of English literature as well as what we are meant to understand as an intellectual response to Indian classical music, as opposed to Sharma’s more bodily one, one we are told, he almost can’t help.

In another passage, Sharma's determined efforts to master English are described in the aural terms of musical training. This might almost have been acceptable, even predictable, given that the author himself must have been practicing notational combinations every morning. But in the case of Sharma, this practice is also explicitly associated with the infantile:

His reading practice every morning, executed with the single-mindedness of a child practicing scales by thumping the keys, remains for me one of the most relaxing memories of Oxford; me lying on the bed and patiently listening, a time of rootedness and plenitude, even of equable solitude, for with Sharma one is always alone, listening to him. Mandelstam, read by Sharma, took on a different, unsuspected life, odd, cubist, harmlessly egotistical, and atmospheric. (9)

For Chaudhuri, whose amicable but nonetheless objectionable condescension here would put the haughtiest and most patronizing colonial sahib to shame, Mandelstam, in Sharma's rural Indian English, becomes a pleasurable experience in sound rather than in intellectual understanding.

Music as a family tradition begins to become something of a motif in Dhar and Chaudhuri. Sheila Dhar's natal Mathur family, and the Mathur Kayastha community in general, is repeatedly described as preoccupied with the learning and performance of all types of music in general and of Hindustani classical music in particular. The significance of music in the household is registered on many levels in the memoir: communal training sessions, private hours of individual practice, participative family musical evenings, concerts by invited professional musicians, care taken with distinguished musical house guests, and even initiatory rites and critical auditions for new brides. The bride's musical pedigree would be discussed and her worth assessed. Indeed, Dhar suggests that brides might even get selected for sons of the family especially on the basis of their being musically talented or having received training from reputed teachers. It would not be

wrong to say that the Mathur Kayastha approach to music within the home placed the community among the cultural trendsetters of the decades before independence. The chapter entitled 'If Music Be the Food of Love' that opens the discussion of music in Dhar's *Raga'n Josh*, begins with a paragraph that bears analysis:

Because Mathur families were such staunch believers in entertainment, the first qualification they looked for in a prospective daughter-in-law was her ability to sing and dance. If she could also make conversation in English, it was an added and almost equally valuable asset. The ideal for girls therefore was to attend English medium schools and learn Indian music at home. Most families were of the view that cooking and housekeeping were not that important because there were always servants to attend to all that. Accordingly, our household provided itself with a music teacher who constituted a regular and continuing service, just like the milkman or the vegetable hawker. (38)

Here is the “modern” Indian woman in the making then, a familiar figure in postcolonial English writing, a woman well versed in the traditional arts, but equally able to hold her own in an Anglophile social world. Yet, for all the pointedly highlighted Mathur reverence for the arts, the professed association of high social status and refinement with the English language and Indian music is complicated by the reference to the music teacher as a peddler of technique rather than a musical mentor. Music as “entertainment”, “qualification”, or “asset” - placed only slightly above cooking and housekeeping on the domestic and matrimonial scales - is shorn off all inspiration, all magic. Dhar's later decision to renounce English may have something to do with the connection between English and the transactional approach to music these lines comment on.

Like Chaudhuri, Dhar also acknowledges the relationship of the music she has been taught to the religious and folk music heard in her early years, equally a part of the Mathur Kayastha legacy, but this story can only be described as irreverent in her telling of it. Her grandmother invites the ladies of the neighbourhood to *kirtan* sessions, where

devotional songs are led by a dubious guru-type figure called Swami Satyanand (literally “real joy”) with whose tall body and handsome face most of his audience is infatuated. Her grandfather, jealous of the Swami’s hold on his wife, expresses typically forceful disapproval, but is unsuccessful in ousting the Swami from the position of domestic spiritual master (14). So much, then, for devotional music. Folk musical traditions are certainly referenced in her more serious essays: “Most of the ragas...are highly developed and schematic versions of the primitive melodies of the various tribal and folk cultures of the country” (218). But in her life experience the connection with folk music appears to be comic rather than, as in Chaudhuri’s case, beatific. Her grandfather’s youthful journey to study law in England, now in the hoary past, becomes the subject matter of ballads in the repertoire of the professional folk singers who perform at family functions. “(O)ne (lyric)...referred to how he had learnt to ease himself standing up instead of squatting on the roadside like the other natives. According to the sarcastic refrain...this was indeed a lesson worth crossing the seven seas for!” (10). Dhar’s first music master, Mohan Baba, might conceivably have embodied the connection with an older time that Chaudhuri so prizes and seeks to resurrect in portraying the accompanists Mohanlal and Sohanlal. Except that Dhar’s instructor is selected and employed not by any of the family elders, who seem to think this below them (perhaps because music masters live in the downmarket old city), but are recruited instead by their senior-most retainer instead. Mohan Babu has a “hoarse, unmodulated voice and (a) prosaic manner”, cycles to work from some distance, and waits humbly in the music room from 4 to 5.30 every evening, teaching any family member who steps in the door, regardless of talent (38-40). Over the years, the young Dhar’s notebook fills up with songs in different *ragas*

for the many festivals, but she insists that though even “his matter-of-fact rendering of various *ragas* gave me enough indication that there were hidden treasures to be discovered....On the whole the association did not yield much except promise and mutual affection” (40).

All this is in total contrast to Chaudhuri’s rhapsodies. Beginning Chapter 23 of *Afternoon Raga* with Sohanlal, who is also the model for the “alternative” guru Pyarelal of the later *The Immortals*, Chaudhuri writes:

Sohanlal was born in a kingdom of Rajasthan and, as a boy, he became a court dancer....(H)e had to perform before the king,... his guru would take him and another boy to dance as Radha and Krishna at the court. When the dance was over the audience would bow before the two children as if they *were* Radha and Krishna. That world, of gestures and wonder, existing in the wide, silent margins of the land, is gone now. All has been named and brought to consciousness, the colours, the words and their meanings, but Sohanlal is one of the few people who remember the darkness of what was there before, the old language and its life. (105)

The past, then, is ambivalent. It is a past of many wonders and colours that Chaudhuri clearly values, and seeks to revive in his music. Yet it is also a dark past, a “before” where many things are apparently unnamed and unconscious. Later in the same *Afternoon Raag* chapter we read:

When we were alone, Sohanlal would show me the lanes of Brindavan....Brindavan appeared as he moved while singing the words in Avadhi that had been composed by Bindadeen Maharaj. Avadhi...such a poetic language that its most common expressions can bring places and spirits before the eye, can stir love in the heart. Its discontinuous grammar and incomplete sentences are a product of the consciousness that existed before there was no difference between the past and the present. (105-6)

In both places, Chaudhuri oscillates between romantic nostalgia and a dangerously Hegelian conflation of the rural pre-independent and princely India with the pre-historical (“no difference between the past and the present”), or at the very least, the inarticulate pre-modern (“discontinuous grammar and incomplete sentences”, “all has (since) been

named and brought to consciousness”). The implications are startling, and sit rather strangely with Chaudhuri’s essay on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincialising Europe* :

The 'imaginary waiting-room of history' is another of Chakrabarty's compressed, telling images....Heiner Müller...uses it of the 'Third World' in a 1989 interview...(Chakrabarty) employs it to great effect. The phrase has purgatorial resonances: you feel that those who are in the waiting-room are going to be there for some time.... Yet for almost two hundred years, in countries like India, there has been a self-consciousness (and it still exists today) which asks to be judged and understood by 'universal' standards....universalism both formed and circumscribed it.” (From Chaudhuri’s own website)

In Chaudhuri’s own passages from the novel, the waiting room appears to be a far cry from purgatory, not merely implied, but also powerfully romanticized. The dates for Bindadin Maharaj, the originator of the Lucknow *gharana* of kathak dance, known to be a very sophisticated version of the dance form, are as recent as 1830-1913. The implication, however, appears to be that Bindadin’s lyrics are “discontinuous” because they are incapable of completeness in a time that has an imperfect conceptual understanding of linearity/continuity. Quite another way of interpreting the lyrics would be that they were written for an audience that, though it is conversant with linearity/continuity, may find the fragmentary and the repetitive more interesting as representative of a wholeness recognizable only within a shared worldview.

The threads of Chaudhuri’s novel can now be drawn together to better inspect how the novel’s idea of (auto)biography relates to nation and to class. In the Sohanlal passage, Chaudhuri indicates that freedom from British rule, unity as one country as opposed to division into British India and the “dark”/feudal princely states, as well as a previously unavailable historical consciousness, together enable late 20<sup>th</sup> century Indians to join the intellectual mainstream of the world community. Within this mainstream, Indians prove that what they inherit and bring to the cultural table is of value by recourse to the

sophistication of a tradition that, paradoxically, grew to fullness when things were not properly “named” or “brought to consciousness”. Ideas about this contradiction within colonial culture were of course, originally the domain of the orientalist scholar. But the orientalist, no matter how sincere, could not divest himself of his outsider-ness. For Chaudhuri, the paradox described above, can only be reconciled - whether fully, or, more tantalizingly, in part - through the interpretive capabilities of the western-educated Indian. This Indian could well be Spivak’s object of vilification, the “native informant - cum - hybrid globalist” (*A Critique of Postcolonialism* 399). Indeed, the issues of re-creation and representation that Chaudhuri raises here are manifold, because Sohanlal is only able to describe the past to him by singing it. But, as Sohanlal’s interpreter to the west, Chaudhuri appears to see himself carrying out a function that goes beyond that of native informant. *In writing a novel that is explicitly in imitation of the khayaal, the representative is both practitioner and expounding scholar; that is, he can experience the past as well as describe and relate it to the present, becoming, in his performances, the very history he seeks to (re)create.*<sup>25</sup>

In Chaudhuri’s *The Immortals* classical music and its pedagogy are viewed through the eyes of a college student who romanticizes the bohemian, spontaneous, and artistic in

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<sup>25</sup> A useful tradition to juxtapose here is that of Zulu praise-singing or *izibongo*, where history and (auto)biography intersect in the chanting of praise names that belong both to the *imbongi* - the praise singer or poet - as well as to his tribal ancestors. *Izibongo*, like autobiography, particularly the kind of collaborative autobiography that Madhu writes with Bai in Deshpande’s novel, “reflect(s) the ways in which the construction of selves happens at the interface between autobiography and biography, between the intrasubjective and the intersubjective.” (Judith Coullie et al, 9) Discussing the art of narrative autobiography in South Africa, Coullie sees the survival of *izibongo* as a sign that Africa “has been able to accommodate literacy without entirely capitulating to it”, as also to Western notions of the separation of private and public domains (Coullie, 1999, 81-83). Unlike much music in the postcolonial context, or in the context of globalization, *izibongo* appears to have stayed relatively free of western influence, particularly in the manner of its production. Zolani Mikwa, a well-known praise-poet, says: “...the good thing is that you dictate the terms of how it must happen. I have produced and directed the recording because no one in the technological world understands what I am doing. I had to be a producer and director of my work so that it does not lose the gist of its Africanness.” (Coullie et al, 142)

reaction to his father's severely corporatized lifestyle. Inherited from British entrepreneurs and managers, the world of subsidized "soft furnishings", prime-property apartment leases, cooks proficient at trifles and custards, and tea-at-the-Taj entertainment allowances is one whose enjoyments the teenager simultaneously takes for granted and abhors. Chaudhuri's preoccupation with the figure of the music guru in his own past stretches across three of his works: a short story foray in *A Strange and Sublime Address*, the leisurely meanderings of *Afternoon Raga*, and the lengthier and more prosaic *The Immortals*. His tone as he looks back at Nirmalya Sengupta, evidently another literary version of his own younger self, is far more ironic and self-deprecating than in *Afternoon Raga*, where lyricism and the stylistic compulsions of the *khayaal* structure take precedence.<sup>26</sup> The young man's deepening curiosity and self-conscious attraction towards Indian classical music are pointedly contrasted with the rather less artistic inclinations of his old school friends now preparing for life in a competitive business world: "Rajiv...now at the Sydenham College of Commerce...with his no-nonsense, primate-like, terrestrial concerns, knew nothing about Indian culture. He thought people who went around talking about 'Indian' culture oily and pretentious" (*The Immortals* 125). Nirmalya's new interest in ragas, *khayaals*, and their relationship with devotional poetry is thus caught in a dual tension, against, on the one hand, the expendability of such knowledge in a milieu where professional qualifications and a decent job are the foremost priorities, and on the other, the tendency among young upper class urban Indians to

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<sup>26</sup> In spite of every caution enjoined on us in regard to identifying writers with their protagonists, I would assert that in this case the identification poses very few problems. Chaudhuri's repeated return to the themes of boyhood musical training and his own as much as his mother's musical proficiency, the formal allegiance he acknowledges to the Kunwar Shyam *gharana*, the barely disguised names of the teachers (Shyam, the *gharana* founder's name given to the character who represents his actual dead guru Govind Prasad Jaipurwale; Govind and Shyam are also both names for Krishna), his Oxford degree, and the openly admitted circumstances of his elite upbringing in corporate Kolkata and Mumbai all point to the autobiographical nature of the three works on music.

downplay religious influences as well as to glamorize and internalize western cultural and aesthetic models: Rajiv thinks “ragas and ustadhs and shrutis...a great betrayal on Nirmalya’s part...(once) an erudite supporter of the blues...when every object in the universe...was being transmogrified into a condition called ‘disco’. To turn away at this testing time from those magnificent sounds of impecunious Chicago to something that was so formless and god-desiring seemed...not so much perverse as dishonest (126).” This double tension frames Nirmalya’s youthfully high expectations of the idealized music guru and his bewilderment with the real teachers he encounters, people whose rather more worldly aspirations and activities he must - and eventually does - learn to square with the convert’s fervency of his own explorations.

Because Nirmalya’s mother is an aspiring amateur singer always searching for that one teacher possessed of both talents and contacts who can propel her into the professional world, the Sengupta living room is opened up to a variety of music instructors, most of whom disappoint. Eventually, the longest student-teacher relationship Mrs.Sengupta forms is with a family of respected but lesser-known professional musicians from North India: the eldest brother, inheritor of the family tradition, sings and teaches; his younger brother and brother-in-law assist as accompanists on the tabla and harmonium. Gradually, Nirmalya, who begins to learn first by listening, and then by formally practicing under the guru, Shyamji, is drawn into that extended family’s concerns. The guru and the accompanists are, of course, the same characters we have met in *Afternoon Raga*, with the difference that in this novel Nirmalya, unlike the previous protagonist, reveals his extended exposure to the world they inhabit outside of music and voices his doubts and later his critique of their involvement with that world. This novel,

unlike the other one, where guru status was uncompromisingly accorded to the singer-teacher, also raises questions about who qualifies as the “real” guru. Shyamji, the formal guru, is preoccupied with getting ahead in the musical world: he teaches “corporate wives...devout traders and tax defaulters”, negotiates a contract for directing Mumbai film music, and promises his better students a professional break, promises he is no position to fulfill. He runs from pillar to post to obtain advertisements and sponsorships for the souvenir to mark the concert he annually organizes, a concert dedicated, in turn, to his own guru, his dead father, at which apart from the one “big” artiste he can persuade, most of the performers are his mediocre but eager pupils, and finally fulfils one long-lasting ambition for most musicians: travels to the US on a ticket bought by a wealthy emigrant disciple, at whose home he lives and gives lessons and private concerts for several months.

This busy and ambitious current *gharana* head, more a skilful impresario and networking adept than the revered and unworldly elder mentor of old, is formally acknowledged as Nirmalya’s guru. But the “lesser” though also experienced and knowledgeable musician who has time to offer - in this case the younger brother and tabla-player Pyarelal, clearly subordinated in the earlier *Afternoon Raga* – is the one from whom the most spontaneous and intimate musical insights and the most instinctive understanding are gleaned. Several passages dwell on Nirmalya’s confusion in this regard:

Shyamji fitted neither the model of the Eastern artist, nor that of the Western musician. The Eastern artist was part religious figure, the Western part rebel; and Shyamji seemed to be neither. Shyamji wanted to embrace Bombay...to partake, it seemed to Nirmalya, of the good things of life;...not very unlike what his father or his friends’ fathers wanted. Nirmalya couldn’t fit this in with the kind of person he thought Shyamji should be. (99)

Shyamji gives Nirmalya lessons “between things in a hurry” and allows him to make recordings to reduce actual teaching time (177). These passages highlight the differences between the contemporary relationship shared by an educated and privileged *shishya* and his paid guru, and the same relationship in another milieu and another slower, and pedagogically more uncompromising age. Now the tape recorder

...made the process of teaching and learning less messy, more compressed and expeditious, for both the time-pressed guru and his undecided disciple, shackled to the modern life that had formed him, eager to learn but within the secret, exploratory rhythms of his day....He had lots to do; read philosophy, and novels in which men suddenly discovered in pubs that existence was *contingent* and *absurd*...and poems by women...besotted with suicide; (and) pornographic books from European social democracies....(w)hen Shyamji sang half carelessly but magically into the microphone...it seemed to listen raptly. And then later it became a guru;...an extension of Shyamji, and yet it could never *be* Shyamji, it was at once less clever than him, and more pliant and amenable.....And so the guru became, to Nirmalya, an ideal figure, a sort of imaginary being, almost unrelated to the fact that his real teacher, Shyamji, was an itinerant with his own compulsions... (179).

Whether or not recordings can be particularly effective instructional tools in a musical culture that prioritizes improvisation, Nirmalya, keenly feeling the “absence” of the ideal guru, displays some determination in this regard, an approach that he - or the older author - feels is “exactly in keeping with what a young man of his privileges had been trained to do: to increasingly exercise his right to construct his own education (180).” Shyamji’s reactions to these autodidactic forays, insofar as his seventeen year old student can correctly gauge them, are also discussed:

If he ever felt irritated about the way Nirmalya both adored him and also took his musical education - stubbornly, unapproachably – at least partly in his own hands, it was because he felt slightly threatened by the single-mindedness and fierceness of his competitor, the inner guru in Nirmalya, a product not so much of mystical belief as of a life raised to free will and individual choice. In some ways, though he didn’t altogether mind; it meant he had to take less responsibility. For Shyamji was like a bird that wouldn’t be caged, he fluttered, vanished, and reappeared on the horizon (180).

Here, Nirmalya shows himself to be intractably different from our other *shishyas*, for Dhar, Devidayal, and particularly Hasina in Deshpande's novel (who lives in the traditional guru-*shishya* set up) are helpless in the face of their respective gurus' adamant imposition of conventional teaching methods and rules.

Dhar describes her attitude to musicians as part of her Mathur upbringing, and the result of being the daughter of a man passionate about raga music. Her depictions of the larger-than-life music personalities she interacts with are, in some aspects, in keeping with the general Indian tendency to revere the best musicians for their supposed semi-divine qualities. She writes of Fayaaz Ahmed Khan, the Kirana *gharana* guru she owes the most years of training to, and who stays with them for extended periods in their gracious colonial bungalow (the official residence provided to her distant and disapproving husband, where peacocks roam the lawns):

I donned an attitude of old-fashioned veneration for the guru with all the enthusiasm of the new convert....The old servants in our home actually welcomed the idea of a guru, any guru. It was comfortable and familiar as a concept and took them nearer to their own roots in some way that I did not quite understand. They waited hand and foot on the ustads...leaving me free to concentrate on my lessons. On the whole it felt as if something religious had entered the fabric of our lives (102).

The double use of the words *ustad* and guru is noteworthy. The Muslim *ustad* or Hindu *pandit* are musically learned men, but *ustad* denotes "teacher" in a stronger way than does *pandit*, which in its functional aspect more often stands in for "priest". The student of a *pandit* will say "he is my guru", but not "he is my *pandit*". A Muslim teacher's students, referred to as *shagirds*, would owe allegiance to their *ustad*, in the same way as *shishyas* of a Hindu teacher would their guru. Yet, because Islam is stricter about according partly divine or even saintly status, and lays down limits to the veneration of

human beings, the *guru-shishya* relationship has a formal religious sanction that the *ustad-shagird* relationship cannot. Instead, as Neuman observes, the *ustad-shagird* relationship, emphasizes the *ustad*'s love for the dedicated and loyal *shagird*, and the gift of his musical secrets as a loving reward for such dedication (44-5).<sup>27</sup> To some extent then, there is no exact equivalent of the word "guru" for Muslim students and teachers of music, and the Hindu Dhar thus "venerates" her *ustad* as her guru.

The live-in teaching arrangement that she and Fayyaz Ahmed Khan came to for several months of the year over a period of 10 years is a curious mixture of traditions both Hindu and Muslim, traditional and contemporary: of patronage, where the singer lived on the estate of the royal/aristocratic patron, and of the old *guru-shishya* or *ustad-shagird* set-up where the *shagird/shishya* moved into and worked in the *ustad/guru*'s house, providing faithfully for the latter's daily needs. Examples can be cited of patrons becoming students too, but by and large, the patron was a connoisseur rather than an apprentice. The system that Dhar, the daughter of a prominent and wealthy patron of famous musicians and the wife of a powerful senior government servant, can afford to set up must surely affect the student-teacher dynamic, which in this case could hardly enforce on her personally the older rules of servility, but she makes no reference to any such effects. At one point, because her guru feels her pronunciation of *bandish* lyrics is accented by her intimacy with English, Dhar vows not to speak in English at all, the better to fully immerse herself in the traditions of her *gharana*. This is no small or easy vow to keep in governmental New Delhi of the 1960's and '70s, a capital not-so-secretly in love with the culture of its one-time colonial rulers, but Dhar claims to do it for years.

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<sup>27</sup> Neuman suggests that the only appropriate Islamic analogy to the spiritual aspect of the Hindu *guru-shishya* relationship is that between *sheikh* and *murid*, words invariably used by Muslims exclusively in religious or spiritual contexts and never in the world of music.

Some of her descriptions of Fayyaz Ahmed however, hardly consonant with “veneration” of a guru’s immersion in music, reveal that the worshipful burden of *shishya*-hood rests lightly on her:

I discovered that the sophistication and subtlety of his mind ended with music. Outside that he was like a child. After giving you rare insights into ragas that left you gasping with wonder, he would go off to watch a Tarzan film in an ‘air-conditioned English cinema house’, even though he could not understand the language. Or get lost for hours in playing carom with much younger nephews. Or go to the Hanging Gardens to fly kites. He was always deeply absorbed in something or the other and it was not always music. (106)

The guru’s involvement in the world outside music is perhaps somehow more acceptable to Dhar than to Chaudhuri, because in Fayyaz Ahmed’s case it is not a worldly involvement. Fayyaz Ahmed’s extra-curriculars seem to happen after lessons for the day have been duly completed; the pursuits have a “child”-like innocence, and there is no profit sought or earned from them. Dhar’s voice speaks with the indulgence that age and time can bring, whereas Chaudhuri aims for the indignant feelings of the very young idealist.

On the issue of Hindu *shagirds* and Muslim *ustads*, Mohan Nadkarni’s musical biographies are a useful comparison to Dhar’s work. Though not possessed of Dhar’s felicity with the English language, Nadkarni shares with her a history of writing about music for English magazines and newspapers. While he does have longer biographies to his credit, the book that seems closest to Dhar’s is his *Music To Thy Ears* (2002) in which he offers thumbnail sketches of the careers and personalities of the great instrumentalists, as well as anecdotes about his meetings with them. The opening chapter on the fabled sitar player Allaudin Khan is typical of the ways in which musical gurus were spoken and written of:

Allaudin Khan was something more than a musical genius, a visionary whose like is born but once in a century. Music to him was more than a profession....it was a symbol of *shraddha* (single-minded faith) which embodied the very quintessence of the *parampara* (tradition handed down from master to pupil without break) ideology enshrined in our tradition. So completely indeed did the spirit of *parampara* enveloped (sic) his entire being that from out of it emerged...music...imbued...with religious fervour.... (11)

And again:

It would be no exaggeration to describe Allaudin Khan as an expression of the Divine. Music in its pristine purity is spiritual; and we, in India, have inherited a tradition of music that has been hallowed by musician saints like Swami Haridas, Surdas, Tyagaraja, Syama Sastry, Muttuswami Dikshitar and Vishnu Digambar, to name a few. Allaudin Khan...belonged to this tradition of musician-saints – and alas, he was probably the last of these greats. (12)

The explicit religious connection between the master and his music, and therefore the master and both his listeners and disciples is discussed many more times. Nadkarni uses the Hindu honorific *acharya* to refer to Allaudin Khan, who would normally have gone by the Muslim title of *ustad*, and was, in fact, most often respectfully called ‘Baba’, which is neither Hindu nor Muslim. The word *acharya* has religious connotations, associations with spiritual mentorship that far exceed the meaning of either *ustad* or *pandit*. Elsewhere in the chapter, this interesting if troubling pattern continues, deeply Sankrit-Hindi-Hindu phrases and concepts - *sadhana*, *gurukripa*, *shishya* - standing in for Urdu-Muslim ones, and much is made of the fact that Allaudin Khan read the Gita and wrote the Koran in Devanagari script (19). For Nadkarni, Allaudin Khan’s particular strengths seem to come from his immersion in what is ultimately a Hindu tradition of spirituality, patience and dedication. Could this, perhaps, be an effort to make Allaudin Khan more acceptable to conservative Hindus in terms they were familiar with? In his preface, though, Nadkarni states quite clearly that his audience is not primarily domestic, for among his motives in writing the book is this one: “I find that there has been a

steadily growing demand for biographical literature in instrumental music from the readership abroad more than in India. This, I feel, is in step with the enduring acclaim earned by our visiting instrumental luminaries in the West (viii)". Writing therefore for a western readership primed on Ravi Shankar and beatitude, Nadkarni makes sure to claim Allaudin Khan as quintessentially Indian because quintessentially Hindu, a Hindu sage in fact, only incidentally and nominally Muslim.

Devidayal comments on this tendency too: "Dhondutai, and many other singers, routinely speak of Hindustani classical music as "our" sacred music and emphasize the Hindu-ness of their Muslim teachers....the best strategy was to adopt them as 'Hinduized Muslims' (102). Alladiya Khan is traditionally attributed a Hindu bloodline that stretched back to hoary antiquity, and, as Dhondutai tells his story "used to wear the sacred thread of the Brahmins....He was so Hindu, he rarely drank tea, let alone touched other vices' (102)." Devidayal herself is able to parse these sentiments for what they are, yet at the same time, also succumbs to them. At the end of the story, it is not Dhondutai's voice we hear, but Devidayal's own, obituarizing Khansahib in the reverent tone that we recognize from Nadkarni's earlier work on another musically canonized "Hindu" Muslim. She writes:

Like the great saint-poet Kabir, who called himself neither Hindu, nor Muslim, Khansahib lived and died in a no-man's land that few could appreciate. He ate meat, but he also wore the sacred thread of high caste Hindus. He was a follower of Islam but he also composed thoughtful profound verses that revealed a deep understanding of Hindu philosophy. He did his namaz every day but sang with complete devotion at temples. He gave the greatest gems of his music to non-Muslim singers. His religion was music. (188-9)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> In her chapter on Abdul Karim Khan, probably the most prominent Muslim *ustad* to openly challenge the powerful Bhatkhande-Paluskar combine, Bakhle observes that Abdul Karim's Hindu biographer Balkrishnabua Kapileswari attempts to represent him as an "unthreatening Muslim...an apolitical musician as well as the ideal Brahmin" who sang Hindu Ganesh prayers for Gandhi (236). Bakhle herself argues that not only was Abdul Karim *not* a "good Brahmin", but that this singing on Hindu themes and other similar

Dhar, fortunately, shows no such predilections in regard to Muslim performer-gurus. There is the occasional incomprehension of another way of life, when dealing, for example, with Bade Ghulam Ali Khan's voracious meat-eating (45-46). But on the whole, she makes no effort to write a hoary Hindu history for Muslim maestros. A substantial something of the worshipful mode in Nadkarni's *acharya* tribute, however, also inheres in Dhar's treatment of senior musicians, and, in particular, in the complex depiction of her first formal guru, Pran Nath. This portrait has particular relevance to the ways in which music and spirituality are connected not only in the actual Indian context, but also in the context of Indians showcasing themselves for the West as especially gifted purveyors of a composite New Age spiritual-poetic-musical wisdom. Pran Nath, whose tutelage Dhar shares with four young friends, and who evidently takes on students from affluent families only because he needs the money, is a tyrannical guide. In this, he follows a time-honoured practice in the ancient *guru-shishya* equation. Though Pran Nath does not expect actual domestic or other service from this new breed of older, educated musician hopefuls, his other demands on their time and resources are many and onerous. Dhar observes that it was evident Pran Nath's teacher the Kirana master Ustad Abdul Wahid Khan "had not been too kind to him. It was equally clear that this was the model he had in mind for us....the only one in his experience" (60). His tyranny is matched by his eccentricity. Unlike others, he does not deign to instruct them in the basic *tala* or rhythm cycles, and focuses on the spiritual and emotive content of music, selecting *khayal* lyrics laden with "mystical devotion" from old Sufi texts. Dismissing their advanced degrees as cerebral obstacles to the more instinctive process of musical

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maneuvers are indicative, instead, of his strategic engagement with the aggressive Brahminism he encountered.

learning, he frequently expresses his skepticism about their ability to imbibe any of his skills, and trains solely by self-involved demonstration. Describing the effect of his music on their minds, Dhar writes:

Most of the time we listened in hypnotized states of awe...it overwhelmed us like a religious experience. There was no question of our even trying to repeat this sort of thing. All we could do was drink it all in.... (W)e did not make much progress in...voice training. But something very important was happening....We were leaning about the musical values of an ancient tradition almost by stealth.... learning more about how not to sing than about vocal technique. ... as though we had enlisted in some gigantic project of purification which could never succeed or come to an end.... We were afraid to desecrate the atmosphere by producing any music of our own. (61)

(The word “purification” needs to be bracketed off here as being of particular import, as we shall see, to Pran Nath’s eventual trajectory.) Yet, Dhar confesses to being “intrigued”, even at the time, by the fact that though a musical purist, he “was nowhere near as principled or sensitive in his other dealings” (72). She explains: “I realized that Pran Nath’s predatory attitude to his comparatively well-to-do clientele was his way of dealing with the bitterness his own life had brought him.... we owed him for all the deprivations he had suffered....It seemed to be a matter of principle with him, not of actual need. If there was anything within sight that he could possibly use, he felt compelled to do so” (72). His students’ families, including Dhar’s husband, nervous of Pran Nath’s influence on them, and less credulous about this new religious bent, are unanimous in distrusting the teacher. Future events perhaps vindicate these anxieties. Supported by the tireless efforts of his resourceful and well-connected students, and sponsored by American seekers of enlightenment, one of who tells Dhar that “her whole *kundalini* is wakin’ up”, Pran Nath migrates to the United States in the 1970’s. An “orphaned and desolate” Dhar observes with gentle irony that he “had no worries about

what would happen to our musical dreams...repeating his depressing adage that this business was only for the contentment of the soul” (79).

When Dhar next hears of Pran Nath, it is from an article in the *Village Voice*. A follower of the latest “Gurrujee” in New York explains the basics of his theory of *raga* therapy.<sup>29</sup> Not “desolate” enough - at least at the time of writing, if not at the time of the event - to ignore the implications, Dhar describes this theory:

Apparently...the tranquil *shuddha gandhar* or the major third...in all *ragas* of the Kalyan family had the power to reduce blood pressure. The flat second of the *raga* Bhairav could cure kidney ailments, and the two *madhyams* or fourths...in Kedara could vanquish...insomnia...(T)his miraculous healing could happen only if the...treatment was in accordance with the tonic ‘sa’ of each individual patient, the pitch of the tonic was worked out with...an electronic gadget invented by one of Panditji’s new pupils....it was crucial to determine the correct ‘sa’... otherwise ...things could get even worse. (80)

All ragas are said to hold particular moods, and thus, many can and have been used to therapeutic effect by listeners seeking either to be calmed or invigorated. Their efficacy in curing blood pressure, kidney ailments, or insomnia, however, is rather less attested to. The shade of Dhar’s grandmother’s beguiling religious guide, Swami Satyanand, hovers close to this description. While there is no mistaking Dhar’s sarcasm and her retrospective disappointment at this development, the chapter does not end on a note that is hostile to Pran Nath. Pran Nath stabilizes his finances by “healing” rich – and, it is implied, gullible - American women. Unsurprisingly, his next move is into spiritual healing, growing the predictable beard, and mentoring young American musicians

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<sup>29</sup> Here, Dhar’s rendering of the story of Indian music intersects with portions of my first chapter (‘The Spiritual Guru’), where we see the guru persona stirring to profitable effect avant garde western interest in the connections between Indian music and spiritual/bodily healing. Pran Nath sets himself up in the Village as a late avatar in what can only be described as the Sufi Hindu pantheon, teachers who profit from a modernized and jargon-laden version of Inayat Khan’s New York brand of Hindu-ized Sufism. Khan’s lectures under the rubric of Sufism, we may recall, focused on the Vedic *veena* as the ultimate musical instrument, and asked Americans to look to the Hindu deities Shiva and Saraswati as sources of musical inspiration and spiritual salvation.

interested in the Indian approach to sound. About this, Dhar writes with absolutely no irony that he “out(did) himself in insight and musical creativity....good times had been sighted at last” and that, though he had been the father figure, the small group of his ex-students in India “felt the sort of relief and elation parents feel when a wayward child has done unexpectedly well at school” (80-81). Of their meeting, several years later, in Pran Nath’s impressive white-carpeted New York haven, run by a band of young, reverently bare-footed, international worshipper-enthusiasts, Dhar is able to write: “I felt like falling at (his) feet and telling him how much I loved and respected him in spite of everything that had happened....”(82). On this occasion, Pran Nath treats her as Indian fathers traditionally treat married daughters, plying her and her disapproving husband with delicacies, and paying for their taxi fare. At no point does “everything that had happened” come between them.

What can we make of Dhar’s attitude to what many would see as a cynical reification of Indian classical music? One way of reading the text here, clearly Dhar’s no-nonsense way, would be to capitulate to the practical notion that everything translates into necessary monetary value, that what she seems to gesture towards as a probably bogus therapy phase was a brief expedient, and that, at the very least, Pran Nath’s students stood to learn something, however small or incidental, of the Indian musical tradition. On the American side, a rich harvest of reminiscences off the web testifies to his influence on musicians like the minimalist La Monte Young, Terry Riley, and Jon Hassell, to whom he appears to have been both musical and spiritual guide. In an online article published in *The Wire* entitled ‘Is There Music After 091101?’ Marcus Boon - who elsewhere describes Pran Nath as ‘Infinity’s Pathfinder’ – writes:

For the first weeks after 091101, the only music I was able to listen to was Indian ragas, which, with their sustained focus on a particular emotional mood, slowly penetrate consciousness until everything else falls away. And I thought about raga master Pandit Pran Nath, born a Hindu in what is now Pakistan, member of a Muslim gharana in India – precisely the kind of liminal figure we need right now, able to move between and reconcile worlds that are tragically polarized, through devotion to perfect sound.

For Boon, Pran Nath's spirituality is what gives his music continued relevance. Yet Boon himself sees that Pran Nath imported not just raga music, but also many of the worldlier aspects of the *guru-shishya* tradition of subservience. He describes how Pran Nath lived in Young's loft, where Young and Marian Zazeela made him tea at 3am daily. "He would then perform his riaz [practice]", Boon writes, "and give them a lesson – if he chose to." Young recalls Pran Nath's efforts to control his pupils, efforts which, like back home in India, involve distancing their own suspicious families: "He was the head of the household....We were not allowed to have friends. We had to give up everything – rarely did we even get to visit our parents. He was very protective...and extremely possessive of us. But we got the reward....if you make the guru happy, then you get the lessons." Boon also mentions that the young musicians would spend much time looking after Pran Nath's finances, organizing concerts, and raising money for his three daughters' dowries: "Riley, Young and Zazeela all sacrificed their own careers while serving Guruji...alienating patrons who thought they should be focusing on their own work."

Reading Boon and Dhar together is a revealing exercise in the way cultural processes travel. What is essentially a very conservative system apparently gets translated into bohemian freedom in the West, but this is freedom with a heavy price. Surely, Riley, Young and Zazeela would have been more comfortable with the western mode of instruction, which limits the teacher's purview over non-musical aspects of a student's

life? Much of the young musicians' willingness to thus prostrate themselves has to do with what they see as the spiritual connection between their guru and Indian classical music. In Boon's and Young's telling, Pran Nath is repeatedly referred to as someone who specializes in the meditative and more spiritual *dhrupad* form of raga singing, a form which has few takers in a popular classical music culture more inclined to the more recent and romantic *khayaal* form.<sup>30</sup> Oddly, while Dhar makes reference to Pran Nath's intensely sombre renditions, and his spiritual lyrics, she does not refer to the *dhrupad* or its modern fate anywhere in her chapter. Nor does she mention the Tapkeshwar cave in the hills north of Delhi, where Pran Nath claims to have lived as a recluse for many years. (The cave is now the site of an annual pilgrimage by Young and his students, and descriptions of their experiences there invariably make reference to the bliss to be obtained from the combination of ragas and hallucinogenic drugs.) It is at this point that Dhar's relationship with her western audience might have been under threat, because she seems to be gesturing not just at the sterility of western life, which leads people to look eastwards for what often turns out to be spurious guidance, but also at the gullibility of many westerners who ought, by rights, to know better. But because she herself feels the need to "fall at his feet", the threatening moment passes, and she joins Young and co. in reverence, "in spite" of it all.

Autobiography is, among other things, the writing of the private self into public coherence. In thinking about how autobiographical selves are created, revealed, concealed, or dramatized, it is instructive to look at the ways in which the musicians in these books view the relationship memoir/(auto)biography and musical performance. It is important to note, here, that all the authors make it a point to impress upon readers the

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<sup>30</sup> See Sanyal and Widdess, Introduction.

notion of the impermanence and improvisational exclusivity of the raga as sung by any one individual. Dhar writes: “The music is not prepared beforehand and rigidly presented but is a live communication in which the listener contributes to the reality of each moment. The ideal of the singer is to share with the listener all phases of the creative process, much like an idea developed in extempore speech” (221). Bai’s guru, Kashinath Buwa, says of his own rendition of Raga Todi: “...that Todi was mine. You can never get that. You have to create your own, it will come through your life. Your experiences, your joys and sorrows...” (133). In her interviews to Madhu, Bai stresses the fact that what she has to say about herself is similarly both unique and ephemeral, and therefore requires appropriate recording: “Remember,’ she warned me, ‘I won’t repeat myself. If you lose something, it’s gone, you won’t get it again” (26). At this point the reader may well imagine these words being said to the young Bai by Buwa, who was, we are told, a severe and exacting teacher. Attuned to the subtleties of sound, Bai is acutely conscious of the tape recorder and its value in the production of her newest public face. Her cautions to Madhu would seem to imply carelessness or forgetfulness on Madhu’s part, or, on the other hand, could point towards a certain way in which what she has to say cannot be duplicated because it is being relived in exactly that light just that one time. But what she does in fact say is certainly not spontaneous. Madhu immediately recognizes and points out the internalized effort with which the singer’s story has clearly been drafted, emended, finalized:

‘Say the date, the time, your name, and that you are interviewing me..., Now play it back,’...And the two of us solemnly listened to my voice saying these things....And then, like a schoolgirl repeating her lessons, a child reciting a poem she’s learnt by heart, she began, speaking carefully into the recorder, enunciating her words with careful precision....I realized on the first day that she didn’t really need my questions. They were just a formality, a duty I had to perform, the cue to set her off

on her almost rehearsed speech. She already knew what she was going to say. All these things have been related by her so often that the matter had gelled into a definite shape. There can be no alteration. (27)<sup>31</sup>

Bai quite willingly acknowledges that her retelling is an effort to correct the errors in the only existing biographical work on her, written by a man who, apparently, did not know enough about her to do her justice. But the omissions in her own story – the children, the love affair – tell Madhu that Bai’s version is hardly more truthful than that of the writer she criticizes. If her performances on stage ring true to raga form, here in this enactment of her life, in pretending to have followed the rules of respectability, she breaks all the rules of self-forgetful sincerity in performance. Yet perhaps, in seeking an aesthetically shaped truth, rather than a literal one, Bai reaches for the same completeness that she achieves on stage, a completeness that the circumstances of her life have denied her.

Dhar, on the other hand, appears to work with no such conflicts and explicitly connects her writing with her music. Writing, she says:

... forced me down to a deeper layer of myself. I am a singer and unrolling the pictures in my mind through the written word felt exactly like singing. At any rate it took me to the very place I occupy in my head and heart when I try to express my whole self through the idiom of music. This realization made me ask myself, seriously for the first time, what it is that I am really saying when I sing. (4)

This connection becomes clearer when we consider her explanation of how she began writing to record the stories she had enjoyed telling over the years: “Clearly the writing venture called for a different kind of telling”, she mulls. “For one thing”, she continues, “the vocal inflections and mimicry I used to rely on to draw character had to give place to

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<sup>31</sup> Bai’s insistence on establishing her identity on the tape recorder at the beginning of each interview possibly stems from the anxiety that many singers in the early days of recording felt at the thought that their music might be “stolen” or otherwise wrongly ascribed to a rival. Dhar notes that they would therefore hurriedly announce their name before or after each recital, “in the naïve belief that this would safeguard them against plagiarism and pirating (RJ: 248).” It appears to have been a habit that was difficult for the older performers to shake off.

descriptions...”(xii). For her, the relationship between her music and her autobiographical writing as two performative aspects of her personality is far more evident than it is to Bai. (There is, of course, the fact that we only know as much of Bai’s interiority as she chooses to reveal to Madhu, but there is hardly any verbal evidence of such relatively sophisticated self-reflexivity.) On the other hand, Dhar’s sweepingly holistic self-identification through music is complete. In a typically culinary metaphor she insists that all her material – people musical and non-musical, accents, food, places, smells, laughs - “the green chillies and back peppers of life itself are all within me and therefore a part of the body of my music” (5). Indeed, the book’s title *Raga n’ Josh*, with its puns on the words raga, *josh* or zest, and the Kashmiri meat delicacy *ragan josh*, quite clearly evidences the connection between music and food, and therefore not just the author’s intense pleasure in the gastronomic, but also the fact of music as a necessity rather than a luxury in her life. There is the occasional excitable confusion, as here: “I knew from the accumulated lore of a lifetime in music that a conscious switching off of everything one has learnt, is a necessary prerequisite for a genuine musical performance. For me the act of singing ideally means recognizing and intensifying my own identity, and communicating it in the rigorous traditional medium of an ancient musical language” (4-5). The question for us here would be: can a “rigorous traditional medium” be used simultaneously with a “conscious switching off of everything one has learned”? This question is discussed, although in a different context, in my next chapter, where the possibility of unconscious musical learning is explored as a part of my argument about Salman Rushdie’s effort to bypass both formal teachers of music and knotty musical first questions.

In all the texts, accompanists - the harmonium, tabla, and sarangi players without whom no classical concert, vocal or instrumental, is complete – clearly belong to the musical subaltern. This is very much in keeping with the considerably lowered status of these artistes from the advent of recording in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ragas performed as they used to be, in the courts of royalty and the salons of the aristocracy, used to be leisurely affairs that could last for as long as the patron wished to be entertained, sometimes even a whole day. Given this time frame, a singer could delineate the shape of the raga and explore its nuances in a meditative way, bringing his or her own unique personality to bear on the raga. The singer also took short breaks to drink something, or rest the voice, breaks that allowed accompanists their opportunity to play solo pieces, thereby displaying their also considerable skills.<sup>32</sup> But the recording format as it was first adopted and continued to be used for many decades, was that of short sound tracks, the first recordings being as short as three minutes. Singers thus had to hurry through the process of raga delineation and into the lyric *bandish* as soon as possible. An important fallout of the new short recordings was that the harmonium, tabla, and sarangi players who used to play a crucial role in live performances now had hardly any time at all in which to play solos. Their role, which, though always secondary to the singer or main player, used to be equally creative and interpretive, was now restricted to a much more mechanical keeping of the beat or repetition of the basic melodic content. With the gradual erosion of the older patronage structure and the ubiquity of recorded music, even when longer recordings became possible, accompanist's solos slowed down the process of recording each track and could actually reduce the number of tracks on an album, something that record companies were usually unwilling to stomach. Recent years have

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<sup>32</sup> See James Kippen 1988 and 2006.

seen the emergence of a “star accompanist” system as the result of the efforts of Alla Rakha and Zakir Hussain, savvy *tabla* maestros with western concert exposure and their own music schools in California. But till then, and certainly for the large majority of accompanists well after, a *tabla* or harmonium player who insisted on his own riff mid-performance became a hindrance rather than an asset both in the recording room as well as in live concert. It became part of the main singer’s or player’s job to keep accompanists “in control”, as it were, even in a musical system based on improvisation. The accompanist who wanted to perform his solo piece had to wait his turn, the slight nod or glance that signaled permission for a brief turn.

The most obvious example of this distinction in status between singer and accompanists in our texts is the character of Ghulam Mohammed, Bai’s *tabla* player who becomes the lover with whom she elopes. Ghulam Mohammed is Muslim, already a member of an unpopular minority. Madhu remembers that the house in Belgaum in which Bai lived with him and their illegitimate daughter Munni, is a house in which the spotlight is always on Bai. Ghulam Mohammed plays a subservient role both on stage as well as at home, where his position as Munni’s father is never acknowledged, not even by Munni herself. Ashamed of the connection with a Muslim who is also a lowly *tabla* player, Munni claims that she is the child of an affluent Hindu lawyer in Pune. Madhu has to piece this story together for herself without Bai’s co-operation: “Her silences...are what link her to that woman....Her control is absolute, magnificent. If it slips, it’s so imperceptible that I have to be quick and sharp to catch her...(like when) she uses, to my amusement, the *tabla* as a metaphor for her loneliness. ‘It was like singing without the *tabla*. Music without taal (rhythm) is meaningless’” (177).

Elsewhere, Deshpande obliquely comments again on this with her description of the accompanist twins in Bai's present household in Bhavanipur, "the tabla-master and the pety-master". We are told the story – thought to be funny by most of Bai's retinue – of how, when the wife of one twin died, the two brothers stayed on with the surviving wife and the two children, and nobody knew who which child's father was, not even the children themselves. When she had to name the children's father in school forms, the wife "wrote it sometimes as Shivshankar and sometimes as Bhavanishankar. And, it was said, she countered the teacher's objection with 'What difference does it make?'" (69-70). These faceless, interchangeable twins, whose function is more important than either their persons or their feelings, find a shadow pair in Chaudhuri's accompanists Mohanlal and Sohanlal. Both the latter are related to the guru and find employment under his auspices. While it is true that Sohanal is described as a repository of an almost lost tradition, at least in *Afternoon Raga* Chaudhuri warns him to be appropriately unassuming: "When a singer performs, it is the job of the accompanists to support him dutifully and unobtrusively....The song and its syllables are set to this... (cyclical rhythm) pattern so that one privileged world in the poem will coincide ineluctably with the first of the sixteen beats in the cycle" (48).

Chaudhuri is not content with this. On a page where, ironically, he explains the strict rules of the *sama* or culminating moment in the rhythmic cycle, an occasion over which we might imagine the *tabla* player maintains equal control, we read "...much drama, apprehension and triumph surround it (the sama) ....For the singer is allowed to, even expected to, adventurously embark on rhythmic voyages of his own, only to arrive, with sudden, instinctive, and logical grace, once more at the sama, taking the audience, who

are keeping time, unawares” (49). We are not left to assume that the triumph, which could well be shared by singer and *tabla* player, belongs, as far as Chaudhuri is concerned, squarely to the singer; we are explicitly told so: the singer can be “like an irresponsible but prodigious child”, while the “harmonium player must reproduce the notes faithfully without distracting him.” The accompanists are prescribed behaviour in one long and astonishing sentence that recommends them to become:

...like palanquin bearers carrying a precious burden, or like solemn but indulgent guardians who walk a little distance behind a precocious child as it does astonishing things...or like deferential ministers clearing a path for their picturesque prince, or like anonymous and selfless spouses who give of themselves for the sake of a husband. Mohan...created the ground...Sohanlal...filled in the background. In the care of these two custodians, my guru sang and shone with his true worth. (49)

Here, the lyrical emphasis of the concluding phrases makes it evident that in Chaudhuri’s linguistic *khayaal*, this portion is, in fact, the “triumphant” *sama*. The guru in this position of musical supremacy, serviced by willing, self-abnegating “ministers...or spouses”, is the figure that Chaudhuri’s *khayaal* seeks to cherish and immortalize. Mohanlal and Sohanlal (the latter also having as a young man played Krishna’s mythical lover Radha) are feminized into subservience.

On the very next page, which begins a new chapter, readers hear of the two servant girls in the Chaudhuris’ apartment building, “Chhaya and Maya (who) would spend the morning sweeping and cleaning and collecting rubbish” (50). Chhaya (though her name literally means “shadow”) is sexualized early, the adolescent Chaudhuri observing her body with a casual but definitely lustful regard as she grows up (51). She is married off early too, and to make sure we do not miss her fleshliness, her husband runs a meat shop, a lowly occupation, particularly for a Hindu, whose “low” caste becomes evident from this association with animal slaughter. The author himself provides a comparison

between the sisters and the two granddaughters of the wealthy widow in the neighbouring flat, girls who are marking time before getting married, and are under obligation to do nothing except look prettily unworried (53). He is correct enough to imply a connection with Mohanlal and Sohanlal, given that the girls appear immediately after them and that their names are similarly twinned. Significantly, however, the portions of the text that relate to the two accompanists are written sans even the smallest touch of irony. Chaudhuri needs them to - means them to - stay in their place, just as much as his building needs Chaya and Maya to keep it clean. The hierarchies in both cases are displayed, even remarked on, but while in the case of the servant girls it is fleetingly questioned through the pairing with the affluent neighbours, in the case of the musical accompanists it passes without critique. It is true that in *The Immortals* Chaudhuri explores the character of Pyarelal (Sohanlal) in some depth. However, even there, while he learns a lot from Pyarelal, he is reluctant to accept or fully acknowledge Pyarelal's mentorship, and his keen sense of the class difference between them is the more evident because Pyarelal does not accompanied by the haze of any guru identity.

Though Deshpande does not discuss real life models for Bai, the singer's story appears to be based on the life of real female singer-teachers. Among the possible figures are Kesarbai Kerkar, Mogubai Kurdikar, and, the likeliest model, the senior Kirana *gharana* singer Gangubai Hangal. Gangubai's last name refers to a small town in the Dharwar-Belgaum bilingual (Marathi-Kannada) region that Deshpande's novel is set in. She was born in Shukrawaradapete in Dharwad, and in the novel, Munni claims her father is from Shukarvarpet in Pune. Also, Gangubai has actually written an autobiography in Kannada, *Nanna Badukina Haadu* ("The Song of My Life"). But Gangubai, unlike Bai (who is

Brahmin), was born into the *devdasi* or South Indian temple courtesan tradition, her mother, the *devdasi* Ambabai being a reputed Carnatic classical singer. Talking about the status of women singers in an interview by filmmaker Vijaya Mulay Gangubai says: “If a male musician is a Muslim, he becomes an Ustad. If he is a Hindu, he becomes a Pandit. But women like Kesarbai and Mogubai just remain Bais.” In an essay on her, Deepa Ganesh writes: “I expected Gangubai to belt out feminist discourses: on the cruelty of the Devadasi tradition into which she was born, the brutality of the caste system, a decadent society, the struggles of a woman who has to straddle more than one world, the discriminating world of music which sets different standards for man and woman, and more. But she is not (ready) to take any of those confrontational stances.” Though born a Brahmin, thanks to her unconventional decisions Bai shares with Gangubai the scandal that attaches to women who break the rules. Madhu remembers that in the early Neemgaon days, nobody refers to Bai by her name but by the derogatory phrase “singer woman” (the Marathi for “singer woman” would read “ganari bai”) or “that bai” (29). While “bai” does also mean “woman” in Marathi, its association with ill-repute is particularly strong in the case of women singers.<sup>33</sup> Gangubai herself was never married, and though she appears not to have followed her mother’s profession, stayed in a long-term relationship with Gurunath Kaulgi, a Brahmin who also had an officially acknowledged Brahmin wife. Like Bai, Gangubai too, travelled long distances every day

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<sup>33</sup> Amelia Maciszewski gives us the four-level hierarchy amongst entertainers in the *tawaif* tradition, though our Bai, of course, has never been one. At the apex was the *tawaif* who only sang, called a *bai*. Immediately below was the *jaan*, who sang and danced, followed by the *kaneez*, defined as an ‘entertainer’. At the lowest level was the *khanagi*, who also provided sex (Maciszewski, 162). In the *tamasha*, a popular raunchy Marathi show, the dancers were also called *bais*. It is possible that several traditions (*tawaif*, *tamasha*, *devadasi*) converge in this regard in small-town Maharashtra. Bai’s title, since she is born high-caste, could also come purely from the more innocuous Marathi meaning. It should be noted, though, that Devidayal comments on how the switch from *Bai* to *Tai* (as in *Dhondutai*) or ‘elder sister’ (who is Kesarbai’s disciple) is a move in the direction of respectability.

to learn from her guru, the legendary Sawai Gandharva, because he would not let her live on his premises as he would his male students. In an interview to Sabina Sehgal she says:

Guruji lived in Kundgol...a distance of about 30 kilometres. (When) ...around 1937...I had a family to look after and anyway, it would have been impossible to live in Kundgol with him like Bhim-‘Anna’ (Bhimsen Joshi) did. And so I would travel from Hubli to Kundgol by train every evening, (with) my uncle....I still remember vividly the reception...whenever I walked down the streets to guruji’s house in Kundgol. People would rush out of their houses and jeer, ‘Dekho, dekho, gaanewali aiyi hai’ (see, see, the singer has come). It was humiliating, but I got used to it.

(<http://ellakavi.wordpress.com/category/kavigalu/govinda-pai/> on 16<sup>th</sup> April, 2008)

But Bai, the fallen Brahmin wife, unlike Gangubai, is unwilling to tell the whole truth about herself. Trying to write her story, and wrestling with the half-truths she encounters, Madhu, who brings a younger, and more liberal perspective to bear on Bai’s past and its recreation, says:

I can take Bai’s life and make what I want of it...I can make Bai the rebel who rejected the conventions....The feminist who lived her life on her terms. The great artist who struggled and sacrificed everything in the cause of her art....(But) there is a curious innocence about her. She is as unaware of trendy feminism as she is of political correctness. She speaks of herself as a Brahmin in a way that assumes her superiority on this account alone.... (166)

Bai’s brand of innocence complicates rather than simplifies Madhu’s job. Bai may not be au fait with political correctness, but she has strong views on how she is to be represented:

She...rejects the safe ledge of the woman artist to stand on. From this platform, if only she knew it, she can do no wrong. Abandoning her husband...lover...daughter ...can be justified; indeed they will be applauded....Victim stories are out of fashion, heroines are in. ... But Bai is unaware of this. She clings...to the respectability she claimed in her second birth as a singer, when...she reappeared in public view wearing at that first public performance the mangalsutra of the married woman. (167)

In juxtaposing Bai’s outlook with Madhu’s, and presenting to the reader all the emancipative and socially redemptive possibilities that early women classical singers -

now become senior teachers - often foreclosed for themselves, Deshpande tries to make transparent the complex of challenges they faced.

Dhar, who also writes about the famous women musician-teachers she has interacted with, is far more celebratory in tracing their trajectories, personal and professional. It must, of course, be taken into account that she was naming and openly describing real people, and therefore had to be discreet in discussing their personal lives. Nonetheless, her chapter on Begum Akhtar, possibly the biggest success story in the history of North Indian women musicians, makes an interesting comparison with Savitri Bai's story as Deshpande tells it. Begum Akhtar (aka Akhtari Bai) was born to the courtesan's life, but Dhar refers to her mother, Mushtari Bai only as "a well-known professional singer of Faizabad" (265). Though she is described hyperbolically as "both fact and myth", in Dhar's eyes Akhtari's triumphs are not limited to the musical world. She sets her cap on and conquers a wealthy and highborn barrister, making a marriage that astonishes onlookers. The effrontery of this courtship clearly finds Dhar's admiration. Much space is devoted to Akhtari's uncommon panache and her success both musical and social, but the only two lines in an eight-page chapter to acknowledge her origins are: "The nawabs of Hyderabad, Bhopal, and Rampur and the maharaja of Kashmir employed her as a singer from time to time and treated her with special respect because of her dignified ways and the rare charm of her personality. Though she lived the life of a courtesan in the earlier part of her life, her natural bearing compelled the awe and deference usually reserved for royalty"(265). Reading Akhtari's "dignified ways" retrospectively, Dhar elides the painful early years in which the singer may very likely have been bedded or at the very least propositioned by aristocratic "employers", services that formed an integral part of

the traditional North Indian *tawaif* package. With good luck and the sangfroid that Dhar describes as “dignity”, it is possible that Akhtari managed to escape some of those beds, but her reputation until the time she married was that of a courtesan with extraordinary musical talent, and before she became famous as a singer she must have been treated like a courtesan, even if a high-class one.

In thinking about why Dhar discusses the less palatable aspects of Akhtari’s life in this circumlocutory fashion, we must certainly consider the fact that while writing or editing memoir essays for publication in India, a woman of Dhar’s class and modest but genuine musical stature would have found it necessary to tiptoe around verbal taboos, to convey things in ways that were socially permissible. Yet, the inescapable fact is that her narrative of celebration attempts to partially veil an actual, broader history of violation. Vidya Rao (1996) and Regula Burkhardt Qureshi (2002) have both argued that the *tawaif* could rearticulate the social aesthetic of her milieu in new, meaningful, perhaps even empowering ways, yet the underlying reality to courtesan life, as Amelia Maciszewski emphasizes, was certainly circumscription (Maciszewski 159). As one of Maciszewski’s respondents tells us, for the *tawaif* or her Hindu counterpart the *devadasi*, even the often forced loss of virginity - marked, with small differences, in both traditions by a *nath utarai*/deflowering ceremony in which she is formally handed over to the highest and potentially the most permanent bidder - was symbolically associated with her musical training. Part of the money she received from her new owner-patron was, according to the rule, to be spent on gifts for her more often than not male music and dance guru(s).<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>34</sup> This system is endlessly circular. Amrit Srinivasan writes of the Tamil devadasi, put through a ceremony of dedication to the local temple deity: “... (S)he was set apart from her non-dedicated sisters...not permitted to marry and her...unmarried status was legal in customary terms. Significantly, however she was not prevented from leading a normal life involving sex with individuals of her choice and childbearing.

system thus seems to grip the *tawaif/devadasi* in tighter and tighter loops. Akhtari was “dignified” enough to make it to respectability; hundreds of talented singers and dancers clearly could not.

Deshpande’s conclusion to the musical portion of her book, depicted through Hasina’s fortunes, is also romanticized in the extreme. What redeems it to some extent, however, is that it does follow a serious and realistic delineation of the challenges faced by women singers and by performers who belong to the Muslim minority. In taking cognizance of these, it looks ahead towards the possibility of multiple assimilations: as a Muslim into a more tolerant and syncretic mainstream, and as a woman, into the role of musical torch-bearer, traditionally reserved for male disciples. A dying Bai delegates to Hasina the honour of singing at her Guru’s birth anniversary celebrations, annually held at a temple outside the town. This is to be Hasina’s first public performance, a momentous occasion for her. Hindu fundamentalist protestors try to attack Madhu, mistaking her for Hasina, on the grounds that a Muslim should not sing in a Hindu temple. Eventually, police protection and counter-propaganda from influential citizens win the day, and Hasina sings as scheduled.

Deshpande gives the debuting singer a musical programme whose determined political correctness cannot be mistaken. She begins her recital with Raga Malkauns, often associated with the court of Baz Bahadur, the legendary 16<sup>th</sup> century Muslim musician and historical Sultan of Malwa, whose romance and short, tragic marriage to Rani

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The very rituals which marked and confirmed her incorporation into temple service also committed her to the rigorous emotional and physical training in (the) classical dance, her hereditary profession. In addition, they served to advertise... her availability for sexual liaisons with a proper patron and protector. Very often... the costs of temple dedication were met by a man who wished thus to anticipate a particular devadasi's favours after she had attained puberty. It was crucially a woman's 'dedicated' status which made it a symbol of social prestige and privilege to maintain her (EPW, XX, 44, p 1870.)

Roopmati, a Hindu princess, is frequently referenced in India as an example of early modern religious tolerance born of a shared passion for music. The next item is a *devi stotra*, a song in praise of the Mother Goddess, which Hasina performs sitting “almost in Padmasana” (317). The Hindu-ness of the goddess combines with the now almost universal significance of the *padmasana* or yogic lotus-position, a posture of concentration and reverence. The texture of the moment is further deepened when Deshpande gives us the lyrics: “Hasina’s voice rises with that strange haunting quality the unaccompanied human voice has....she reaches the words ‘*bhiksham dehi*’ – give me alms – at the end of every stanza”. Madhu has just heard the same *stotra* recited by a priest conducting an *upanayana* (Brahmin coming-of-age) ceremony on the temple premises. Hasina’s musical debut connects her in this worshipful mode both to the human voice in *namaaz*, Muslim prayer, and to the culture of simplicity and humility inherent in the mendicant values encouraged by many strains of Hinduism and nearly all Buddhist schools of thought. Her final piece is a Kannada *vachana* or praise verse composed by the 12<sup>th</sup> century rebel Veerashaiva woman poet, Akka Mahadevi. Akka’s verses have been internalized by thousands of Kannada speakers, and, claimed by Indian feminists in a tradition of Indian women’s writing, have been translated into all the major Indian languages as well as English. Significantly, it is the male accompanist twins who suggest and then teach this song to Hasina, and who hover about the performance with a proprietary interest that she get the words right. Madhu observes:

Bai never sang bhajans. ‘I’m not a tamasha woman trying to seduce my customers by dancing the way they want me to,’ she said. Now her student Hasina, a Muslim woman, sings this poem, composed centuries ago by a woman, a Hindu woman, whose entire life was a statement of her faith....Hasina has prepared well, her

pronunciation is perfect, and so too, I see, is her understanding of the words. 'I saw a dream, I saw a dream,' she sings, affirming the vision over and over again (319).<sup>35</sup>

Here, as elsewhere in her text, Deshpande is not writing for the academic, or even for an otherwise especially capable reader, who might well be impatient with such a programmatic hammering in of the political message. Rather, the reader she speaks to inhabits the growing English-educated middle-class lay Indian spectrum, a reader dealing with everyday realities, for whom issues related to religion and/or gender may not be particularly conspicuous or transparent. (I offer, as some examples, people I have myself encountered in a long career in India: a) the middle-aged city doctor who has had little time in her junior years for anything other than swotting for exams and dealing with patients in the many clinics she has had to attend to make a living, b) the small town English-medium, perhaps "convented" college graduate housewife needing something more substantial than women's magazines like *Femina* or *Eve's Weekly* of an afternoon, c) the call centre employee or young bank teller exchanging bedside books with a colleague between shifts, d) the busy corporate executive with impressive engineering and MBA degrees - trained not to worry over questions of religion or gender except as they affect the "equal-opportunity" workplace he commands - looking for in-flight reading at an airport bookstore.) This reader is not quite as au fait with the language of political correctness in which academics, particularly western-educated academics in the humanities, are accustomed to couch their writing. Is a message less important or less relevant because it is "easy" to interpret? While it would be unfair to equate the musical

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<sup>35</sup> Bai's refusal to sing *bhajans* (devotional songs) is strange, given her deep need to negate her unorthodox past and find social acceptance. Dhondutai's squeamish reluctance to perform the romantic/erotic *thumri* – the form more often associated with the *tamasha* (Maharashtrian dancing) girl - is far more understandable. Bai's protest, oddly phrased, especially in its use of the word "seduce", seems to be aimed at the whimsical demands of the paying public, rather than the content of what that public might demand.

schedule described above with the kitschy “national integration” endings of commercial Bollywood films, I suggest that in its deliberate abstention from nuance, it does something of the same work, but for a somewhat more discerning audience. These readers are positioned somewhere between the humanities academic and the more unreflective consumer of the Bombay blockbuster. In the larger Indian context, this is admittedly a very small group. But like Kiran Nagarkar, whose work I will discuss at length in my final chapter, clearly Deshpande too sees its growing potential - in the world outside leftist and secular academia - as a player in the process of forging a more progressive consensus.

Autobiography, as Judith Coullie et al remind us, is a genre informed by the distinction between fact and fiction (54). Dhar, Chaudhuri, and Devidayal line up on the fact side of this equation, with Deshpande on the fiction side. But in producing the “facts” as they see them, the three auto/biographers seek to recreate the “ancient” glory of what is, in reality, a relatively recent tradition, Indian classical music in the hands of its new owners, the socially ascendant English-speaking upper and middle classes. The discursive conventions of such productions almost inevitably reveal a largely unapologetic sense of class privilege. For all three of these authors, the patronage of their class, and with it, the necessity of admiring exposition before a cosmopolitan Indian and wider international readership become vital components in the continuation of this nascent “age-old” art. Questions that trouble the grandeur of the unfolding raga are accordingly brushed under the carpet. Placed squarely at the center of these recuperative anxieties is the music guru, whose own concerns, as we have seen, often tend to prioritize self-preservation over cultural preservation. Deshpande, on the other hand, working with

fiction, appears more able to foreground the relationship between the mimetic and the poetic in the fashioning of the autobiographical musical self. Madhu parses Bai's story for its factual truths as opposed to its metaphorical or emotional truths, but acknowledges, in the end, how crucial the latter can be to the telling of a life. Yet Deshpande's story also cleaves to the factual in its unblinking exposure of the fissures just under the surface of musical life and its consequent abstention from the celebratory where such celebration is unwarranted. As a depiction of the politics of teaching classical music in its intersection with class, caste, religion and gender, *Small Remedies* suggests the possibility of a more demotic art, but always also registers efforts unraveled and protests made in vain. Deshpande focuses on the vernacular, especially on the Marathi-Kannada bilinguality of her Dharwar-Belgaum locale, and on the difficulties this presents her fictional biographer, fluent in English and halting with Marathi as a language of formal literary work, who must become a translator thrice over. The novel thus emphasizes the existence of a flourishing and organic small town classical music ethos, where the passing down of music from one generation to the next predates, encircles, and interrogates the self-consciously "cultured" urban and international performances in Chaudhuri, Dhar, and Devidayal. In my next chapter I will examine another aspect of urban India's relationship with the teaching of music: in this case, pop-rock and western art music, and what more "cosmopolitan" and widely read Indian authors have made of them.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE VIRTUAL GURU: DISPLACEMENT, CULTURAL BIRTHRIGHT, AND THE ORPHIC/DIONYSIAN

In this chapter I examine Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth's move away from Indian music. In the summer publishing season of 1999, two of their books, Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* and Seth's *An Equal Music* vied for international attention. Rushdie's novel follows the fortunes of two Indian rock stars in the west, while Seth eschews everything Indian after his Indian magnum opus (*A Suitable Boy*, 1996) to write a novel about European chamber music players set in London, Vienna, and Venice. Both novels - unlike any previous Indian English text that thematizes music - are love stories. Opening their locales and subjects up in this way allowed both authors to continue speaking to an international readership in a way that other writers dealt with in this dissertation, Amit Chaudhuri or Shashi Deshpande, for example, cannot hope to - perhaps do not seek to - achieve. The move to western music, while possibly also prompted by market considerations, is an attempt to come to terms with the figure of the musical-spiritual guru. Seth's novel wrestles with the idea of music in matters psychic, and Rushdie's in matters both psychic and spiritual, and both texts engage, though in very different ways, with the role of master musician-teachers in the lives of students and younger practitioners. While both novels ultimately remain within the concept - evoked without exception by all our authors so far, and appearing here in a revised but clearly recognizable form - of music as a way to transcend the worldly, both, I argue, also push towards claiming an unmediated relation to that music in their attempts to virtualize the previously embodied authority of the musical guru.

Rushdie's troubled relationship with the Indian world he leaves behind is evident in his constant, almost fretting, references to Indian religions and spirituality, to Indian culture in general, and to the whole vexed question of authenticity. At one point, the novel's hero Ormus Cama himself is almost apotheosized in the public eye as a musical-spiritual guide in his own right, someone who apparently brings the wisdom of the east to a materialist and promiscuous western world. The spiritual gurus Rushdie's singer heroine Vina Apsara sometimes patronizes seem to hold the key to a culture represented in equal parts as beguiling and sinister. Overwhelmed by its too-muchness, and bidding India farewell, the author, like his male lead, attempts to break free onto the global stage through the apparently more liberating idiom of late '60s rock. Yet, if Anglo-American rock with its accompanying complex of appropriative musicianship and corporate profits provides the framework within which the novel's lead pair operates, Rushdie's text fights to move music out of the constraints of cultural ownership and into a new postnational mode. In the previous chapters we have seen how music has been nationalized and politicized in India, and what a crucial role the musical-spiritual guru has played in this process. In the second part of this chapter, we will examine Rushdie's attempts to engage with the guru figure given the novel's focus on the postnational, and with the backdrop of the ongoing debates on cultural authenticity. It is important to remind readers that the two novels work in very different genres. Rushdie's text is written in the sweeping, allegorical, magical realist style now familiar to his readers, and references several important Indian and international cultural and geopolitical events occurring after the 1940s. Seth's novel, like most of his writing, eschews such flamboyance, indeed, is resolutely realistic in comparison; with the exception of the occasional childhood

flashback it is set in its 1990s present, and its overriding concerns appear to be somewhat more private than those of Rushdie.

*An Equal Music* reflects Seth's preoccupation with the issue of the dominating mentor, here the protagonist Michael's violin teacher Carl Kall. It bears mention that Seth claims amateur training in vocal raga music. Though, unlike in the case of the singer-authors of the previous chapter, that training seems to have been cut short early for Seth, growing up in India he would certainly have known of and perhaps himself been exposed to the workings of the *guru-shishya parampara*, the tradition of the guru who is always to be worshipfully and unquestioningly obeyed. Several passages in the novel dwell angrily on Carl's idiosyncrasies, Michael's inability to deal with them, and his subsequent break down. It is Carl's behaviour that drives Michael away from Vienna and (he feels) causes his love relationship with a fellow music student, Julia, to fall apart. The book emphasizes alternatives: less demanding and erratic facilitator figures for one, like the appropriately named Mrs. Formby, as well as Julia herself, the love relationship becoming one that broadens Michael's musical and intellectual horizons in new and unexpected ways. While it reveals the fact that music education for the children of British working class parents has progressively been in decline, the novel also points at the ways in which such children find access to classical music, as well as to the library system and radio programmes that support their efforts to educate themselves.

Both novels participate in the related debate about authenticity and its place in the workings of artistic inspiration, Rushdie almost invariably weighing in against the former concept, and Seth revealing a more complicated approach to it, particularly as it is represented in his novel's continuous discussion of the role that canonical scores should

play in modern classical music making. Where the books come together, and where they break decisively with earlier Indian English fiction on musicians, is in the connection they draw and then redraw between musical pedagogy and inspiration on the one hand, and romantic love and the sexual/bodily on the other. In this respect, Rushdie and Seth have a very early South Asian precursor, Michael Ondaatje, whose first novel, *Coming Through Slaughter* (1976), fictionalizes the life of the legendary unrecorded jazz trumpet player Buddy Bolden. Set in New Orleans at the beginning of the jazz era, *Slaughter* is emphatically western in its characters and setting, gives no evidence that it was written by someone from - or even influenced by - a South Asian culture, and deals with matters sexual and romantic in a style that is far more explicit than any other previous South Asian text that engages with music or musicians. Born of Burgher and Colombo Chetty descent in Sri Lanka, and moving as a teenager to England and then as an adult to Canada in a world before satellite television and internet, i.e. a world not yet globalized in quite the way we know it to be today, Ondaatje's cultural coordinates are perhaps harder to outline than are those of Rushdie and Seth. Describing some of his work as South Asian therefore opens up a rich debate on what constitutes South Asian-ness and what might fairly be excluded from such a category. There is no doubt, however, that *Slaughter*, though it has no South Asian locale or characters, in fact, precisely because it has no South Asian locale or characters, is a book that we must regard as an important influence on both Rushdie and Seth. As my fourth and final chapter will show, the relationship of music to sexuality finds its ultimate form in Kiran Nagarkar's historical novel *The Cuckold* (1997), which rewrites the love songs of the saint-poet-singer Mira to the god Krishna. There, the guru/teacher figure is conspicuously absent from the beginning - has

already been rendered unnecessary. Nagarkar moves one step further from the “grown up” platonic ending of Seth’s novel, and from the complicated interplay of selective abstinence and promiscuity that marks Rushdie’s focal characters. In *The Cuckold*, not just the music guru, but sex itself is virtualized for the musician - not least because it is most vividly fantasized in songs that describe coupling with a god - and the deeply eroticized imaginary relationship alone sustains musical development and creative activity. With *An Equal Music*, my third chapter also relates backwards to the previous auto/biographical one, since Michael is regarded as being loosely based on Seth’s own real life musician lover, Philippe Honore. I should mention here that if this chapter appears slightly skewed towards analysis of Seth, who occupies almost two thirds of the page space, it is because Seth’s novel deals in much more detail with the formal pedagogical process, whereas Rushdie’s circumvents that process altogether.

In *An Equal Music*, the bildung narrative movement works through youthful anger against Carl Kall and a particularly commercialized version of tradition in the first half, to relative emotional equanimity at the end, an attitude we are clearly supposed to read as more mature. The final mindset is indexed by a qualified acceptance of the realities of the music industry and the inevitable brevity of high romance, as well as a resigned move away from the sexual to the platonic. This development finds correlatives in Seth’s choice of composers, musical genres, and locales. Though this work is generally recognized as being a celebration of a conservative art form, European classical music, Seth incorporates elements in the early chapters that cannot be described as conservative, chief among them being the primary position accorded to Schubert as he is viewed through the lens of twentieth century music history. Seth also raises important

contemporary questions related to class, public education, corporate and consumer culture, and the complicated machinations of the modern music industry. But these issues are raised only to be swept away almost in a Forsterian return, by the powers of the great and apparently cleansing stream of “pure” music, or “music itself.”

The changes in Michael’s approach to the senior music teachers or maestros who initiate the more serious and talented students into the musical profession are gradual but apparent, and Seth, it appears, wants us to see these changes as part of Michael’s delayed emotional coming of age. In the first half, Michael fluctuates between self-pitying apathy and a debilitating anger and sorrow at the old memory of a nervous breakdown during a concert, and the break up of his love relationship with Julia, once a fellow music student in Vienna, for both of which he holds their early music teacher Carl Kall substantially responsible. The very modest circumstances of his life as a professional but not particularly successful violinist in his late thirties do not help his mental state. On and off he plays with the Maggiore string quartet, a group that is talented but has not yet made it to the forefront of public attention, earns his bread and butter with private tuitions on which he ruminates with some bitterness, and has a halfhearted, almost callously physical relationship with Virginie, one of his female students. The son of a butcher, he feels the need to move beyond his small town working-class origins and build contacts in the music business in London, but finds himself and his group members ill-equipped with the necessary networking skills. He plays a valuable old Tononi violin that belongs to Mrs. Formby, an aging well wisher and cultural mentor from his high school years, and lives in dread of the day when her death will cause the violin to go into the possession of the nephew who is her formal heir.

As the narrative progresses, Michael's career situation improves somewhat with the help of the group's savvy agent who organizes concert tours to Europe and his relationship with Julia – now married and a mother - enjoys a temporary and illicit revival, one shadowed by the knowledge that she is going deaf and will be unable to play with any group before long. Mrs. Formby, the owner of the Tononi, dies, and almost miraculously Michael becomes its new owner. By the end of the book, we see him in a state of resignation at the second and final break with Julia, allowing himself to feel nothing but the beauty of the music flowing around him, and to believe only that the music is “a sufficient gift. Why ask for happiness, why hope not to grieve? It is enough, it is to be blessed enough, to live from day to day and to hear such music – not too much or the soul could not sustain it – from time to time” (381). I argue that this acceptance is related to the text's transference of emphasis in terms of musical learning, guidance, and inspiration. In the early sections, the novel suggests both the temptations and the dangers of having to submit to the will of real life music teachers, the relationship between musical pedagogy and the erotic, and the attractions of an almost eroticized musical guidance received from the lives and works of the more unconventional composers of previous centuries. Several passages in the first quarter of the novel thus celebrate Schubert, a composer who represented outsider status in sexual choices, genre innovation, and, through the lied in particular, a connection with the untrained and spontaneous, with folk culture and amateur involvement. Throughout the text, the all but palpable presence of early composers is felt through the musical scores that come to represent them, and statues and busts of them in concert venues across Europe. At the end of the novel, Michael's bitterness towards Kall appears to have abated, a change textually

represented in the shift of emphasis from Schubert in the early pages to Bach at the conclusion. Bach was the quintessential insider to the great European classical music tradition, of which he is sometimes called the “father”. It is significant that by the end, Michael has ‘graduated’ emotionally from humming Schubert’s lied - a form which became popular among other reasons because it required the most basic musical and vocal skills - to being obsessed with one of the most cerebral compositions in European classical music, and one that requires rigorous training and much finesse to do justice to – Bach’s *The Art of Fugue*.

The composer in focus at the beginning is clearly Schubert, and the genre favoured is the lied. Julia calls Schubert “a bit of a frog” to look at, but willingly admits he is a frog she would have kissed (29). Conversations with Mrs. Formby include references to Schumann as “the wrong Schu”, with Schubert given pride of place (68). To alleviate his loneliness, Michael plays portions of Schubert’s lively Trout Symphony on his violin at home. His special fondness for Schubert and the important space the composer occupies in his mental and musical life are foregrounded very early when he confesses: “I have not played Schubert for more than a month. My violin misses him more than I do. I tune it, and we enter my soundproof cell. No light, no sound comes in from the world....I will play nothing of what we have played in our quartet, nothing that reminds me of my recent music-making with any human being. I will play his songs” (5). Schubert’s songs thus literally become an escape into a hermetically sealed other and happier world.

Paralleling our protagonist’s sense of romantic desolation and artistic dissatisfaction is the novel’s opening reference to a relatively informal genre, the Germanic love song or lied, many pieces of which Schubert famously set to music. An extract from one of these

– the Heinrich Heine poem “Der Doppelgänger” - appears in stanza form on the second page apparently as part of Michael’s random thought processes, and quite obviously reflects his mental distress and unfulfilled emotional yearnings. The girl at the French bakery tells him “You are a happy man... (Y)ou’re always humming”, and his response, of which he is instantly ashamed, is: “It’s my work” (4). As Michael puts his week’s routinely bought croissants into the freezer, he “notices” - somewhat artlessly for Seth - that he “was humming the same half-tuneless tune of one of Schubert’s last songs:

I see a man who stares upwards  
And wrings his hands from the force of his pain  
I shudder when I see his face.  
The moon reveals myself to me” (4)

The doppelgänger (from the German “shadow walker”), traditionally an eerie metaphor of likeness-in-difference, or strangeness, stands in variously for alienation from self, angst, death, or an omen, and thus the fear of death. Sometimes regarded as men’s “evil twins”, doppelgängers fictional and “reported” have tended to behave in malevolently contrary ways, usually to the detriment of their originals. However, Heine’s version is not only not evil, but clearly also feels pain just as real humans do. The conclusion to the first verse stresses that the double’s relation to all concerned – Heinz, Schubert, Michael, and (as we shall see) possibly Seth himself– is not an antagonistic one. I quote the second verse here, one that Seth does not himself include:

You spirit double, you specter with my face  
Why do you mock my love-pain so  
That tortured me here, here in this place  
So many nights, so long ago?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> From Leon Malinofsky’s translation, which, of the many accessible today, I believe to be stylistically closest to Seth’s.

In Franz Schubert: Sexuality, Subjectivity, Song Lawrence Kramer describes “Der Doppelgänger” as:

...one of the most discussed of Schubert’s songs. It is an exemplary treatment of the nineteenth century theme of the double, the alter-ego in whom the subject sees its undisciplined, unsocialized side, which in this case once more means the compulsion to nurse an erotic wound....The speaker, revisiting his former lover’s house, encounters a figure whom he gradually recognizes as a mocking and distorted version of himself....Like the poem’s speaker, the song’s vocal persona is appalled by his double, who forces him to see that his love-agony (*Liebesleid*) is the hidden kernel of his being – hidden, but no longer hideable. (55)

Footnoting other musical and literary scholars who have commented on the double, Kramer insists that his analysis differs from theirs in “teasing out the double’s affirmative relationship to the vocal persona, a relationship that not only coexists with, but is even predicated on, the double’s ghastriness. This constitutive ambivalence”, he argues, “is the basis of the double as a historical formation” (55). Michael’s position as a sufferer from *Liebesleid*, and more crucially, a sufferer in private, is therefore quite firmly established early in the first chapter of Seth’s novel. Kramer comments on the “submerged pun” of the “*Liebesleid* returning as a distorted *Leibeslied*”, and his description of the dramatis personae of Schubert’s lieder points towards the appropriateness of Seth’s choice of Schubert to represent Michael’s emotional state in the early part of the novel: “The figures who sing through these songs...take emotion as law and desire as logic...help foster a strain of dissidence against (but also within) the everyday life of modernity that is deeply characteristic of modernity itself” (58-9).

It would be impossible to achieve anything approaching a fuller understanding of *An Equal Music* without taking into account its auto/biographical elements. As a dissertating reader, one is well forewarned of the reductive pitfalls of trying to “match” characters to authors, or to real life people who may have had an important or formative influence on

those authors. Yet, at several points in the text, passages that we will go on to inspect, the novel tempts one into wondering how it might be read autobiographically. It is here that Schubert, the lieder form, and the doppelganger theme, become alluringly appropriate emblems not just of Michael's consciousness, but also that of Seth himself. For Seth, choosing Schubert to play this critical opening role in his novel seems to have been intimately connected with the growing certainty that Schubert, too, was homosexual. At this point in the text, we are also only two pages away from Seth's acrostic poetic dedication to his long time partner, the up and coming classical violinist Philippe Honore, a relationship not made public for many years and only rarely and glancingly acknowledged till the time of the novel's publication. Given Seth's own choices, it would seem that alternative sexuality, though referenced in empathetic terms in his mock-heroic verse novel *The Golden Gate*, has not yet received the more complete novelistic treatment it deserves at his hands. Though Michael himself is heterosexual, Seth makes some movements in this direction again with the characterization of Piers, one of Michael's colleagues in the quartet.

It would perhaps be simplistic to link Seth's decision not to make this a full-fledged gay love story solely to personal reticence about his lifestyle. Issues of global acceptability and marketability - including, no doubt, sales in India, where he enjoys preeminent stature as an internationally successful homegrown author, and where his books find their most avid but generally conservative consumers - may also have influenced him and his publishers. Since *An Equal Music*, he has given his mother permission to publicly acknowledge both the fact of his gayness and her reactions to this revelation in her 2003 biography, and has made attempts to speak more candidly to the

media about his orientation, though he admits that he finds the process difficult, that it goes against the grain of a person as private as he is:

I don't feel my friends' lives and my own should be part of the public's right to know. But in a case like this where so much is at stake, where the happiness, at a conservative estimate, of 50 million people and their right not to be fearful or lonely and to be with the people whom they love is at issue, and the happiness of their families as well, then it really is incumbent on us to speak out. (Sheela Reddy interview, *Outlook*, Oct 2nd, 2006)

But until the time *An Equal Music* was published, Seth had not yet formally acknowledged either his own sexual orientation or his relationship with Honore. My intention here is not to pursue some sort of anachronistic detective trail that ends in a “scoop” about Seth’s sexual choices, or his decisions first to conceal them, and then later to come out. Though the word anachronistic in this context is perhaps more applicable in the western world than in India which only legalized consensual gay sex in 2009. What I wish to highlight here, instead, are the connections Seth draws between the sexual/romantic and musical as well as literary learning and inspiration and between music and literature as parallel art forms.

I offer a brief anecdote by way of introduction to the way in which Seth’s homosexuality was either not recognized and/or not referred to in India at the time of the novel’s publication. I confess, myself, to being completely unaware of it at the time, and accepting magazine and newspaper pronouncements to the effect that he was India’s most eligible (assumed heterosexual by default) literary bachelor.<sup>37</sup> As part of a promotional tour, in early autumn of 1996 Seth read from *An Equal Music* at the Seagull Bookstore in Kolkata. His packed audience included a section of people who seemed very well

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<sup>37</sup> Naipaul was married for decades at the time, and (as it turns out, erroneously) regarded as past further action on the matrimonial front, and Rushdie offered only intermittent competition in the spaces between his marriages. In any case, as in practically every culture, a successful person who has never been married attracts much more interest on this front than a divorced one.

acquainted with the composers and compositions he wrote about, several people questioning him on his choices and suggesting possible alternatives that he might instead have selected. In a Q and A session that stretched to almost an hour, others, not so well versed in the idiom of western classical music, wanted to know about his training in raga music. Still others - and this included the graduate student population I belonged to – had questions about the novel’s stylistic aspects, its comments on the commercialization of music, what it means to be a deaf musician today, the global marketability of a novel on Indian musicians, in short, about everything except Philippe Honore and his contribution to the genesis of the novel. The Seagull Bookstore is affiliated with a progressive media center that around the same time also organized an event based on transsexual and transvestite rights, and certainly was not unfriendly to the issues of gays and lesbians even in a country that had yet to legalize their sexual acts. But because Seth allowed only the text to speak for him, not one person – and perhaps some in the audience knew or suspected the truth - saw fit to mention the novel’s treatment of homosexuality or the crucial way in which Seth’s gayness had played into the conception of the novel.

Yet, as we shall see, the dedication to Honore appears to signpost Seth’s intention to write the work as a partial telling of his own romance. The poem evidences both love and regret, though it is unclear whether the regret at that stage was about the relationship foundering, or about the complicated politics of privacy involved in Seth’s decision to be discreet about it. I quote the poem in full, as it is substantially significant to my argument:

Perhaps this could have stayed unstated.  
 Had our words turned to other things  
 In the grey park, the rain abated,  
 Life would have quickened other strings.  
 I list your gifts in this creation:  
 Pen, paper, ink and inspiration.

Peace to the heart with touch or word,  
Ease to the soul with note and chord.

How did that walk, those winter hours  
Occasion this? No lightning came,  
Nor did I sense, when touched by flame,  
Our story lit with borrowed powers –  
Rather, by what our spirits burned,  
Embered in words, to us returned.

Here, the opening sense of loss in “perhaps”, “could have”, “had”, “grey”, “rain”, and “would have” is underscored by the silenced sound of the strings. Yet the second half of the stanza is determined in its vote of thanks: the “gifts...Pen, paper, ink and inspiration” certainly seem to have outlasted the relationship. What is significant to my argument, moreover, is that no external stimulus is necessary to the author’s artistic activity; the “flame” that lights the act of creation is not a “borrowed” one, but one that the love between the two men ignites; it burns out – or is put out by the drizzle? – but then lives in “embered” form as the work of art. The poem thus enacts even before the novel begins, some of the process of abstraction or virtualizing that the text will work through more completely. The romantic relationship is transformed from the physical encounter in the park, through a process of sublimation by the “burning” of spirits, to come alive again in a disembodied but powerfully meaningful form as the lovers’ story. Implicit also in the final lines is the suggestion that Honore has his own musical version of “our story” to tell, that the romantic relationship could potentially also - and as it turns out, will be - “embered” elsewhere in another form, in musical notes performed on a concert stage, or heard on a CD, or, as happens in the novel, appearing in the form of the score.

In a more or less predictable twist on this until then apparently rarefied and uncontaminated two-way flow between music and writing: a year after the publication of

Seth's book, Decca released a double album entitled 'Vikram Seth: An Equal Music - Music from the Best-Selling Novel'. The album features the classical compositions mentioned in the novel, played by various quartets and quintets, recordings in which Honore's talents are accorded pride of place. Here is an extract from Barnes and Noble's online plug for the set:

The protagonist of Vikram Seth's sad romance is a violinist who specializes in chamber music, and the masterworks that he plays are themselves important characters in the story. While some of these musical personae are well known, like Schubert's "Trout" Quintet, others are more obscure. One of the novel's pivotal pieces -- Beethoven's arrangement for string quintet of his C Minor Piano Trio, Op. 1, No. 3 -- was actually not available on CD at all. Luckily, Decca has stepped in to provide a two-disc companion to the book which includes, among other things, a brand new recording of that elusive Beethoven arrangement....Decca also introduces us to new names, most notably that of violinist Phillippe Honore who also happens to be the dedicatee of the novel. Honoré has a beautiful, bright tone, a secure technique, and a thoughtful style that perfectly evokes the character of the book's fictional violinist. For those readers who were swept away by Seth's story, this collection will provide added insight, as well as many hours of listening pleasure (Web; retrieved 09/26/2009).

It is impossible to ignore the manifold commercial ironies of the word "companion" in this context. The novel decries exactly the same pandering to market realities that the CD here seems to participate in, even if we were to believe that the recordings were originally conceived as a labour of love. The "reviewer" is, as might perhaps be expected, far less cautious than the academic is trained to be about identifying Honore with Michael, whose musical thoughtfulness we cannot actually hear, and whose general thoughtfulness as a person would hardly stand inspection if it were to be judged by his flight from Vienna, and his quite foolhardy subsequent actions as a besotted secret lover. But what this advertisement does highlight is the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of writing convincingly about music in the absence of the actual music. Seth's 'equal music' is rendered doubly "elusive" and therefore also doubly exclusive, by the necessity of both

words and music for the discerning listener. The blurb also correctly emphasizes the related role of the master works that Seth's characters fetishize – and through them, of the master composers - as parallel characters in the novel. I suggest, in this context, that Seth's foregrounding of musical scores is an attempt to narrow the inevitable gap between music and writing about music. And it is this move that enables him to finally work through the transference of musical authority from the living master-teacher to the dead composers, investing the ultimate power over musicians not in their teachers, but in the scores that now represent canonical composers.

The debate over scores weaves its way through several sections of the novel, in particular, those that deal with romantic relationships. Here too, the novel shows the conflict and later the gradual “development” in Michael's views. Piers's intense liaison and then break up with his ex-partner Tobias, a violinist in another quartet, is the subject of some mulling over, apparently on account of the unfortunate effects it has on the Maggiore quartet's interpersonal and musical dynamics, rather than from the perspective of Piers' heartbreak per se:

Tobias entered the picture – or, more exactly, crashed through the frame....Piers came under his sway....Under the influence of Tobias he became obsessed with the holy writ of theory....Our job was to realize a reproduction of the score. Anything else – an imaginative idea, a fluctuation in pace, a whim, anything that smudged the template, was an abomination. There was no sense of “ah!” to our music at all. We attained a lifeless lucidity....At times it was almost Tobias and not Piers who was playing and arguing....It was a bit like *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*....Piers somehow exorcised Tobias, and not just he but all of us gradually became ourselves again. We never mention Tobias if we can avoid it. (75-76)

(Note how this passage, itself part of a narrative about music, highlights the (un)translatability of art forms in its referencing of writing (in the form of the score), drama, visual art, and film.) Here, the double who seems to play and argue instead of

Piers is not a spectral or fabulous creature, yet the malevolent propensities of the doppelganger are quite clearly suggested: a predatory Tobias “crashes” from some threatening unframed off-stage locus onto the focal main stage of the quartet’s rehearsals, and the group is rendered “lifeless”; Tobias is a “body snatcher” from whose clutches the group is rescued by an act of “exorcism”, the four regroup through a process of convalescence. Taken at face value, such an interpretation seems out of place in Seth’s writing. Of course, this is Michael’s “straight” version of the events, and Seth might merely be drawing attention to the insensitivity with which even “sympathetic” heterosexuals can sometimes trivialize or critique other kinds of relationships. But the entire quartet feels unable to deal with Tobias’s ghost, exorcized or not, and the superstitious fear of another “possession” makes this a taboo subject henceforth. This taboo, this unspeakability is, as we have seen, peculiarly apropos to Seth’s situation as an Indian writer and gay lover. Also important to this section of my argument is the special resonance that the theme of identification with a ghastly and eerily identical double would have for Seth, in terms of a clandestine homosexual “subject”’s relation to the “object” of his affections. But what is most crucial in the passage quoted above is the manner in which the authority of the score, at this early stage, is represented as the antithesis of everything living and imaginative: it is a “template” which causes the group’s music to become “lifeless.” The implicit comparison with the lied, drawn out on both the thematic and stylistic levels, could not be more telling. First, the lied is a relatively uncomplicated, amateur, participatory, often spontaneously improvisatory form. And second, not only is Tobias a threatening presence, unlike the doppelganger of the Schubert lied we hear Michel singing, but further, what he and later his phantom

presence in Piers bring to the efforts of the group kills everything in their playing that makes their work musical in the truest sense: “the holy writ of theory” that Tobias and Tobias-as- Piers preach reduces the Maggiore’s practice to mere “reproduction”.

Almost inevitably though, given the importance of the score to musicians, given the primary status accorded to a classic/“heroic” Beethoven by critics as prominent as Adorno, and given that one of the musicians is going deaf, the novel also depicts Michael’s search for first the score and then the record of a Beethoven string quintet, Opus 104, a piece that almost nobody has ever heard of.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, it is Virginia, whose eccentric reading apparently includes “bruising through” whole sections of music encyclopedias, who tells him of the existence of the quintet, and at first he is unwilling to believe her. (34) Michael launches a hunt for versions of Opus 104, calling the music stores and libraries he has always depended upon. Beethoven, of course, would be the obvious choice here, given Julia’s deafness. Michael does not yet know of Julia’s situation in this regard, but we know that Beethoven evokes deafness even for lay readers in almost the same way as Milton does blindness. The usual stores are unable to locate

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<sup>38</sup> Locating a model for Enlightenment philosophy in Beethoven’s music, Adorno writes: “...due to its artistically planned indifference toward each of the individual aspects of the music it uses, Beethoven’s music amounts to something like a kind of “justification” [*Rechtfertigung*] of tonality itself, and the forms associated with tonality. In a manner not unlike Kant...in Beethoven the forms... could be said to reemerge from out of the specific process of composition. It is actually tonality itself which, in Beethoven’s case, is both theme and outcome.... (His) genius consists precisely in the fact that this process does not remain on a general level, but...in a manner which corresponds exactly to the great tradition of German philosophy (the philosophy of Hegel above all) – it plunges itself from the most generalized and unspecific to the most extreme concretion in order thus to lead back to the binding forces of the universal once more.” (“On the Problem of Musical Analysis” 167, Leppert 162-180.) Adorno thus asserts an intimate structural correspondence between the important aspects of bourgeois ideology and the most basic features and movements of tonal music, an understanding that Witkin describes as the “quintessential realization in music of an apparent reconciliation between the collective force of society which (Adorno) identified with ‘form’ in music, and the spontaneous movement of free individuals – represented in music by the sensuous particulars or elements” (Witkin 63). Susan McClary argues that Western tonality is an “intensely ideological formation” because it “constructed musical analogs to such emerging ideals as rationality, individualism, progress, and centered subjectivity. Far from merely reflecting their times, these musical procedures participated actively in shaping habits of thought on which the modern era depended” (2000: 5, 67)

recordings, and when a reluctant and skeptical clerk finally finds the score for Opus 104 in a catalogue, it is for a clarinet quintet, available in two weeks if in stock, and priced dear at thirty-two pounds, an amount Michael is hesitant to immediately pay. His next recourse is the music libraries, and this offers Seth an opportunity not just to stress how musical scores have made Michael what he is, but also to comment on the facilities for music education in the provinces:

The main public music library in London opens, astonishingly enough, at one in the afternoon, so I decide to try the one in Manchester instead....I phone the Henry Watson Music Library, my second home when I was a student in Manchester – and even more crucially, for three years between school and college when I had to earn a fitful living there. I could not afford scores and music in those days. If this library had not existed, I don't know how I could have held onto my dream of becoming a musician. (36)

Appropriately enough, the person at the end of the line at the Manchester library finds the score Michael is looking for, and suggests an interlibrary loan. When Michael asks whether the library he uses in London, the Westminster Music Library, can request the loan, he is told: “Yes, I suppose so. They've had their, well, tribulations. But they should still, I suppose, be able to tell a trio from a quintet (37)”. We are expected not to miss the smug, and to us surprising, note of reverse snobbishness in the Manchester librarian's response.

Returning to the London stores, Michael pursues his search for a CD of Opus 104 at “every store (he) can find...Tower, HMV, Virgin, Music Discount Centre, the works”, but coming up with a blank everywhere, concludes that there is no such CD (38). Eventually, his Maggiore colleague Billy, who, “oddly enough for a thoroughly modern composer, is a great believer in the virtues of vinyl” recommends “Harold Moore's...a Dickensian haven” (38-39). The record is found in a pile of “Eastern European

recordings” at Moore’s, issued in the 1970s under the label of Supraphon, a Czech company that tries to present “unfairly neglected” works and “unusual combinations” (40). As in much of the book, London and what it can afford the professional musician pales before European sophistication and discernment, and what is presented as the more appropriately respectful European approach to the glories of the past. The description of Michael’s bus journey home with the record in hand is a complex layering of his thoughts on music, nationality, and class: French schoolgirls chatter about cosmetics, (reminding us (but not him) of young, and by implication similarly shallow, Virginie, whose information sends him to Opus 104, but who is herself forgotten in the excitement of locating the work); he then recalls Dvorak’s son-in-law in a random association with the violinist named on the sleeve of the disc, a son-in-law who, like Michael himself, was a butcher’s son (40-41). And suddenly, in a traffic jam outside Selfridges, who’s welcoming Angel gazes benignly down on love rediscovered, he sees Julia for the first time in ten years. Michael embarks on a taxi chase to catch Julia, staring down a parcel-laden Oxford Street woman shopper to get the taxi, and forgets the Opus 104 record in the taxi as he leaves. The connections between tracking down a rarely heard Beethoven work, ordering the score, and finding Julia again, (in the midst of - and as an antithesis to - rampant urban commercialization) are hardly to be missed. He despairs of finding both Julia and the record again, and sits down to weep, this time under the statue of Eros. Providentially, the taxi driver takes the trouble to trace the record to him through the store’s bill in the packet, and it is restored to him, allowing us to hope that Julia, too will be found.

The narrative proximity of the emphasis on musical resources in the counties, resources to which Michael has been led to at an early age under Mrs. Formby's guidance, and the rediscovery of Julia and the Beethoven score serves to highlight meaningful ways in which Michael's musical and aesthetic self has been shaped by people and influences other than Carl. These influences are portrayed as at least as, if not more important than, that of Carl. Childless Mrs. Formby, once an orchestra violinist, shows interest in young Michael's development, and it is she who takes him, aged nine, to one of his first serious concerts, a performance of Handel's 'Messiah' (66). The boy watches as the conductor "brings down a stick and a huge and lovely noise fills the world. More than anything (he wants) to be a part of such a noise" (67). They listen to Vaughan Williams' 'The Lark Ascending' on Mrs. Formby's gramophone, and the child begs her to teach him how to play the violin, which she does, on a small one she had used as a child (70-71). Later, she organizes a good teacher for him, and he is lucky enough to avail of the instruments on loan that his comprehensive school still offered students, a facility, he points out, that has since been withdrawn as a result of cuts in public funding (71).<sup>39</sup> Finally, of course, comes the loan of the Tononi from Mrs. Formby herself, a loan that later becomes a permanent bequest. The availability of classical music programmes on the radio too, seems to have had a formative impact on the younger Michael, possibly even influencing

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<sup>39</sup> Levels of awareness about classical music amongst Manchester respondents in Derek Wynne and Justin O'Connor's 1998 study of musical tastes do not appear to justify the smugness of the librarian Michael talks to. Chosen from the younger and better-educated representatives of the new middle classes (many recently moving from smaller towns to enjoy city life, and close to the adult Michael in age and educational background), only 19 out of 148 respondents were able to name more than 6 composers (p 847, cited in Peter Martin.) If Michael becomes a professional classical musician in spite of his modest circumstances in an English small town, we must, in agreement with him, think of him as exceptionally fortunate both in having Mrs. Formby's guidance, as well as in his particular historical moment, i.e. before Thatcherite spending cuts, when a comprehensive school like the one he went to in Rochdale could still provide both a good musical training, as well as instruments on loan.

his ultimate choice of chamber music as opposed to its symphonic counterpart. Even Adorno, generally critical of classical music on the radio, grudgingly admits that chamber music is structurally best suited to radio transmission. How much chamber music Michael actually got to hear on his favourite BBC programmes, though, is open to question. As Adorno reminds us in the same essay, radio listeners have always tended to prefer symphonic music on account of its “primitive and spectacular strength of sound, its “publicity character”... (its) multicolored structure... (and its) specific symphonic intensity and emphasis” (252). Chamber music, according to Adorno, is heard less frequently on the air in spite of its structural suitability for the radio because its textural polyphony makes it more complex and difficult to understand; it is therefore not “dramatic” enough, or as amenable as the symphony to what he labels “quotation listening” and facile romanticization (263-7). While radio technology has improved tremendously after Adorno, it is debatable how much audience preferences had changed between the time of Adorno’s essay and the middle ’70s in which Seth situates Michael’s boyhood. It is safe to say, though, that Michael growing up must have heard a fair amount of radio classical music as part of the BBC’s longstanding policy of cultivating interest in the classical works. Indeed, the boy Michael seems to have been the ideal BBC subject: someone to whom classical music became increasingly real and desirable among other reasons because of his easy access to it on the airwaves.

There are two other important facts that we need to take into consideration while examining the different approaches to the score that we see developing in *An Equal Music*. It can be argued that the rebelliousness of student musicians and then the virtualization of the master musician-teacher is facilitated, even made possible at all for

Seth by his shift of locale to Europe, where notions of individualism and selfhood are regarded rather differently than in India. But alongside this, in replacing the primacy of the “suffocating” maestro by that of the score, Seth has crucial recourse to a form of written music that Indian classical musicians have never had. As we have seen in previous chapters, Indian raga music is based on improvisation within the fairly strict set of notes and melodic movements that have traditionally been laid down for each raga. In most genres of North Indian raga music at least, which is the Indian music Seth would be more familiar with, and which differs significantly in this respect from its South Indian counterpart, the role of composers is limited to very brief lyrical pieces that anchor the larger web of melodic and rhythmic improvisation. In a musical culture where knowledge has been orally transmitted until very recently, even the raga “rules”, minimal as they are, were only systematized and notated on the western model as late as the first half of the twentieth century. To this day, classical singers and instrumentalists must repeatedly listen to trained older performers to gain even the most basic understanding of how the shape of each raga should be correctly delineated and then its structure developed. But because this structural development is based on individual creativity - always, however, staying within raga norms - there is no one “right” way that a raga is authorized to be sung; there are, instead, an infinite number of ways in which a raga can be built on within the correct scheme. Which is to say that in raga music, for a variety of reasons, including most obviously that it is the product of a musical culture that was till very recently almost exclusively verbal, there is no counterpart of the written or printed score as western musicians understand it. Individual virtuosity must be negotiated within a tradition that is

always regarded as immeasurably larger than the individual, and to which he or she can only have access through the benevolence of a duly propitiated guru.

It is true that recorded Indian raga music has been more and more widely available from shortly after the time that the music started being notated in print versions. It is therefore theoretically possible for a keen listener and would-be autodidact to put together a collection of recordings of one raga with a text like the now ubiquitous Bhatkhande (which provides the bare bones notational shape of each raga) and come up with an imitation or even a working synthesis that sounds like the raga as it is sung or played by trained performers. In practice however, there is no known case where such a singer has attained any level of public recognition from serious classical music audiences. Part of the reluctance to entertain the possibility of teaching oneself to perform at anything other than an informal drawing room level, or of accepting someone who is thus self tutored, also comes from the continuing - albeit gradually lightening - weight accorded to the idea of the *gharana* or musical lineage that governed raga music in the days when it was supported by royal and aristocratic patronage. Chapter Two provides a more complete sense of how the *gharana* dynamic has worked in shaping musical styles, enabling and enforcing stylistic and thematic continuity, forging loyalties and engendering rivalries, and, crucially, authorizing individual musicians to sing as officially recognized *gharana* successors and representatives. Before recitals on the concert stage, all classical musicians continue to be introduced first of all as the students of their best-known teachers. Claiming an established link with a *gharana* is thus the first step to claiming the serious attention of a discerning audience. Given these factors, there could have been no Indian Michael; Seth could only envisage a rebellious but plausibly capable

classical musician-protagonist on the western stage. And, turning the argument inside out, the only way such a rebellious musician could be plausibly capable on the western stage is by submitting to the final authority of a generally accepted compositional score instead.

Returning to the subject of Seth's musical genre choices, it bears mention here that the lied was very popular with early Romantics like Goethe and Schlegel, and its status, therefore, as one of the most romantic of the Romantic genres is well known. Schubert wrote and composed more than 600 lieder, and played a chronologically small but crucial bridging role between the ages of baroque and romantic music. His choice of the homespun lied and his efforts to popularize it for amateur drawing room performance may have been one of the many reasons that he occupies a "feminine" space among the major composers. Referring to him as "a great imponderable", Kramer observes that

...(h)is early biographers presented him in terms stamped by inferiority which have stuck to his music and problematized its canonical standing. Schubert is the only "great composer" who comes down to us as naïve, passive, self-indulgent, child-like, and feminine; Mozart is a bear by comparison.... this Schubertian identity crisis is not a problem to be solved by further scholarship but a constitutive feature of Schubert's historical, and with it his aesthetic, situation. His music, especially in its preoccupation with song and the song-like, can be heard as a response to the emergence...of a new form of western social organization...(a newly) disciplinary society...the determination of human identity by reference to central norms. (1)

In the decade before *An Equal Music* was published, new and controversial theories about Schubert's personal life had occasioned intense arguments in the classical music fraternity. Maynard Solomon may be said to have sparked off the furore with his 1989 essay "Franz Schubert and the Peacocks of Benvenuto Cellini" where he suggests that Schubert had connections with the early nineteenth century Viennese gay subculture; several other musicologists subsequently jumped into the fray with either supplementary hypotheses or impassioned "defenses". Most recently, Scott Messing, in his lengthy two-

volume study, *Schubert in the European Imagination* (2006), analyzes the composer's perceived femininity in terms of musical choices, physical stature and behaviour. Messing discusses at some length the famous 1838 review of Schubert by Schumann, in which the former is ascribed a *madchencharakter* ("girlish character") in contrast with the more traditionally heroic and masculine Beethoven. While Messing stresses that the term was a complex one and "not simply a clever locution designed to represent a singular womanliness whose appropriate site was the home and whose artistic expression was an untroubled *Hausmusik*", he too concedes that Schumann's remark remains the most influential characterization of Schubert, one that invariably colours his posthumous reputation (2). The entire debate was certainly at roiling point when Seth would have been making decisions about his characters and themes, and should logically have occupied front and center space in his research into Schubert's life and times.

Almost in accordance with the state of this controversy, the lieder phase of the novel features messy physical relationships that sometimes do battle with and sometimes overshadow Michael's musical self. The connection between sexuality and the teaching and playing of music is highlighted in ways that also allow us to inspect how gender factors into classical music as a profession in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Michael's desires his student Virginie's body, but cannot always respond appropriately to her much younger eagerness in matters sexual. He wonders why he they have not broken up yet, and the manner in which he compares her to the memory of Julia is revealing:

Virginie will not practice, yet demands these lessons....her flat is overheated and there is a great deal of pink....when I step into the bathroom I recoil....every time I sleep here I wonder what I am doing with my time and hers....having begun, what we have continues. She wants it to, and I go along with it, through lust and loneliness, I suppose, and laziness and lack of focus. Our lessons are a clear space. Today it is a partita by Bach: the E major. I ask her to play it all the way

through....it's not just one damn note after another. That second mi-re-mi should carry some memory of the first....As for the one I remember, I see her with her eyes closed, playing Bach to herself: an English suite. Gently her fingers travel among the keys. (6-7)

Virginie's sexuality, represented as floridly French and predatory, as well as her father's deep pockets for lessons that his daughter treats cavalierly are thrown into relief against Julia's gentleness, Englishness, and dedication to music. Though Virginie will not practice, she is anxious to win the college competition, and wants to upgrade her violin: "She is thinking of selling her Miremont, and getting her father – who supports her unstudentlike standard of living – to buy her something early and Italian" (7). The Miremont must have been a fine enough specimen already, given Claude Augustin Miremont's reputation as a distinguished maker of instruments who prided himself on handcrafting his pieces himself instead of hiring the usual clutch of junior craftsmen.<sup>40</sup> Michael's comment, then, becomes a grimacing reference to his own situation in regard to his Tononi, and to the straitened circumstances that will not allow him to treat antique violins with quite the same casual sense of entitlement.

Virginie's failings as a student and Michael's helplessness, both musical and sexual, are juxtaposed with another student-teacher model a few pages later. Michael remembers Yuko, a young Japanese fellow student of Kall's in the Vienna days, one who was far more serious about her work. She is presented not just as a contrast to Virginie, but also to his own younger self:

Yuko does all the things that young Japanese women students are expected to do: practice obediently, suffer terribly, and visit all the Beethoven and Schubert houses they can locate. But Yuko also does what I know I should do – would, indeed, if I knew how to. She ignores the fact that Carl ignores her, annuls his insults by not rising to them, and sifts out a musician's message from his playing, not his speech. (16)

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<sup>40</sup> Ref. Universal Dictionary of Violin and Bowmakers.

We may well wonder, here, about the way in which obedience and willingness to suffer in the cause of one's art are figured as oriental and feminine by a first-person narrator with whom our postcolonial - and gay - author is generally in sympathy. There appears to be pleasure involved in Carl's persecution of Yuko; her "suffering" is evident, her patience a further temptation. Because Seth admits in his interviews to some small training in vocal Indian classical music, we know that he would have been aware that in the Indian *guru-shishya* system it was customary, till late into the 20th century when fees began to be paid in money, for the *gandhaa-bandh* or formally initiated disciple to practically be a servant to his music guru, cooking, cleaning, and tending to his needs, and accepting snubs, derision, and invective alike as par for the course, a role not unlike that traditionally prescribed for a wife. We could ask, also, how this knowledge - although relevant to what was in effect a service relationship rather than the wage relationship of contemporary western music instruction - played into Seth's understanding of what qualifies as acceptable behaviour on the part of a teacher, as well as into the related word picture of the long-suffering Yuko. Was it the exchange of fees, then, that should have given her immunity from Carl's mistreatment? Or does Seth mean to critique the more demeaning service aspects of the *guru-shishya* tradition here? Did Honore's memories of his student days, on which Seth very likely drew, include a Carl persona? If that were so, read in the light of Michael's feelings, might it also have been the case that Honore the European male - conditioned to individualism, but also, perhaps in spite of a more nuanced understanding of gender roles, to being "male" even in a student-teacher situation - was unable to prostrate himself as Yuko does? The anomalous status of An Equal Music within the genre of the Indian English novel makes Seth's

unique insider-outsider position in relation to these issues particularly complex and interesting.

There is more information on Carl's attitude: when he is angry, he "looks almost demented...looks carefully at me, as if wondering which of my cervical vertebrae it will cause him least trouble to snap. He turns away.... He thought I was capable of – and that I would want – a solo career. Now he is perhaps as disillusioned with me as I with him" (17). The threat of Carl's anger is bodily here, as also the pressure caused by the high hopes Michael feels he has dashed. The tension between them, as an older Michael admits, albeit unwillingly, was perhaps not just Carl's doing. Yet as he attempts, in his broodings, to apportion responsibility in a more measured way, the terms he uses are revealing:

...that old man, that stubborn magician, brutal and full of suffocating energy, did not, unaided, drive me from Vienna. It was as much my younger self, unyielding, unwilling to exchange a mentor for a dictator, or to sidle past a collision.... If I had not met him, I would not have brought to life the voice in my hands...not gone to the *Musikhochschule*...not met Julia...not have lost Julia. I would not be adrift. How can I hate Carl any more? .... Maybe I could have learned more from him if I had swallowed my sense of self. (17)

Again, the relationship is relived in terms of the independence of spirit that Michael feels should have been his by right, and in terms of Carl's efforts at an unwarranted and dictatorial subjugation of the student's will. In the previous chapter, student musicians like Sheila Dhar and Hasina clearly register but never seem to rail against the misbehaviour and arrogance of their gurus in this way, glossing injustices with the repeated self reassurance that this is how things are meant to be in the pedagogical cycle, and that their gurus themselves went to tremendous pains to acquire the knowledge now being imparted. Putting this down only to gender seems to be a simplification of the

issues involved, given Chaudhuri's lyrical flights about his guru. Nor can class be used as the explanatory rubric, for if Hasina is poor, and has no connections and few choices, Dhar shares both Chaudhuri's English-educated upper class assurance and his awareness of the many options open to him in terms of musical genres, styles, and, implicitly, teachers. Might we thus say then, that it is Seth's advent into the world of western music, both as a musician's partner, and as the author of this novel, that allows him to comment on the hierarchical nature of the student-teacher relationship in a way that his Indian upbringing, and in particular his own musical training, should otherwise have militated against?

When an aging Carl hears the quartet play on a European tour and writes to Michael in what appear to be his final days, Michael, still suffering from the consequences of their interaction, is resentful of this late olive branch: "But now I think, let him die, his time has come, I cannot reply. Why should he foist on me this responsibility for absolution? (17)" The section ends with an indictment: "I was not learning, I was unlearning, I was unraveling. When I came apart at the concert, it was not because I had been ill, or because I had not prepared what I was playing. It was because he had said I would fail, and I could see him in the audience and knew he willed me to (17)." The last sentence here sounds immature and unreasonable almost to the point of paranoia, reflecting both the great stress that the training process had put Michael under, as well as his disproportionate and continuing rage at being unable to make the most of the opportunity that Carl's mentorship had seemed to offer. Julia, who Carl charms with extravagant compliments, seems to second our idea that Michael had overreacted to Carl's methods in ways that could only be detrimental to his career and emotional stability: "She couldn't

understand what fault I found in him, either then or later. She loved me, yes, but saw this as a mote in my own eye (55).” Yet Michael struggles against the notion that true music can be born out of such an unequal relationship, and his thoughts here take us back to the novel’s title: “Why did we call him Carl among ourselves? Because that is what he would most have hated. “Herr Professor, Herr Professor.” What did the noble sound he created have to do with such bowing and scraping, such subservience of soul?” (55). Susan McClary argues that because the male musician’s masculinity has been compromised in post-enlightenment western culture by the perception that he is too closely associated with bodily rhythms, one of the preoccupations of western art music has been to achieve a certain hypermasculinity where the will of the great male composers overrides the lure of the sensuous (2002: 53-57). If, as it does on one level, Seth’s text militates against the male domination of the maestro, on another, in eventually according the foremost priority to the score, and through that score to the “great” male composers who impose it, the novel reverts in significant ways to something very like the traditional gender equation.

Yet related to the younger Michael’s angry feelings towards Carl, is a notion of western art music as potentially capable of connoting independence of spirit and non-hierarchical relationships. In his Introduction to *Literary Music*, a book in which, along with *An Equal Music*, he also analyses the role of music in several European novels including Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*, Jeanette Winterson’s *Art and Lies*, and Ian McEwan’s *Amsterdam*, Stephen Benson notes that contemporary writers’ interest in art music is “almost exclusively Classical and Romantic in origin, the....genres...are resolutely conventional: symphony, sonata, opera, song and string quartet. The selection is unabashedly wedded to the canon, but the object of real interest is the manner in which

individual works or genres come to exemplify a particular construction of music” (7). In the section on Seth, Benson emphasizes that the novel is almost anachronistic because it is “resolute in its belief in the ethical value of a particular musical tradition...the Viennese tradition of which Schubert’s songs are an integral part” (118-19). It is undisputable that Schubert himself came from a musical family, received formal training, has belonged to the canon for almost two centuries, and did compose more formal works including symphonies, liturgical music and operas, and that the lied now qualifies as a recognized formal genre. However, I argue here that in evoking Schubert’s alternative sexual choices as well as his role in popularizing songs for amateur drawing room performance in the early pages of *An Equal Music*, Seth begins by looking back at the possibility of music as a freer, more spontaneous, communal, and participatory activity. This alternative construction imagines a music that does not always require rigorous training or cerebration, where meaningful, moving, - possibly even “noble”? - sounds might perhaps have been created by ordinary people, without the “mutual drudgery” of tuitions to or from the mediocre, or the “bowing and scraping” and “subservience of the soul” associated with professional training under a master musician. The novel’s rather more conventional ending, however, relegates this possibility to the realm of romantic and youthful idealism.

In examining the knotty issues of class and cultural ownership raised by *An Equal Music*, I begin by quoting John Donne, one of whose sermons provides the novel’s title. Seth’s epigraph is an extract of that sermon: “And into that gate they shall enter, and in that house they shall dwell, where there shall be no cloud nor sun, no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light, no noise nor silence, but one equal music, no fears nor

hopes, but one equal possession, no foes nor friends, but one equal communion and identity, no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity” (Sermon XXVII).<sup>41</sup> Though Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical formulations on the relationship of class to high/art music have been persuasively contested by more empirical researchers, repeating Bourdieu’s basic dictum is still of some value here: “(N)othing more clearly affirms one’s class, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music (18).”<sup>42</sup> Keeping the classical performer rather than the listener in view, Bourdieu’s assertion appears to be at least partially supported by Edward Said. Commenting on the transference of western classical music from the drawing room to the concert stage, Said emphasizes the “highly rarified temporal duration” of concert music, identifying this as a space where ownership of culture is contested and established. Said describes the concert as an “alienating social ritual”, and emphasizes the culturally proprietary role of professional musical performance as what he calls an “extreme occasion”. He remarks on the increasingly unbridgeable distance between the concert artist in formal evening attire and “in a lesser, lower, far more secondary space, the listener who buys records, frequents concert halls, and is routinely made to feel the impossibility of attaining the packaged virtuosity of a professional performer”.<sup>43</sup> In this context, the listener is reduced to “poignant

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<sup>41</sup> Published 1660, this sermon dated 29<sup>th</sup> February 1627/8.

<sup>42</sup> See James Johnson (1995) and Tia de Nora (2000 and 2003), and research studies carried out in several parts of the USA by Richard Peterson and Albert Simkus (1992), in Manchester by Wynne and O’Connor (1998), and in the Netherlands by Koen van Eijck (2000). These studies indicate that though the majority of classical music listeners continue to come from the educated upper classes, this constituency is also increasingly spending the largest chunk of its outlay on other more demotic musical forms including pop, rock, jazz and World Music.

<sup>43</sup> Said’s comments are particularly apropos to our discussion of (un)belonging in the world of music: he qualifies his own position as being that of a “rank outsider with no professional musicological reputation at stake”, and therefore claims the freedom to indulge in “impressionistic theorizing and descriptions” (1991: xvii). Interestingly, given the fact that Michael goes to a sold-out box office for Julia’s final concert, and has to depend on Billy’s good offices to procure a last-minute extra ticket, Said remarks that “the scarcity of tickets and the staggeringly brilliant technique of the performer achiev(e) roughly the same distancing effect (3).” Teresa Magdanz provides an interesting counter to Said’s argument from the perspective of a

speechlessness as he/she faces an onslaught of such refinement, articulation, and technique as almost to constitute a sadomasochistic experience” (3). Writing on Michael’s epiphanic experience of Bach’s *Art of Fugue* in the latter half of Seth’s novel, Benson observes that the composition functions here at the same time as both a “supremely valuable piece of music in its own right – an equal music in Donne’s metaphysical (theological) sense...(with a) ”heavenly” (372),...”unearthly beauty” (77) - and a coded and irreducibly personal expression of the end of an affair between two musicians – an equal music in the earthbound sense of a state of equanimity reached after much striving” (118). If we examine the novel’s final moments in the light of Said’s emphasis, though, we can now also see Michael’s experience of Julia’s last public rendition of *The Art of Fugue* and his sense of its “equal”ness in a somewhat different light, that of the emotions of artistes, rather than listeners.

Read this way, we can see how important it is for Michael to have shared with Julia and all other professional classical performers the experience of being dressed up for concerts, and of playing before an audience constituted of many listeners less qualified than such artistes to pronounce on the quality of the music. On the tour of Europe, when the quartet and Julia are in their concert attire before the Vienna cognoscenti, Seth makes it a point to describe the women’s bright silk dresses: “like rich moths, green and blue and gold” (237) and the “peacockry” of the men’s dinner jackets, the possibility of tails and cummerbunds. The music, then, is not “equal” merely because it is beautiful, or because it brings people together in their emotions towards it; it is “equal” not only in Donne’s sense, but also precisely because it is difficult and because its accoutrements are

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flautist and musicologist when she bemoans instead the constant “backgroundization” of classical music in the present day (“Classical Music: Is Anyone Listening?” 2).

glamorous, because it allows the small town butcher's son to feel he knows and owns it as more than a mere listener. In enabling him in this way, classical music makes him more equal to the challenges, musical and otherwise, that life throws at him. It is "equal", and it makes him Julia's intellectual and cultural equal, in spite of her cultured European and affluent American connections, because her husband James - the American banker who provides her with a gracious home near a park, and a quiet room of her own for her piano - cannot understand or play it as Julia or Michel can. This "equality", or its paradoxical superiority, allows Michael to feel forgiveness towards Carl who he finally acknowledges is in large part responsible for the flowering of both his talents and Julia's, and to achieve the relative calm of resignation.

The earlier narrative is also interspersed with Michael's memories of Julia in Vienna, long moments in which he acknowledges the vital formative influence she has had on his musical abilities:

Though she had spent all her life in England before coming to Vienna to study, she had grown up speaking both German and English. She had been brought up in a world unreachably different from mine, where art and literature and music are absorbed without effort or explanation, from speech and travels, from books and records, from the very walls and shelves. For all my studies at school and all my autodidact's reading...in Manchester, it was she who became my best teacher, and for this, as for everything else I gave my heart into her hand.... She taught me to enjoy art, she improved my German enormously, she even taught me bridge. She showed me things about music simply through her playing; the joy I got from making music with her, alone or in our trio, was as great as the joy which the quartet has given me. I later realized that even about music I had learned more from her than from anyone else, for what I learned from her I was not taught. (81)

It is impossible not to read in this passage not just Michael's longing to become as unselfconsciously cultured and cosmopolitan as Julia, but also his acute sense of the way in which class separates his life experience from hers. In the same section, he admits that they come from "different Englands...her father taught history at Oxford" (80). This

desiring outsider-ness, this yearning to be like Julia, who has “effortlessly” “absorbed” high culture, fuels Michael’s own insistence that what he had learned from her “was not taught”, but also somehow internalized by osmosis. What makes this certainty easier, even possible, for him is the sexual relationship: “...within a week of our meeting we were lovers. One morning, after a night of making love, we tried making music together. It did not go well; we were both too nervous. Later in the week we gave it another try, and were taken aback by how naturally, how responsively - to each other, to the music - we were playing” (80). As if anticipating the comment that making love and music together might seem too easy a cliché (something Julia, in fact, remarks on years later in London), here Michael’s flashback emphasizes the naturalness of this connection. Note how the making of music together is described in the same way that sex might be: a nervous first attempt that does not satisfy followed by a second “try” that does. Thus, in describing both the broadening of his aesthetic and musical horizons under Julia’s guidance, and their lovemaking, Michael seems to be at unusual pains to stress the organic nature of their interactions.

Other memories of Julia explicitly foreground the emotional association Michael makes between her and Bach’s music, particularly the fugues, an association we shall see in its fullest form at the end of the novel. He hears a “snatch of Bach in a taxi, of all places. I rarely take cabs, cabs rarely play music, any music they do play is rarely classical....It was the end of a prelude and the start of a fugue.... This is Julia, I said to myself, this is Julia (32).” The “search” for Julia is also the search for her kind of music, for performance that exemplifies “naturalness....Rightful surprise, intensity, inwardness” (32). Later, we are told:

When I listened to music, it was often to Bach. It was after all in her company, through her playing, that my feeling for his music had grown from admiration to love. Sometimes she and Maria had played the gamba sonatas, sometimes she and I had played his violin and keyboard music....There was one choral prelude, "*An Wasserflüssen Babylon*", which had overcome me even as we played it. But it was when she had played by herself, to herself, a suite, say, or an invention, or a fugue – that I had most completely yielded my being to Bach, and to her. (83)

Julia's self-sufficiency as a musician playing "by herself, to herself" rather than for a paying audience, a quality that her deafness, later, can only accentuate, is an important part of her attraction for Michael. Years later, when they meet again, her relatively comfortable financial situation has freed her from the commercial considerations that he himself must always take into account. Also prefigured here, is the way in which the fugue brings together for him the beauty of Bach's music and of the love relationship; the "yielding" of the self to Julia is thus two-fold: she is both his lover, and, through Bach's music, an alternative musical mentor. Elsewhere, the novel highlights Bach's centrality to Michael's vision of communion with other musicians too, as for example when the Maggiore practices the first contrapunctus of 'The Art of Fugue':

The fugue flows on and our traveling bows follow its course, guided and guiding....We play in an energized trance....In my mind's eye I see the little used clefs of the original score, and the sinking and rising, swift and slow, parallel and contrary, of all our several voices - and in my mind's ear I hear what has sounded and is sounding and is yet to sound. I only have to realize on the strings what is already real to me; and so have Billy and Helen and Piers. Our synchronous visions merge and we are one: with each other, with the world, and with that long-dispersed being whose force we receive through the shape of his annotated vision and the single swift-flowing syllable of his name. (89-90)

In this section, the score is not the oppressive instrument of subjugation that it seemed to be in Tobias's hands; instead, it literally becomes the bond between the four musicians whose performance is an act of reverence to the "little used clefs", of pleasurable submission to the "force" of Bach's "annotated vision". Yet, not surprisingly, it is Piers

who takes objection to their agent's suggestion that the quartet might play the complete two and a half hour 'Art' in concert: "It'll deflect us from what we want to do. It'll compete with our performances, not complement them. We can't *perform* the whole damn thing....Quartets don't do that sort of thing on stage. Besides, Bach didn't write it for string quartet." (111-2). Billy, on the other hand tries to make a case for the 'Art' on stage,: "Others think it wasn't even written to be played, just as a sort of offering to God or the spirit of music, or something - but I think that's silly." (112). In saying this, Billy references the long-standing scholarly argument that attaches to Bach's 'Art'.

Where Bach and *The Art of Fugue* separate definitively from Schubert and lieder is firstly in the status Bach enjoys in the western classical canon, and secondly in the nature of fugal form itself. Christopher Wolff, probably the most eminent of Bach's 20<sup>th</sup> century biographers, describes him as "the lawmaker of genuine composition" and, like many other scholars, attributes to him the basis of the Romantic idea of "pure music" (9). Wolff devotes his first chapter to Bach's concern with the notion of "musical science", and quotes a 1750 obituary by the composer and organist Johann Friedrich Agricola, in which the latter compares Bach to Isaac Newton on grounds that they were both equally influential in their respective scientific areas, and - crucially, for us - because the experiments of both these personalities could only be fully understood and appreciated by connoisseurs (6). Citing the musicologist Nicholas Cook on "the nineteenth century trope of the quartet as a conversational genre" and the consequent "ethics of openness to the other", Benson concludes that Seth's ending is only "ostensibly the apotheosis of an absolute music", and that the alternative discourse of music to be found in a reading against the grain would reveal music in the novel to be "irreducibly social...therein

(lying) its claim to be equal” (128-9). However, while the fugue allows for the conceptual polyphony that finds approval in the postmodern scholarly world, the very cerebral nature of the genre, particularly of *The Art of Fugue*, itself a special and extreme example, as well as the significant fact that Julia plays it alone in the final concert, tend to blur Benson’s alternative equal-because-social hypothesis.<sup>44</sup>

*The Art of Fugue*, written sometime in the 1740s and published in 1751, a year after Bach’s death, was first played in its full extant form (appropriately enough in the Leipzig Thomaskirche where Bach used to be the Thomaskantor or principal conductor) only as late as 1927. This was partly because though Mozart and Beethoven occasionally included fugal elements in their compositions, the fugue itself was not particularly popular until the mid-nineteenth century when Mendelssohn and Schumann began reviving it. Early confusion about which instruments Bach had intended *The Art of Fugue* for may have added to professional reluctance or unease. The fact that Bach left it unfinished at the time of his death posed a challenge too. It is only recently that evidence unearthed, specifically a 1751 advertisement for the sheet music, indicates he had meant it to be played on the organ or harpsichord. But most of all, until recently, it was the perceived theoretical nature of the work that deterred musicians from trying their hands at it. Questions on *The Art of Fugue* invariably centred around whether or not such music

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<sup>44</sup> Adorno’s analysis of the *Art of Fugue* reflects some of the tensions we discuss here: “The most powerful formal types that music has crystallized out of itself, the fugue and the sonata, are generated by tonality down to the most intimate details. (But)...the great composers have always felt dissatisfaction with the external compulsory element in music, which imposed constraints on what they themselves wanted. The greatest fully polyphonic works of Bach, such as...*The Art of Fugue*...bear witness to this dissatisfaction...Bach drew on the polyphonic arts...already archaic in his era, in order to overcome the gravity of the schema by dint of the complete integration of all the voices...so that the music, as it were, owes nothing to anything except what it itself is, here and now (Leppert, 633).” Thus according to Adorno, polyphony is a graft onto the stricter structure that governs Bach’s music; the apparently seamless melding of many voices can merely soften or temper the severe rules of tonality, not supercede them or even render them invisible. Indeed if anything, in Adorno’s reading of Bach, polyphony serves to emphasize the music’s abstractness, its unrelatedness to anything outside of its own existence.

could be regarded as genuine music, i.e. work which had the minimal expressive elements required to count as music. In *Musical Meaning and Emotion*, Stephen Davies uses The Art of Fugue as an example with which to analyze music where the lack of expressive qualities is of marginal importance as compared to the vital aspect of technique in the composition and playing of the piece (354). In his Bach monograph, Philip Spitta describes the work as being so excessively intellectual as to fall into the category of *Augenmusik*, literally German for “eye-music”, music meant for reading pleasure by experts rather than for performance. Even on the sleeve notes to his 1999 recording, a version seen as more “festive” and instrumentally varied than most, conductor Rinaldo Alessandrini wonders: “Is it possible to consider The Art of Fugue as music?”<sup>45</sup>

Writing on the mathematical enigma presented by The Art of Fugue’s incomplete Contrapunctus 14, which many twentieth century organist-composers including Helmut Walcha, Lionel Rogg and Michael Ferguson have felt compelled to complete as the final proof of their pedigree, Janos Malina calls the entire composition a “precis” of technical possibilities in contrapuntal invention, and a “timeless example” of how fugues should be written: “(T)his fugue is clearly Bach's great summation. Bach himself no doubt intended this way. Even in its fragmentary form the movement is one of his most breathtaking of pure polyphonic essays. Completing it is like solving a puzzle, a test of the interpreter's

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<sup>45</sup> The fugue is a harmonized polyphonic composition based on the principle of counterpoint. But the word has a second meaning. The OED tells us that it also stands for an abnormal psychiatric condition associated with “a flight from one's own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality...a dissociative reaction to shock or emotional stress in a neurotic, during which all awareness of personal identity is lost though the person's outward behaviour may appear rational. On recovery, memory of events during the state is totally repressed....”. Michael’s depression in the first half of the novel, his two break downs before and during concerts, the doppelganger/imposter theme, the constant yearning for Julia’s company, and the fantasy of leaving grey and commercial London to be back in Vienna (presented as a hallowed locale, specially appropriate for musicians to meet and fall in love) can thus all be read as proleptically associated with The Art of Fugue.

mastery of Bach's legacy. To pass it is to take symbolic possession of that legacy (pg?).” Bach’s not particularly modest use of the definitive article in the title certainly indicates that he had meant the composition to be his - *the* - final word on counterpoint, a confidence widely regarded as justified. The fact that the notes in the concluding four-part contrapunctus encode his name, B-A-C-H, would have been of additional interest to Seth, who is known to “sign” his writing with anagrams of his own name.<sup>46</sup> Finally, we come to the issue of Julia’s deafness. The Art of Fugue represents a special bond between Michael and Julia because she painstakingly writes a portion of the complicated score out for him by hand as a last personalized birthday gift. Her playing of it thus symbolizes abstraction and incompleteness in many aspects: her own, as a deaf pianist shut off from the world and her audience on a physical level, that of the unfinished piece itself, and of the clandestine truncated love affair. The ultimate triumph of pure music in the conventional sense is thus represented by the score that Julia gifts Michael in the literal form of visually pleasing *augenmusik*, over which it is thus acknowledged that they have achieved mastery through their common hard won ability to “solve” the puzzle, and thus come to peace with themselves, with each other, and with the inevitability of parting.

It is important, here, to consider what all this means given that it comes from a postcolonial author in, or just coming out of, a relationship with a European classical musician, an author who suggests, at the very outset, the auto/biographical nature of at least some of his source material. Unlike any of the writers presented so far in this dissertation, Seth is not the musician himself; instead, he has vicarious, if knowledgeable, access to the act of music-making through a partner’s experience of it. Also, again unlike

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<sup>46</sup> In this novel, Seth’s name appears as “Keith Varms”, the solicitor who notifies Michael about his eventual fortuitous ownership of the Tononi.

the rest of the authors, he is culturally a relative outsider to the musical tradition that his book celebrates. The novel, then, is about the desiring subject not merely from the perspective of romantic love, but also from that of cultural and musical outsidership. Because Seth stands at least two removes from the professional performance of western classical music, Michael's insistence that performing artistes in the novel share an insider togetherness that others cannot enter can also be read as a reflection on Seth's own two-fold outsider status. Michael and Julia share an exclusive "equal"-ness, as Europeans and as performing musicians, which some one in Seth's position could never replicate with Honore in real life; the performers' trained literacy in the idiom of the music they play effectively bars Seth out. Indeed, even his novel, like all writing about music, can only hope to approximate a description of their coming together in concert, whether as performers together, or as artiste and listener. In venerating the score, however, Seth opens up a new possibility of togetherness, one in which music intellectualized, music-as-writing trumps other differences, allowing entry, however circumscribed, into an otherwise closed and privileged world. Yet, calling such music "equal" music is perhaps wishful thinking. If the insistence on the ultimate guiding role of the score allows Michael to circumvent the maestro-teacher and conceive of unmediated access to "pure" music, the score of a piece like the 'Art' continues to guard the doors of musical understanding and belonging from all except a select few.

If western classical music affords Seth the possibility of minimizing the role of the maestro-teacher, Rushdie's choice of '60s rock allows him to render the teacher of music invisible, to treat that teacher as practically inessential to musical development and performance. His rock star hero, Ormus Cama, does not need to learn music. Repeatedly

evoking the legend of Orpheus, (who, according to Greek myth, was born out of the union between the lyre-playing first musician, Apollo, and Calliope the muse of epic poetry) Ormus-Orpheus is music itself, the oldest music known and mythologized in western culture. In Christopher Rollason's well-known article on *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Rollason (who provides valuable details on the many lyrics in the novel that reference real life rock and pop singers and actually recorded songs) critiques what he calls the "Gayomart conceit", a magical realist construction through which Rushdie seeks to depict a Mumbai-born Parsi man as the originary purveyor of rock's radical message to the western world. Rollason writes:

...if Ormus *does* in any substantive sense resemble Orpheus, it can only be insofar as the text presents him as the artist-initiate, nourishing his creativity at the fount of dark, mysterious forces - a daemonic element which comes to the fore in the paranormal communication which the patient reader is asked to believe Ormus maintains with his dead twin Gayomart, the alleged ghostly inspirer of some of the most celebrated Anglo-American songs of the 60s. (123)

In this part of my chapter, I will show how, in doing so, the "Gayomart conceit" - a more complex postcolonial device than Rollason gives Rushdie credit for - allows the author to virtualize the process of real-life music training. What he posits instead of formal teaching, is a notion of the most meaningful and moving music as a deep-seated, preexistent, latent human capability, requiring only the right circumstances - and, in particular, the right love relationship - to be realized in its outward forms. While in Seth's novel, Michael and Julia, share their formally acquired knowledge of the score as a special secret between musicians, here Ormus has already transcended the score. He comes ready equipped with every musical wherewithal installed in his mind and body, and his lover and fellow singer, Vina Apsara, has only to set the music free.

In the magical realist scheme of Rushdie's novel, Ormus's almost preternatural potential as a musician is demonstrated from moments after his birth, when he begins making "the strange rapid finger movements with both hands which any guitarist could have identified as chord progressions" (23). Early home movies shot by friends reveal "the pudgy hands of baby Ormus incontestably playing air guitar, moving soundlessly through a complex series of monster riffs and dizzy licks with a speed, and feeling, of which the instruments greatest practitioners would have been proud" (23). A few pages later, we are told that his "extraordinary...precocious musical talent" is also evidenced by the "syncopated drumming of his tiny feet against his crib and the perfect-pitch gurgles that went up and down the musical scale *saregama padhanisa, sanidhapa magaresa*" (46). Notice that while using a phrase like "precocious musical talent", which might define any other musical prodigy, Rushdie also ensures that the sheer fantastical excess of these passages - replete with technical terms like "chord progressions", "riffs", "licks", "syncopated drumming", and "perfect pitch"- goes beyond any description of the musical prodigy as that phenomenon is commonly understood in the newborn phase. The reference to the *saregama* notes of the Indian scale rather than the do-re-mi solfa syllables is especially telling. As Rushdie's text informs us, and as is generally known, the Parsi community in Mumbai to which Ormus's family belongs has always been enthusiastic about giving its children a musical education. However, most commonly even today, and almost without exception in the late colonial moment of our hero's childhood, this education tended to be in the form of western classical music. That the infant Ormus's gurgling should be portrayed in terms of *saregama* while his fingers play amazing guitar riffs suggests very early that at least some of the talents that are yet to be

musically realized spring from a source that is not hereditary in the simply generational sense, or even Anglophile Parsi in its orientation, but something deeper, something that speaks of older subconscious musical affinities across race, culture, and time.

Ormus's unique relationship to music is not limited merely to his inborn abilities, but also to his lack of a formal musical education. His father, Sir Darius Xerxes Cama, bans the teaching of music and music itself in all forms from their house after a cricketing accident in which Sir Darius, distracted, significantly, by the raucous music of nationalist fans, lofts a ball recklessly, injuring and rendering mute Ormus's elder brother Ardviraf (a.k.a Virus, one half of the other set of twins born to the Camas). Sir Darius, an outspoken British loyalist and amateur collector of books on the European classics, particularly Greek mythology, begins to equate music with nationalism, and then by association with every sort of dangerous social and political evil. Music becomes "responsible for the world's ills"; thus persuaded, he argues drunkenly that its "practitioners should be wiped out, eradicated, like a disease. Music was a virus, an infection, and music-lovers were comparable to those globe-trotting sexual immoralists whose nameless activities had caused the global spread of syphilis. They were sick, and it was Virus Cama with his dignified silence who was well" (38). One night in 1942 - the year most commonly remembered in India for the Quit India movement, which was severely repressed by the British authorities - little Ormus's singing wakes up the third Cama brother Cyrus. Ormus sings in his sleep, "...so sweetly that birds had woken thinking the dawn had come, and gathered on his windowsill to listen. This sleeper's melody contained such joy in life, such optimism, such hope..." (47). Cyrus, who is jealous of the baby, holds a pillow to his face, trying to stop the music once and for all,

later saying in his own defence: “I couldn’t stand the noise.” (47). As a result, Ormus stops singing for fourteen years: “Not a ditty, not a warble, not a note. Not until Vina Apsara set his music free” (47). Music therefore becomes associated in multiple ways both with free speech and with speech that must be freed. If this section of the novel demonstrates Rushdie’s inability to break away entirely from the genre of the national allegory, within that allegorical framework music is clearly aligned with the progressive forces of change.

In examining how Rushdie conceives of rock’s “freedom” though, Rollason emphasizes the question of whether Rushdie’s stars are able to convincingly bring their Asian selves to bear on the music they create. He is critical of the “Gayomart conceit” because he sees this as a spurious attempt to give Ormus’s music an Eastern origin. Rollason’s reading hinges on a passage where the narrator Rai tells the story of how Bombay invented rock’n’roll before Elvis Presley did:

Rock music...was allegedly first revealed to a Parsi Indian boy named Ormus Cama, who heard all the songs in advance, two years, eight months, and twenty-eight days before anyone else. So according to Ormus and Vina’s variant version of history, their alternative reality, we Bombayites can legitimately claim that it was in truth our music, born in Bombay like Ormus and me, not ‘goods from foreign’ but made in India and maybe it was the foreigners who stole it from us. (96)

Here Rollason appears to tune out completely Rushdie’s playful parodizing of various anxious contemporary nationalistic cultural claims. The text already offers us clues as to how to think about the authority of Rai’s “history” with words like “allegedly”, “variant version”, “alternative reality”, and “maybe”, all of which suggest the parallel existence of other plausible explanations or claims. As opposed to Rollason’s more or less literal interpretation, critics like Stephen Morton, for example, offer a broader reading of these lines. Morton cites Ashwani Sharma on the ascendance of the category of World Music

in the 1980s as part of the emergence of ethnicity as a “master signifier of marketing and advertising’, a signifier, however, that conceals the exploitation of ‘Third World’ musicians by transnational corporations (107). He then argues that the music of Ormus and Vina’s rock band *VTO* “draws attention to the process by which Indian culture is commodified for a global market through cultural forms such as popular music and the novel” (107). Morton’s emphasis on *VTO* as a finished product is not misplaced. In emphasizing the moment of commodification, when cultural expression turns into product, the novel does highlight not only Ormus and Vina’s use of non-western musical components in their songs, but also the way in which the on- and off-stage glamour of their love relationship, in particular Ormus’s intermittent, dramatic, and much publicized vows not to be Vina’s sexual partner for years on end, and the very “eastern”/ “spiritual” notion of such “abstinence” itself, is ultimately used to quite blatant commercial ends.

My chapter suggests that Rushdie does not frame the Gayomart conceit in the context of post-globalization East-West cultural rivalry so as to take either side in the battle over origins (an engagement to be appropriately settled, qua Rollason, by the “victory” of World Music.) Instead, my argument stresses Rushdie’s notion of the origins of music from within the subconscious self. Ormus’s early music – rock music, and Rushdie, I believe, would like to say, music itself, is of organic conception, something autochthonous, untrained, requiring no training, that comes to the transmitting musician from the netherworld of the imagination, and should, in its ideal form, find its way from him to his listeners independent of the actions of any tutelary/developmental intermediaries. While Orpheus may be Apollo’s son, it is unquestionably Dionysus, god of dark inner psychological recesses, who rules *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, his tragic

“goat songs” that first bring together and then separate Vina and Ormus. If baby Ormus can play imaginary riffs and Ormus as a young man sings the songs he hears Gayomart singing in his head, I argue that this is not Rushdie claiming any eastern provenance for rock, or for any kind of western music, or for music per se. It is true that in recent decades tremendous scholarly interest has attached to the non-western influences traced in much of what is classified as western music today. But if Rushdie’s rock is “Bombayite”, it is because Rushdie argues not just for the recognition of music as ultimately always migratory, always a transnational cultural product, but also for a subconscious shared human understanding of music that surfaces, in this particular case only, in the form of a Bombay-born Parsi boy singing early rock hits before they are actually recorded in the west. This understanding, theoretically, could bubble up from the deeps or drop out of the ether anywhere in a potential multiplicity of other places and persons.

Such a notion fits well in some ways, and strangely in others, with Rushdie’s consistent debunking of the myths of authenticity and purity, concepts that have long pervaded discussions of culture in India as elsewhere.<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, in positing the idea that music that arises from the subconscious is the genuine article Rushdie appears to continue adhering to the dichotomies of authentic and inauthentic, pure and impure, real and pretend. On the other, read as a critique of East-West cultural politics, this possibility allows for the common origins of many aspects of art and culture that might ordinarily be

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<sup>47</sup> Partha Chatterjee may be regarded as the first and most important Indian critic to discuss this at length; others since have elaborated on the ways in which notions of a carefully constructed and overwhelmingly Hindu cultural authenticity have underpinned both pre-independence nationalist and post-colonial nation-building efforts. With regard to music more generally, especially useful analyses of the idea of authentic music are to be found in the writing of John Connell and Chris Gibson (2003, particularly their chapter titled ‘Music and Place: Fixing Authenticity, 19-46) and Richard Middleton (2006, chapter titled ‘The Real Thing: The Specter of Authenticity’, 199-246.).

labeled as “belonging” to different peoples, nations, civilizations. Interviewed in *La Monde* in October 1999, some months after the novel was published, Rushdie said, “This book is not a novel about rock’n’roll, but an attempt to respond to the evolution of world culture in the last half century.” Here is an important excerpt from the novel in which he responds to one widely approved conservative Indian approach to popular western music:

What’s a “culture”? Look it up. “A group of micro-organisms grown in a nutrient substance under controlled conditions.” A squirm of germs on a glass slide is all, a laboratory experiment calling itself a society. Most of us wrigglers make do with life on that slide, we even agree to feel proud of that “culture”....But if Vina and Ormus were bacteria too, they were a pair of bugs who wouldn’t take life lying down....their story is...an account of the creation of two bespoke identities, tailored for the wearers by themselves. The rest of us get our personae off the peg, our religion, language, prejudices, demeanor, the works; but Vina and Ormus insisted on...auto-couture.

And music, popular music, was the key that unlocked the door for them, the door to magic lands.

In India it is often said that the music I’m talking about is precisely one of those viruses with which the almighty West has infected the East, one of the great weapons of cultural imperialism, against which all right-minded persons must fight and fight again. Why then offer up paeans to culture-traitors like Ormus Cama who betrayed his roots and spent his pathetic lifetime pouring the trash of America into our children’s ears? Why raise low culture so high, and glorify what is base? Why defend impurity, that vice, as if it were a virtue?

Such are the noisome slithers of the enslaved micro-organisms, twisting and hissing as they protect the inviolability of their sacred homeland, the glass laboratory slide. (95)

In this angry section, Rushdie’s liberal concerns and alignments are clearer: cultural purity or authenticity - a rigorously manipulated mirage - is to be abominated, independence of thought is to be respected and admired, “low culture” deserves attention, not all Indians performing western music are to be seen as sell-outs to MTV-style western cultural hegemony. Of course the accusation of cultural imperialism is one not leveled merely by conservatives, but equally brought to bear by progressive or leftist thinkers and

cultural critics ideologically committed to postcolonial, or anti-globalization, or anti-neoliberalism agendas in several such societies. It could quite convincingly be argued by such thinkers too, that Ormus's early fascination with America and all things American is precisely the kind of slavishness to be avoided, and that his choice of musical genre and his moves to London and then to New York represent not independence, but rather the most pedestrian sell-out to the lure of the western "free" market. While Rushdie takes on the broader idea of cultural authenticity here, rather than the notion of authentic music per se, a version of his dilemma is worked through in terms of music by Richard Middleton. Suggesting the necessity of a dialogical stance as the "starting point for any attempt to reconfigure authenticity for a world where foundational authority must be regarded as humanly constructed", Middleton observes:

Despite the passage of various pop music style since the 1970s through various aesthetics of irony and self-deconstruction, the discourse of authenticity within the music culture still holds much of its critical primacy, as dismissive responses to turn-of-the-century "manufactured pop" and "corporate hegemony" make clear. And who is to say that this stubbornness does not reflect a continuing (if often unacknowledged) quotidian adherence, throughout social practice, to the claims of intuitive judgment?... (I)n an irony of world-historical proportions, the intellectual collapse of authenticity concepts has coincided with its opposite on the level of the political economy: a phase unprecedented in its reach and force, in which an irrational fundamentalism has imposed itself across the planet, the norms of neo-liberal capitalism once again given the status of natural law, but now with the backing too of divine authority – "one market under God"... I want to ask whether the idea of authenticity can be, if not rehabilitated, at least refitted in a way appropriate to a supposedly postmodern age, in which the apparatus of Western Reason is in disarray, and all notions of origin, foundation, absolute truth have become suspect. (203-4)

I argue, here, that Rushdie's depiction of Ormus/Orpheus as the originary and formally untaught musician is the novel's dialogic way, qua Middleton, of negotiating this complex interplay of arguments both for and against western popular music and culture, a talking back, simultaneously, to all parties in the debate by recourse to a real or

imaginary “shared” universal heritage. This heritage is represented in idealized and romantic terms:

He was a musical sorcerer whose melodies could make city streets begin to dance and high buildings sway to their rhythm, a golden troubadour the jouncy poetry of whose lyrics could unlock the very gates of Hell; he incarnated the singer and songwriter as shaman and spokesman, and became the age’s unholy fool. But by his own account he was more than that; for he claimed to be nothing less than the secret originator, the prime innovator, of the music that courses in our blood, that possesses and moves us, wherever we may be, the music that speaks the secret language of all humanity, our common heritage, whatever mother tongue we speak, whatever dances we first learned to dance. (89)

Ormus-as-Orpheus thus becomes the Indian/Asian/Eastern voice, speaking in Western accents, of something that predates divisions into East and West. In the simplest terms: if there is no such thing as an authentic Indian culture, even no such thing as an authentic culture, then nothing belongs to any particular culture, every idea, image and tune is fair game for all. By the terms of this argument, *VTO*’s music is not “Bombayite” rock; it stands in, instead, for a newly audible but ancient music common to all humans, as essential to their being as the flow of their blood, that sings in the voices of the chosen few born to make music across every culture and language group. The denial of cultural authenticity is therefore predicated on the possibility of musical authenticity: true music is not music that is culturally authentic, but music that is authentic to all human experience. Followed through logically, this idea leads to the conclusion that no music that is taught or learnt can be authentic or true, since once taught it falls within the parameters of culturally imbibed knowledge. Only such music that comes instinctively to humans can qualify as true in the strictest sense of the word; only the *born* “singer and songwriter” can qualify as “shaman and spokesman”.

The Gayomart device is thus also related to the idea that music is intimately connected with the way in which the human mind works. Patricia Tunstall refers to Levi-Strauss's early emphasis on music's importance for structuralist thinkers, observing that: "(A)s a sensuous manifestation not of concepts but of operations, music provides an unusually clear demonstration of the basic ordering processes of the mind. Unclouded by semantic associations, the procedures of music reflect not the mind's ideas but only its activities. It is thus an eminently appropriate object for an enquiry concerned with the nature of mental activity itself" (62-63). It is significant that in the last chapter of *Mythologiques* Levi-Strauss also foregrounds the analogous relationship between myth and music. Both myth and music, according to him, are intelligible but untranslatable, and while they may take different forms in different cultures, the basic structural characteristics common to them throw important light on cognitive principles of order. As Tunstall remarks, Levi-Strauss believed that music, like myth, brought you face to face with "conscious approximations of inevitably unconscious truths" (1979: 57). In his book *Myth and Music* Eero Tarasti makes use of Levi Strauss's theory on mythical thought and A.J. Greimas's method of semeanalysis to analyze what he regards as musical reconstructions of myths. Tarasti labels the principle types of these reconstructions the 'hero-mythical', the 'nature-mythical', and the 'magic-mythical' (1979: 86-100). In his later work, especially in *A Theory of Musical Semantics*, Tarasti provides a sophisticated defence of the idea that music has an inner logic accessible to musical semiotics, and that this logic exists as a universal in all human practices. It seems completely appropriate therefore, indeed logical almost to the point of predictability, that Rushdie should bring myth and music together in a text that explores contemporary ideas about culture, authenticity, and the

figure of the immigrant musician. Ormus-Orpheus straddles all of Tarasti's categories: he is a man endowed with heroic musical capabilities both by nature and by the magical knowledge imbibed from Gayomart, his other and subconscious self.

Vina Apsara too, perhaps modeled in this respect on Madonna, or, as some would have it, on the Asian-American singer Asha Puthli, is the ur-self-fashioned female rock star. In the first place, Rushdie defies history in depicting a successful female rock star at all in the 1960s. Citing a number of reasons, from small details like the weight of the guitar and the aggressively male and sexualized way it was held by the more successful pop-rock stars, to larger issues like the unpreparedness of American audiences for what Wanda Jackson describes as women who "could growl, shake, moan, and demand their share of the fun (sexual and otherwise) with the best of male rock 'n' rollers",<sup>48</sup> critics across the board agree that rock 'n' roll tended to be overwhelmingly male identified. As James Dickerson points out, Elvis inaugurated an era of male rock and pop stars: although women scored 30% of the Top 20 hits between 1955 and 1959, that percentage would drop through the next two decades. "In truth", Dickerson writes, "the freewheeling 1960s and 1970s proved to be disastrous decades for women, giving them their lowest numbers of the century" (1998:67). Vina's early and anachronistic self-fashioning is analyzed by the novel's narrator, her clandestine lover, the photographer Rai Merchant; once again, the terms of the authenticity debate are brought into play. The girl-child Nisa, born in small-town America to an Indian father and a Greek-American mother, and sent on being orphaned to the foster home of rich but uncaring relatives in Bombay, adopts the name Vina because she thinks the instrument "made a sound like god" (122). This takes

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<sup>48</sup> Interview found on [www.rockabillyhall.com/WandaJackson.html](http://www.rockabillyhall.com/WandaJackson.html), cited March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2003 by Mina Carson, et al.

us back for a moment to my first chapter where the vina's perceived mystical, quasi-divine resonance, literal as well as metaphorical, has been discussed in more detail. Here too as the young girl who will be Vina Apsara listens to North Indian ragas on the sitar, South Indian tunes, ghazals, and *qawwalis*, music becomes the way to something outside and beyond human understanding, something close to the religious:

(They) always created in her a mood of inexpressible longing....Longing for what? Not, surely, for an "authentic" Indianness that she could never attain? Rather...what Vina wanted was a glimpse of the unknowable. The music offered the tantalizing possibility of being borne on the waves of sound through the curtain of *maya* that supposedly limits our knowing, through the gates of perception to the divine melody beyond....A religious experience, in brief, was what she wanted. (123)

The quotes around "authentic" and the raised eyebrows of the skeptical "supposedly" that qualifies the notion of an unseen truth behind mere material reality appear to indicate where Rai, and, we are tempted to think, Rushdie speaking in Rai's voice, stand in this discussion. Yet the same narrator also writes in a far more believing tone: "A woman who can sing is never entirely beyond salvation. She can open her mouth and set her spirit free....She was a great river which could bear us all away" (124). Significantly, early in Rai's story he has already offered the following paean:

Five mysteries hold the keys to the unseen: the act of love, and the birth of a baby, and the contemplation of great art, and being in the presence of death or disaster, and hearing the human voice lifted in song. These are the occasions when the bolts of the universe fly open and we are given a glimpse of what is hidden; an eff of the ineffable. Glory bursts upon us in such hours; the dark glory of earthquakes, the slippery wonder of new life, the radiance of Vina's singing. (20)

This language, that relates musical understanding and performance to the opening up of wonders beyond human knowledge, is the same language we have heard in Chapter 1, where Tagore and Inayat Khan repeatedly present music as the path to the divine.

What makes Rushdie's approach to the supra-human possibilities of music different from that earlier one, though, is his effort to bypass the role of the musical and/or musical-spiritual mentor, his insistence that those special humans who are capable of reaching or taking others into mystical states through music are born with these capabilities, inherent powers that need little or no formal development. This is reflected in Rai's scornful comments on Vina's "weakness for mentors, for leaders and teachers, the addiction to mumbo jumbo which was her own way of papering over the radical uncertainties of her life..." (129). Her need for such a guide appears to be as much spiritual as musical, and the attraction she feels towards Ormus is depicted as being in large measure the result of her urge to find a spiritual and musical mentor in the same person. Describing her first meeting with Ormus as a young girl in a Bombay record store, Vina says she saw a "light", "a radiance, an aura" emanating from him; Rai's response is immediate and scathing: "Bushwah....Ormus is no god-man with portable lighting effects. Trouble with you is, you came to India and caught a dose of Wisdom-of-the-east-itis, a.k.a. gurushitia, our incurable killer brain disease" (130). While, of course, it bears questioning to suggest that an author is speaking through his narrator, in this instance once again it is tempting to imagine that we are listening to Rushdie in Rai. Read in this way, in the context of our discussion Rai's resemblance to his creator lies in the inner conflict over the role of India, of "Wisdom-of-the-East", and of Indian-ness in his own cultural make-up and his awareness of the same conflict in the novel's main characters. He muses: " Sometimes I try to imagine how she (Vina) would have sounded singing ghazals. For even though she dedicated her life to another music entirely, the pull of India, its songs, its languages, its life, worked upon her always, like the moon" (124).

Certainly almost the same things can be said of Rushdie's writing in English, "another" language "entirely", and the fascination India appears to hold out for him, a fascination that seems to be made up in equal parts of a deep seated emotional and aesthetic response, and a recognition of the immense literary saleability of Indian culture filtered through magical realism.

It is interesting, also, that while one of Rushdie's stated themes is the "freeing" of Ormus's music through Vina's love, the person who actually first frees his music from their father's proscriptions is the apparently dull witted and all but mute brother Ardviraf (Virus). It is Virus who chances upon a cheap flute and immediately begins to play it "with a fluency that bordered on the magical (139)." It is Virus again who "unlock(s) the magic keys" of their piano with "his own magic key", found in their mother's locket where it has been hidden away for over a decade (140). Virus is associated with the music that Ormus (re)discovers by the reader's memory both of Sir Darius calling music a nationalist "virus", and conversely of the reference to music as an alleged weapon of western cultural imperialism (38, 95). The word virus has powerful negative associations for readers in our computer age, but it lends to music something of the irrepressible power of a particularly strong strain, a force that can suddenly appear from nowhere and irreversibly affect everything around it. Counterbalancing the malevolent connotations of the word is the somewhat unoriginal pun on "magic keys", that nevertheless evokes not just the music of Gayomart, internalized by Ormus over years of growing up with his dead twin's voice in his head and now let loose, but also music as one of the five keys to the "glory" of the "unseen" that the narrator has listed for us early in the novel, and the key to the "magic lands" that Vina and Ormus will later find (20, 95). At one point it

seems to be only Virus's presence and the music that the brothers share which somehow keeps the young and troubled Ormus sane:

He is fragile too. Without her love, terminally alienated, he might go horribly wrong. The idea of family, of community, is almost dead in him. There is only silent Virus and their piano sessions. Otherwise he has come loose, like an astronaut floating away from a space capsule. He is a layabout who hears only the vowel sounds of cheap music, who makes meaningless noises. He could easily amount to nothing. He might fail to add up to a person. (147)

The language here moves between pop psych ("terminally alienated"), teen slang (being "spaced out"), and the grimmer and more worldly idiom of success and failure ("layabout...cheap music...meaningless noises"), letting us view Ormus through these different lenses, all of them reflecting concern over a possible breakdown.

The fact is that for several years the adult Ormus does add up to a very successful person and "only silent Virus" contributes to this in more than one way. At a public jazz concert on the evening of Vina's sixteenth birthday, hours before Ormus and Vina consummate their relationship, Virus clambers uninvited onto the stage and "goofily" charms the band (whose leader takes the precaution of turning off Virus's mike) into letting him play. His playing

...was undoubtedly skilful, but the music came out of his flute sounding inappropriate; it was a sound in a different currency, an anna trying to be a penny, but it didn't matter, because he was happy enough tootling away... but mostly because the minute Ormus and Vina (who rush onto the stage behind Virus)...began to sing, everybody just stopped thinking about anything else....Nichols (the band leader) said they were so good he didn't mind being upstaged. (160)

It is thus Virus then, who knowingly or otherwise initiates the star pair's career of public performance. His music, though the audience cannot hear it, anticipates early fusion music: it is odd, aleatory, belonging to neither east nor west, trying to be something it is not, or at least, not yet. It is also music that is untaught enough to be "inappropriate",

“inappropriate” enough to be silenced, mere “tootling” even though it is also paradoxically described as “skilful”. The word “currency” seems especially apropos here: Virus’s music, or as we may read it, *the* virus of music cannot be categorized, or, logically, owned. Here it is not just dismissed as negligible, but literally muzzled in spite of obvious talent, precisely because it cannot be translated into terms that any audience, even the professional musicians who hear it, can relate to. Rushdie’s scheme has two pairs of Cama twins, and in the Virus/Cyrus pair, it is Cyrus who becomes the very articulate and persuasive pillow murderer, a serial strangler of unsuspecting victims, and Virus who is the silent, “good” half. But, as in The Satanic Verses, Rushdie plays with notions of twinning, doubling, and goodness and evil in ways that throw up uncomfortable convergences rather than divergences between the latter categories. Dark, dead Gayomart sings through heroic and at one point almost “saintly” Ormus, a long-distance Cyrus psychically propels Virus to patricide. Meshed inside this complex doubling and quadrupling, music thus becomes less a talent that needs to be developed than a characteristic that will find outlet, like good and evil, in unexpected and uncontrollable ways.

Woven closely into the novel’s debate on authenticity and the sometime real and sometimes perceived uplifting powers of music is the discussion on religious and spiritual guru figures. We have already encountered Rai’s hostility and sarcasm in respect of such figures. The plot reinforces this negative association early on by making murderous young Cyrus into a proto-guru or prophet who lures victims with passionate eloquence about “the moral short circuit of the age’...the nationwide ‘loss of soul-greatness’...and...his dream of forming a ‘people’s movement for the salvation by

spiritual energy-force of this poor, bloodied land” (137). Ormus is horrified by what he finds in an England very unlike his boyhood fantasies, “...addled by mysticism, mesmerised by the miraculous, the psychotropic, in love with alien gods... (287)”. He is repelled by “the swallowing of various forms of gibberish that has replaced the exercise of intelligence, the susceptibility to gurus and other phoney leaders, the flight from reason” and embarrassed that women find his Indian identity sexually attractive because it is “so spiritual” (287, 289). Yet, in a characteristically Rushdean gambit, Ormus is also aware of the way in which his own “visionary madness”, his weird communing with another world, and the porous veil of his heightened consciousness that separates, but only thinly, the real from the extra real, all implicate him in the foreign and frightening workings of his new space (288). Even Rai the narrator admits at one point: “When Ormus Cama saw his vision, he revealed himself to be a true prophet, and I say this as a dyed-in-the-wool unbeliever.... He was genuinely ahead of his time.... *Music will save us, and love*. When reality bites, and it bites me almost every day, I need Ormus’s music, his take” (351-353). Elsewhere, talking about America’s Vietnam experience, Rai says:

In this bereft moment, rudderless America is unusually open to the paradoxes of Ormus’s songs...open...to paradox itself, to non-identical twin ambiguity...Ormus’s music has arrived like an affirmation from another East to enter into the musical heart of Americanness, to flow into the river of dreams....that America which by losing certitude has newly opened itself to the external world responds to the un-American sounds Ormus adds to his tracks: the Cuban horns...Brazilian drums...Chilean woodwinds...African male choruses...Algerian...ululations, Pakistani qawwalis. (378-379)

Ormus therefore becomes emblematic of rock’s salvational appropriation of musical influences from across the world. There is no mistaking his resemblance, at this stage, to our two early musical gurus, Tagore and Inayat Khan: the same circumstances, a post war world groping for certainties, and the same language of peace from an East, or at least a

somewhere that is culturally the non-West, perceived as instinctively more enlightened.<sup>49</sup>

The process of Ormus's canonization in popular culture is completed when, after years of famous promiscuity, he publicly vows abstinence, and is transformed into "a preacher of the spirit" who "thunders" against hedonism from "the virtuous heights of his chastity" (390-91). Later, after Ormus and Vina are married, and *VTO* is at the height of its success, Vina pays for full-page ads in the leading dailies to spread the *VTO* message: "*As artists we seek to achieve, in our art, a state of love.... Love is the attempt to impose order on chaos, meaning on absurdity.... We transform constantly and we remain constant. Music is the bridge between our worlds. Music liberates and unifies.... Songs are love's enchantment. They are everyday magic.... Songs enchant away our pain.... Love is harmony. Harmony is love*" (422-23). (Original in italics). Of course, neither *VTO*'s audiences or Rushdie's readers need to be reminded that love and music are intertwined in the story of Ormus and Vina; the ads merely serve to reiterate more forcefully, and in a more universal form, ideas that the novel has already repeatedly referenced. Later in his career, magazine articles discuss the "prophetic accuracy" of the young Ormus's songs, begging him to "*Heal the breaking planet. Sing to us and soothe the aching earth*" (547). (Original in italics) The reader of this dissertation will also

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<sup>49</sup> Using the example of Lennon, Middleton argues that the search for musical authenticity seems to lead almost automatically back to a non-western Other: "Almost as soon as the Beatles became successful, Lennon was beginning to formulate his creative ambitions along the lines of a "real me" – "John Lennon" as opposed to "John Beatle"... an authentic self as opposed to the commodified, fetishized icon that he came to loath. Musically, culturally, politically, this search was articulated through a set of oppositions in which a series of Others was lined up against the inauthentic.... (T)he search took in singer-songwriter honesty and psychedelic visions, avant garde iconoclasm and conceptual art, transcendental meditation and primal scream therapy, political anthems and politicized happenings, hymns to feminism and to black pride. The search for the real Lennon, it would seem, could only proceed through the cultural peripheries - through the Other. In a familiar figuration, these Others were conceived as attractively unreflective - models of *action* in the face of over-intellectualized sophistication.... This simplicity, this cult of origin...is...linked, intriguingly, to the music's aesthetic challenge, its modernity (200-201)."

recognize behind some of this the saintly figure of Tagore as new hope for a broken world, and Inayat Khan's beatific language of universal harmonies.

Yet, both the more affirmative aspects of a guiding or inspirational musical figure in a world of violence, excess, and moral panic, and the sense that Rushdie could be more than half-serious about the spiritually redemptive possibilities he explores are constantly undermined by the text's skepticism, its knowing comments on the intellectual and emotional limitations of the audience/consumers for such possibilities, its unblinking gaze at the way in which idealized versions of spiritual upliftment and the virtues of a "spiritualized" free love and celibacy in turn are made commercially profitable by both musicians and godmen, and most of all by its depiction of a variety of false gurus.<sup>50</sup> In addition to Cyrus the articulate and "prophetic" serial killer and patricide, a Goddess-Ma ensconced on another floor of Ormus's fancy Manhattan high rise makes a "brass-bold bid for transcultural divinity" (497). Accomplished in the "laws of spin", she issues "Goddess Sayings" that Rai describes as "India-blah, Bharat-burble...India...is hotter than ever: its food, its fabric...its direct line to Spirit Central,... its saints" (496). The Indian government itself acts on the advice of unscrupulous godmen, Ulurishi and the Aurhum Baba, to denounce Ormus, "the lapsed Zoroastrian seismopropagandist" for his own more dismal doomsday predictions (556). If, therefore, on the one hand, the text

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<sup>50</sup> Though Rushdie is apparently writing about the late 1960s, he incorporates many historical events up to the mid 1990s into his novel; his cultural critique therefore often feels as relevant to his day as to the days in which rock 'n' roll first took to the stage. As always, he argues for hybridized culture as a global reality, but seems more than a little uncomfortable nevertheless with what Peterson and Kern describe as the "omnivorous" style of cultural consumption typical of ascendant social groups in the current day. Peterson writes: "While snobbish exclusiveness was an effective marker of status in a relatively homogenous and WASP-ish world that could enforce its dominance by force if necessary, omnivorous inclusion seems better adapted to an increasingly global world managed by those who make their way, in part, by showing respect for the cultural expressions of others (1996: 906)". Wynne and O'Connor similarly discuss the "sampling culture" of music consumption; "the auto-didact", they assert, "has turned flaneur" in a postmodern world where identity is created through lifestyles choices rather than embedded in class relations. (1998: 855-858). Van Eick describes this phenomenon as a "social lubricant in a world where the ideal of democracy increasingly implies the principal equality of many cultural forms" (2000:219).

repeatedly describes the immigrant's cultural disorientation as "loss of the East", on the other, at several points it angrily denounces all spokes(wo)men for its favorite bugbear, "Wisdom-of-the-East."

This context also helps us to understand the romanticization of the music piracy industry and of the affection accorded to Mull Standish, the principal pirate of music in Rushdie's novel. The process works in two related ways. As Anna Maria Ochoa points out, the role of music piracy in the informal economy serves as a radical bypassing of corporate-controlled musical circuits (2003:21). Mull Standish is therefore the necessary "rogue" alternative to Yul Singh, whose Colchis Records conglomerate later calls the shots on Ormus and Vina. On another level, the physical location of Standish's quick-and-dirty operation, on a boat off British shores, both evokes the romantic notion of naval piracy most lately seen in Johnny Depp heroics, and serves to challenge the notion of music that can be fixed in place even in terms of its origins. John Connell and Chris Gibson argue that the discipline of ethnomusicology has constructed its own version of musical authenticity in part by giving the music brought in from the periphery some spatial fixity, embedding it in place by recourse to lyrics or styles that actually or purportedly "speak" to/of specific locales, and performative traditions that, it is therefore asserted, cannot be replicated other than in their sites of apparent origin (2003:19). The piracy motif subverts this possibility, and thus acts simultaneously to critique global multinational control over music, the exploitation of Third World musicians in particular, and the idea of the ownership of music by any entity, as well as to interrogate the idea that moorings, musical and otherwise, are really as critical as they seem to be to a sense of self artistic and otherwise, in performance or out of it.

By way of brief conclusion I will reiterate therefore that if classical music provides Seth with some of the cultural and personal certainties he seems to be groping for, rock n' roll does precisely the opposite for Rushdie, giving him a stage on which to perform the play of contradictions and contingencies that constitute his world. And both the certainty and the contingencies are located in the virtualized guru: in Seth's case, a commanding and Apollonian Bach as he speaks through his score, and in Rushdie's case, the haunting Dionysian songs of a dead twin bringing to life music for a new and confusing world.

CHAPTER FOURTHE POLITICAL GURU: GANDHI AND THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF BHAKTIMUSIC

*bhaktya mam abhijanati  
yavan yas ca smi tattvatah  
tato mam tattvato jnatva  
visate tadantaram*

Through devotion he comes to know Me,  
What My measure is and who I am in truth;  
Then, having known me in truth,  
He forthwith enters into me.

- The *Bhagavad Gita* <sup>51</sup>

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) can arguably be called India's foremost modern political guru. His impact on Indian politics in his own lifetime and the international respect accorded to his ideological legacy of *ahimsa* or non-violence hardly require elaboration here. Within India, Gandhi made controversial, often idiosyncratic, in turn both rigidly traditional and boldly radical pronouncements on caste, religion, diet, sexual relationships, and the role of women in public and private life, publicly performed and wrote about experiments in self-discipline, and set a personal example of unbending austerity and transparency. If Gandhism stayed alive in the early years of independence though, it was primarily as a set of ideals rather than as practice, both in terms of democratic politics and social and familial norms. By the time he died, as several historians point out, Gandhi's relevance to nationalist politics was much diminished, as

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<sup>51</sup> The *Bhagavad Gita*, the religious text most revered by the majority of Hindus, is in fact a song. A small but vital extract from the Mahabharata, it is the song of the Bhagavad god, or Vishnu, expounding his rules for a virtuous life as revealed by his popular avatar Krishna. For many Indians, particularly Hindus, separating music from its religious aspect is almost impossible. Islam, the second-largest religion in India, has its own very complex relationship with music, which is discussed elsewhere in this dissertation.

younger leaders in actual positions of governmental power, Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel to name the foremost, adopted models for industrialized economic growth and coercive national integration that were sharply at odds with Gandhian ideology. Gandhi's relevance to electoral and parliamentary politics appears to be limited to a totemic ideal, honored only through occasional formal obeisance and mandatory hand-woven *khadi* clothes.<sup>52</sup> Globalization, the opening up of the economy, and the consequent growth of Indian consumerism have also rendered Gandhi's insistence on the value of village life, frugality, and simplicity all but irrelevant. Outside government and its branches, aggressive nuclear readiness, majoritarian politics, big business and bigger malls though, in the last two decades or so Gandhi's ideas have received some attention and been critiqued, reworked, appropriated and sometimes even deployed by a small but varied spectrum of Indians, from historians and cultural critics to social workers and educationists, from health professionals and literary personalities to women's rights activists, environmental groups, and proponents of "simple-living-high-thinking" vegetarianism.<sup>53</sup> This chapter will examine two novelistic versions of Gandhian ideals at

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<sup>52</sup>Partha Chatterjee gives us a sense of how hard it is for present-day politicians and administrators to reconcile in practice their own roles and current ideas on governance with those Gandhi subscribed to. In his chapter 'The Moment of Manoeuvre: Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society': he writes: "...it is only when politics is directly subordinated to a communal morality that the minority of exploiters in society can be resisted by the people and equalities and divisions removed. As a political ideal, therefore, Gandhi counterposes against the system of representative government an undivided concept of popular sovereignty, where the community is self-regulating and political power is dissolved into the collective moral will." Chatterjee quotes Gandhi on the notion of "enlightened anarchy in which each person will become his own ruler.... In an ideal state there will be no political institution and therefore no political power." Yet interestingly enough, in its form, Chatterjee observes that this political ideal is not envisaged as a "consensual democracy with complete and continual participation by every member of the polity. The Utopia is Ramrajya (the rule of the legendary perfect avatar Rama), a patriarchy in which the ruler by his moral quality and habitual adherence to the truth, always expresses the collective will....The ideal conception of Ramrajya... encapsulates the critique of all that is morally reprehensible in the economic and political organization of civil society" (Chatterjee: 1986, 91-2, and Gandhi: 'Enlightened Anarchy: A Political Ideal', CW, Vol 68, 265 ).

<sup>53</sup> Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susan Hoeber Rudolph sum up the most significant evidence in their case for the recent recuperation of a "postmodern Gandhi": "Much of his reception...in the first three decades of

the point where those ideals intersect with the trajectory of *bhakti* music, or music that originates in a widely popular and particularly individualized form of Hindu worship.

In the first of these novels, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938), Gandhi is specifically referenced as the primary political guide and authority; such aspects of his ideology as are represented are questioned and discussed, but eventually accepted into the life of the village without major modification. Here, the regular village meetings for *bhajans* or devotional songs feature as a small but crucially facilitating component in Gandhi's plan for the mass mobilization of women in particular into the anticolonial effort. We will read *Kanthapura* briefly, since its role in this chapter is primarily as an early foil to the analysis of music and Gandhism in our second novel, Kiran Nagarkar's *The Cuckold* (1996). *The Cuckold*'s text does not mention Gandhi by name even once. Yet, as we shall see, using the story of the 16<sup>th</sup> century saint-poet-singer Mirabai, Nagarkar intervenes in multiple ways in the post-independence debate on Gandhi, suggesting how some of the questions Gandhi asked and the solutions he offered can be recalibrated to be made relevant to the demands of a new and even more challenging century. In making this intervention, Nagarkar productively draws together several issues and strands of thought that have appeared in the texts analyzed earlier in this dissertation: spontaneity

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independence was formalistic, iconographic, and hagiographic....(he was) an icon, in sight but out of mind, a dead monument rather than a living memory....(His) image and reputation began to recuperate in the 1980s when a postmodern Gandhi began to take shape. Books by Ashis Nandy and other scholars contributed to the turnaround....A newly-remembered Gandhi began to inspire and legitimize a burgeoning civil society of social and political movements and not-for-profit, non-governmental and voluntary organizations....influential intellectuals – Rajni Kothari, Ramashray Roy, perhaps Partha Chatterjee, and...Bhikhu Parekh, joined Nandy.... (Gandhi) was shown as crafting an authentic Indian voice by disentangling his ideas and vocabulary from those of the raj's colonial modernity and by reforming and revitalizing tradition....He was acknowledged as a key author of India's civil society and many of its associated movements. The secular-rationalist left, disposed to be suspicious of Gandhi's spiritual aspect, softened its critique. The Hindu right, disposed to suspect his religious inclusivism, began to stress his commitment to Hinduism. Indeed, as Gandhi the icon and monument faded from view and a revitalized Gandhi emerged to occupy considerable political space, he became an increasingly contested multi-valent signifier (Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays, 33)".

vis a vis training, the relationship between music and writing, particularly autobiographical writing and history, the dichotomy between the “interested” or politically valent song versus abstract or “pure” music, the truth value of music, the relationship between music and the divine, and the politics of gender as it is played out in music. *Bhakti* music, the music that Mira brings us, is music that is quintessentially untaught and thus outside Brahminical priestly control. It originates in the spontaneous devotion of the individual worshipper for a chosen and directly addressed personal deity. If Seth’s use of the lied suggests the manifold capabilities of the sung word, and Hasina’s concert in Deshpande’s novel briefly highlights the regenerative social and political potential of religious song, in this chapter we will see how the spontaneous *bhakti* lyric in Nagarkar’s hands questions established paradigms and opens up new possibilities for 21st century India, mired as it continues to be in violent religious conflicts, caste issues, and huge class and gender inequalities. Though the texts have very different approaches to Gandhian thought, because they look to versions of *bhakti* music as both instruments and mirrors of change, they offer a possible paradigm for the uses such music may be put to, and of a pragmatic and progressive version of Gandhian activism today.

Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* is the story of one Indian village in its experience of the Gandhian freedom struggle. The novel was written some years after the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930-32 and depicts what till then was the largest ever mobilization of the Indian rural populace into Gandhi’s mass anti-colonial effort. Analyzing the novel’s Gandhian aspects, Anshuman Mondal points out that Gandhi reached the highpoint of his political authority during the Civil Disobedience Movement, one among the three nation-wide campaigns he led during the freedom struggle, the

others being the Non-Cooperation Movement of the mid-1920s and the Quit India Movement of 1942 (2003:104). If the Civil Disobedience Movement then represented the “zenith of the Gandhian paradigm as an ideological force”, Rao’s novel, and particularly the small but crucial role that devotional music plays in it, are of considerable importance to us. Read at face value, Rao’s writing is deeply invested in two objectives: the anti-colonial struggle itself, and a related project, the development of a distinctively Indian English idiom. His use of music is accordingly bookended by these two goals. His famous and oft-quoted Foreword has come to be regarded as a policy statement for Indian authors in English hoping to formulate a style less bound by the strictures of English-as-she-is-spoke. In it, Rao announces his intent even while he describes the difficulties of what he undertakes: “One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.... We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians. Our method of expression therefore has to be a dialect which will some day prove to be as distinctive and colourful as the Irish or the American. Time alone will justify it...” (vii). Ten years before Salman Rushdie became a child of India’s midnight hour, the seeds of what he was to bring to internationally acclaimed fruition were being sown. In the Foreword, Rao invokes the notion of a different cultural tempo. Whereas for Inayat Khan and Tagore, both writing at around the same time as Rao, the whole world’s one heart beats in what we can now recognize as fashionably and politically correct unison with the slow harmony of natural processes, for Rao it becomes essential to point out that his world, the world of the Indian village, Indian storytelling and devotional song and chant, moves to very different rhythms: “The tempo of Indian life must be fused into our English expression”, he writes, “even as the tempo of American or Irish life has gone

into the making of theirs. We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India that makes us rush and tumble and run on” (vii). He invokes the telling of the stories of the Mahabharata epic as the model for his experiment with indigenized English. The epic stories are generally recited or chanted, and such sessions are punctuated by *bhajans* or religious songs, usually joined in by all present. This is where we find our musical connection.

Rao delineates a specifically Gandhian formula in his depiction of the deployment of music as a unifying political force. This force that Gandhi gradually conceived of for use in his *satyagraha* movement was comprised of women in almost equal measure, and it is their participation in particular that his workers seek in the novel, fanning out into the rural areas to find the best ways to communicate with their targets.<sup>54</sup> The *bhajan* meeting is the natural locus for their work. Even before the anti-colonial players make their appearance, we see that the political capability of music is already latent in the influence that devotional reading, chanting and singing have on the villagers, especially for women, for whom it is an approved activity because most often regulated (as in Rao’s novel), at least nominally, by a male priest or singer-chanter-commentator. Early in the novel we are given a description of a month-long community sponsored *Sankara-Jayanthi* festival in which more women seem to participate than men. This bottom-up, determinedly more organic/“authentic” view is very different from Forster’s at Dewas, or even that of Dewas’s HH, who lavishes large sums on the frenetic pomp and circumstance of

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<sup>54</sup> For more on Gandhi’s changing positions in regard to women in the national movement see Ashis Nandy (1980), Madhu Kishwar (1985), Partha Chatterjee (1986), and Sujata Patel (1988). Rumina Sethi (1999) and Anshuman Mondal (2003) provide literary analyses; their work focuses specifically on the Gandhian basis of *Kanthapura*.

Gokulashtami and other religious celebrations. Here is the voice of the female narrator, who often addresses her reader/listener as ‘sister’:

...old Ramakrishnayya... read out the *Sankara-Vijaya* day after day. And we all cried out ‘May the Goddess bless him,’ for there was none more serene and deep-voiced than he. We always went to discuss Vedanta with him in the afternoons after the vessels were washed and the children had gone to school. And now we gathered at the Isvara’s temple on the promontory, instead of Rangamma’s veranda. How grand the *Sankara-Jayanti* was! Old Ramakrishnayya read chapter after chapter with such a calm, bell-metal voice, and we all listened with our sari fringes wet with tears. Then they began to lay leaves for dinner...(the boys) served like veritable princes. Then, when we had eaten and washed our hands, the younger women sang, and we discussed the *mayavada*, and after that went home. We hastily pushed rice onto the leaves of the young and came back for the evening prayers. There used to be bhajan. Trumpet Lingayya with his silver trumpet was always there, and once the music was over we stayed till the camphor was lit, and throwing a last glance at the god, we went home to sleep, with the god’s face framed within our eyes. (7-8)<sup>55</sup>

Note how we are dealing here with the same Vedanta that Tagore and Khan hold in reverence, the same god Shiva that Khan invokes in his *vina* playing, and devotional songs based on the same raga music that Khan played and that inspired most of Tagore’s songs. But the Vedanta here is not the fount of timeless and unquestioned truths; rather, debate over its interpretation is a part of the women’s daily lives. This is surprising, because Rao’s Hinduism, like Gandhi’s, is an emphasis on the religious, rather than, as

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<sup>55</sup> *Sankara-Jayanti* is held to commemorate *Sankara-Vijaya* or the victory of Sankara (Shiva). Bhajan/s are Hindu devotional songs, usually sung by all present to the accompaniment of drums and cymbals, clapping of hands and swaying of bodies. Bhajans are most often in the vernacular languages rather than Sanskrit, which is the language that Hindu religious rites are still conducted in. *Mayavada* refers to a view of the world as essentially an illusion (as opposed to a greater reality beyond this world) that was popularized by the late 8<sup>th</sup> century Advaita reformer-saint Adi Shankaracharya who stressed the idea of the oneness of the human and the divine, *brahman* in the form of *atman* or soul. It is also related to the notion of the invisible god, and could be used as a derogatory term, indeed as an accusation of near-atheism, by believers on the other side, for whom the divide between god and his creation was a central tenet. It is unclear whether our narrator means to use it in a derogatory way. Clearly, what form the divine takes, though, is among the issues that are important in the women’s discussions. That they go to sleep with “the god’s face framed within (their) eyes” may offer some indication of their stance in regard to the Advaita-Dvaita controversy that has raged for centuries within Brahminical Hinduism. It is fair to say that popular Hinduism, particularly as it is recognized internationally, tends towards the Advaita, Shankaracharya casting a long shadow on all Hindu thought after him. (see King, 96-142)

with Khan and Tagore, a turn towards the mystical or spiritual. The power of the religious injunction as expressed in song or chant is far more formidable than that of the spiritual or mystical, because by definition, the latter two approaches allow for more flexibility. But the fact that the women discuss their religion makes their debate a sanctioned space for protest and dissent even within the fold of formal religion. And it is this space into which the anti-colonial message is successfully disseminated through the *bhajan* sing-song and the *harikatha* or “story of the gods”. Moorthy, “Gandhi’s man”, eventually take over the *harikatha* sessions and uses the language of the epics and the *puranas* to train the village women in non-violent disobedience.

We are given early indications that the *harikatha* fascinates the women not only as a literary and musical performance, but also, more significantly, as a point of imaginative entry into a perfect world: “Our Sastri is also a poet....And he is a fine singer too. But he is an even grander *Harikatha*-man. When he stood up with the bells at his ankles and the cymbals in his hands, how true and near and brilliant the god-world seemed to us. And never has anyone made a grander *Harikatha* on Parvati’s winning of Siva. He had poetry on his tongue, sister. And he could keep us sitting for hours together” (8). Rumina Sethi, author of the first monograph to focus exclusively on Kanthapura, highlights the dangers of Rao’s assertively Hindu motifs to secular India, motifs adopted in support of Gandhi’s dream of *ram-rajya* in a nation finally about to achieve independence. *Ramrajya* refers to the mythical perfect rule of the epic hero Rama, considered an *avatar* of Vishnu. The novel’s very title makes no bones about where it will take us: *pura* means both ‘town’ or ‘habitation’ and ‘fortress’ in Sanskrit, and the word *kanta* has several different synonyms, some of them being ‘desired’, ‘beautiful’, ‘pleasing’, ‘of Krishna’ (another *avatar* of

Vishnu), and interestingly, ‘the boundary of a village.’ (Monier Monier-Williams.) For Rao, the village community was the ideal locus for the crucial preservation of Indian – here unabashedly Hindu and Brahminical – traditions, even in a country that was being gradually Westernized and brought within the ambit of an alien consumer culture. The hint in the title, of the defining limits of a longed-for space within which the colonizer’s influence could not reach, is telling in this context.

Sethi highlights the startling - and to us, alarming - similarity of the orientalist and the Gandhian nationalist approaches in their evocation of the village as India’s “ultimate reality”. She writes: “Within the double discourse of colonialism that was both hegemonizing and colonizing, the village was India’s answer to the domination by the West. It symbolized indigenous cultural standards, as well as the ‘ancient’ that could stand up to the modern....Ordered and stabilized, the village radiated permanence in an otherwise disintegrated and chaotic world....” (57-58). Apropos Gandhi, who, though he fought caste norms, thought of the village (where caste regulations were traditionally at their worst) as “a prehistoric inner world, economically self-sufficient and an organic community of peasants”, Sethi brings in the ideas of the *dalit* (“low”-caste) leader Babasaheb Ambedkar. She cites Richard Fox’s recapitulation of Ambedkar’s ideas about the Indian village: “a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism” (27). Making what is now a familiar argument, Sethi holds that “nationalism relies paradoxically on the ‘little traditions’ of the countryside for its definitions of authenticity and purity when it is, in fact, a modern movement initiated in cities. The sentiment of nationalism thus builds a sense of solidarity with the peasantry, who, in actual fact scarcely have any role in social change or modernization processes”

(96). We cannot but agree with most of what Sethi has to say about the menacing ways in which some of Gandhi's ideas on *ramrajya* in particular have been rearticulated in terms of a militant late 20<sup>th</sup> century Hindu parochialism. What I would like to emphasize however, is that even taking into account Rao's idealizing Hindu intentions, *Kanthapura* reflects an accurate understanding of the space-within-a-space created by Indian religious music and chant, particularly as these relate to the political mobilization of women, and is therefore a powerful depiction of the this-worldly, distinctly unspiritual and non-mystical uses such a space and the music in it can be put to. Another aspect of Sethi's argument is also important to my reading of the relationship between music and the writing of history. Sethi foregrounds the importance of Rao's novel as both "a cultural tract which (claims to) rewrite "true" history as against the "inauthentic" historical accounts compiled by Europeans, and also wrests the "nation" from the aggressor by effecting a cultural revival through the use of indigenous themes and motifs" (2). As will be made evident later in this chapter, Nagarkar's book thus takes up where Rao's left off on more than one level, connecting songs with the writing of history, and mixing indigenous and Western concepts in an equally innovative way.

Scene after scene in *Kanthapura* testifies to the close connection between religious music and the freedom movement as the villagers experience it. On the night before Gandhi's famous defiance of the Salt Laws at the end of his Dandi March, the narrator says:

...we could not sleep and we could not wake, and all the night we heard the sea conches cry like the announcing cry of the Belur conch that goes trailing its 'om' through the winkless night, and people wake and music plays, and with torch and hymn is it sought, and with torch and hymn is it brought from the river below to the

temple above....we gave our men *paysam* and *chitranna* as though it were Gauri's festival....and in the evening there was bhajan. (120-21)

When Gandhi is arrested, “the temple bell goes ringing in the street and we rush to...hear ‘The Mahatma is arrested! The Mahatma! And next week there will be a Don’t-touch the government campaign. And today everyone will fast and the Congress panchayat will meet, and in the evening bhajan’” (124). The evening *bhajan* meeting, where women have traditionally met to sing and to discuss both their faith and their everyday lives, becomes the site for solidarity in resistance. In other parts of the country, women joined men and children on *prabhat-pheris* (dawn rounds), carrying the tricolour that was to become the Indian flag, and singing religious and patriotic songs. This resistance, whatever its provenance, was a historical phenomenon in large parts of British India. Gandhi - whether because he himself enjoyed *bhajans*, or because he understood the tremendous political leverage they could command, or both - himself popularized them in a way that few politicians before him had. Janaki Bakhle notes the connections between musical sanitizer-modernizers like the Paluskars, both father and son, and Gandhi’s favourite bhajans ‘*Vaishnav Jan To Tene Kahiye*’ by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Gujarati Vaishnav poet Narsimha Mehta, and an adaptation of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Marathi saint-poet Ramdas’s ‘*Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram.*’

Other scholars provide evidence that the use of the *harikatha-bhajan* tradition as Gandhi encouraged it, and as Rao depicts it, was neither a mere idealization of its effects, nor a one-off pre-independence phenomenon. Certainly it will not have been the first or the last religious performance tradition to be used to political ends.<sup>56</sup> Writing on the

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<sup>56</sup> The African-American spiritual and the assertive lyrics of the Latin American Christian Left are only two of the most immediately visible examples of music so deployed.

*harikatha* in South India, and the related forms it engendered, Daniel Neger informs us that it was born or at least redefined in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, comprising of stories from the *Puranas* (ancient Hindu tales), sometimes in the form of *shlokas*<sup>57</sup>, and is delivered in a half-sung recitative by a single stand-up interpreter, man or woman, accompanied by a fiddler and at least one other musician. The performance is often punctuated by short humorous intervals when the audience can intervene by asking questions or making comments, and there was usually a recapitulative commentary at the end. It is customary for Brahmins to conduct *harikathas*, but Neger observes that in the present day at least there appears to be no bar on other castes also performing (126-27). This form would thus have been appropriate as a tool in the Gandhian movement, given Gandhi's insistence on dropping all caste restrictions, a move that was particularly controversial in rural India, where severe caste regulations had governed everyday life for as long as living memory.<sup>58</sup>

Anshuman Mondal, however, argues that in *Kanthapura* Rao was depicting a fantasy situation, a situation that did not historically obtain in the princely state of Mysore, where the village is supposedly located and where Rao himself was born, till at least as late as the Quit India Movement of 1942, 10 years after the novel was written (109). Even then,

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<sup>57</sup> *Shlokas* are the typical form that Hindu religious chanting takes, lines of rhythmic prose of uniform metre.

<sup>58</sup> Neger writes in particular about the *burrakatha* folk form in modern Andhra Pradesh (Rao's novel is set in the neighbouring state of Karnataka), which first emerged in the 1940s under the influence of the Communist Party of India to disseminate the nationalist and revolutionary message in rural areas. *Burrakatha* developed into an artistic medium of regional significance in terms of cultural and linguistic group identity. This was done, Neger writes, "by gradually assimilating a large spectrum of story-telling and singing/acting traditions embedded in various specific art forms, (including the *harikatha*) borrowing either particular aspects in the mode of production/transmission or in inspiring new stories out of the repertoire of these forms.... (*Burrakatha*) helps us understand how tradition finds its way in redefining culture when the time comes to carry on a different message." In Andhra, where it is used today by entities as diverse as candidates for local election, family planning authorities, and corporations advertising consumer goods, it is officially recognized as a means to promote the three causes of *prabodham-kalakshepam-pracharam* (learning-entertainment-spreading a message) (Neger 119-36).

according to Mondal's research, Mysore's participation was seen mostly in the urban areas, with the villages relatively unaffected by Gandhian sentiments, or, as he insists, often actually hostile to Congress organizations that, controlled by urban Brahmins, were "vehemently anti-peasant" in practice. Like Sethi, Mondal too thus finds the representation of Gandhian nationalism in Rao's novel suspect because "overtly ideological". If, as Sethi observes, Rao claimed the status of "true" history for *Kanthapura*, this status is metaphorical in a wish-fulfilling sense and is undermined at a very basic level by the attested truths of nationalist history as it in fact played itself out over that time. The figure of Gandhi in *Kanthapura* thus presides over what is, in effect, fiction posing as - and thus hoping to influence - historical truth.

Without once mentioning Gandhi, through the many complex discursive threads that it draws together *The Cuckold* points insistently at its own status as an intervention in the debate on Gandhian ideology in late 20<sup>th</sup> century India. Within this framework, Nagarkar's reimagining of both Mira's songs in particular and of *bhakti* and the *bhakti* lyric more broadly is crucial to the novel's position on key contemporary Indian issues: gender, sexuality, caste, violence, governance, national security, religious conflict, and the rewriting of history for majoritarian political purposes. The novel unmistakably evokes Gandhi the martyred Mahatma or "great soul" in its questioning of the idea of sainthood: what sainthood might mean, who qualifies for it, and who pays the price it invariably demands. Mira's story is a particularly apposite choice for Nagarkar because Gandhi attributed to Mira important capabilities characteristic of his new Indian womanly ideal, an ideal that he continuously reformulated over a period of almost three decades from around 1917 to his death in 1948. For Gandhi, Mira was the first and exemplary

*satyagrahi* or passive resister, who renounced carnal pleasures and worldly possessions to protest unjust oppression with what he saw as the womanly weapons of truth, capacity to withstand suffering, and innate potential for nonviolence. In a 1917 letter to Esther Falring he wrote:

For me truth and love are interchangeable terms...the Gujarati for passive resistance is truth-force. I have variously defined it as truth-force, love-force or soul-force.... What one has to do is to live the life of love in the midst of the hate we see everywhere....A great queen named Mirabai lived two or three hundred years ago. She forsook her husband and everything and lived a life of absolute love. Her husband at last became her devotee. We often sing in the ashram some fine hymns composed by her.

Feminist critics and historians point towards several factors that could have played into Gandhi's choice of Mira as a national feminine ideal. In an important essay on Gandhi's attitude to women, Madhu Kishwar discusses his discomfort and guilt about his own sexuality, his belief in the traditional Indian idea of the satisfaction of sexual urges as debilitating and emasculating, his consequent elevation of widows to the highest spiritual status, his recommendation of celibacy as the ideal state for a *satyagrahi*, and his exhortations to married couples to become like brothers and sisters the better to devote their energies to social work. Kishwar's essay suggests that Mira's suitability as a national exemplar for Gandhi had more to do with her famous (if only apocryphally evidenced) renunciation of the marital bed than with her equally radical defiance of other patriarchal and caste norms (307-314). Sujata Patel's work shows that promoting Mira, who rebelled against her marital family, as the national ideal for women was not necessarily inconsistent with Gandhi's general approach to non-violent protest, though it was an approach in which Patel sees an in-built dualism involving a "simultaneous acquiescence in and revolt against society". This contradiction was reflected in the

freedoms he was willing to give women, freedoms circumscribed by an idea of virtuous feminine behavior that could not be separated from his upper middle class Vaishnav Gujarati business-family background. Patel writes: “As a good patriarch, the maximum he could do was to rationalize authority, make it ‘just’ and ‘humane’” (297).<sup>59</sup> But it was that same austere religio-cultural upbringing which made Gandhi select Mira, a popular Vaishnav *bhaktin* saint-poet-singer, as one important medium for his message. Gandhi’s personality too, played an important part in women’s mobilization into nationalist politics. Analyzing the role of women in the nationalist movement in Bengal, the historian Tanika Sarkar writes:

The most crucial role in dovetailing the feminine role with nationalist politics was perhaps the image of Gandhi as a saint or even a religious deity and the perception of the patriotic struggle as an essentially religious duty. According to this perception joining the Congress agitation would not really be politicization, a novel and doubtful role for women, but sharing a religious mission – a role deeply embedded in a tradition sanctified by the example of Meera Bai and the ‘sanyasins’. The stress on the personal saintliness of Gandhi, a subtle symbiosis between the religious and the political in the nationalist message under his leadership, enabled nationalism to transcend the realm of politics and elevate itself to a religious domain. (98)

Though she retains some of the features of the legendary Mira that Gandhi drew on and then reinvented, Nagarkar’s Mira as we shall see from the songs in which she frequently finds voice, is a very different creature from Gandhi’s desexualized, self-abnegating, and non-violent national heroine. The novel focuses, sometimes through a first person narrative, on Mira’s husband, the Maharaj Kumar or heir apparent of the Rajput principality of Mewar. Much page space is devoted to his ideas on war, his version of *bhakti*, and his relationship to Krishna and the Bhagawad Gita that represents Krishna’s strategic wartime message to the Mahabharata hero Arjuna. Gandhi’s reliance on the Gita

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<sup>59</sup> Vaishnav: Follower of Vishnu, as opposed to Shaiva (follower of Shiva), or Shakt (of the feminine principle Shakti).

as both spiritual and political precept in his quest for nonviolent means is well documented (David Arnold 33, 55, Thomas Weber 20, Parekh 1997: 2, Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph 7, 10-13).

Other thematic aspects of *The Cuckold* make its relationship to Gandhian thought almost unquestionable. The Prince or Maharaj Kumar, through whose consciousness Mira's story is channeled, is preoccupied with matters relating to sewage and sanitation, recalling for us Gandhi's famous cleaning of his ashram toilets. The Kumar's portions of the narrative take the form of an autobiography in which he often argues with himself about the nature of truth, violent action, expedient means towards desired ends, and the retrospective glorification of Rajput martial valour by the bards of old. He is fascinated by the honest and direct autobiographical fragments that spies purloin from the camp of the latest Muslim threat, Babar, the future founder of the Mughal dynasty who advances towards the borders of Hindustan as the text progresses. Bhikhu Parekh argues that Gandhi took a symbolically significant step by writing autobiography, adopting thereby a form in which Western notions of self were deeply embedded; yet, Parekh shows how Gandhi Indianized the art of autobiography by making his work a spiritual quest for truth, an *atmakatha* or story of the soul, rather than a *jivanvritanta* or description of a life (247-66). We will see how the Kumar's writing of his own story harks back to and yet differs significantly from this Gandhian search for the truth. The Kumar is drawn to Babur, and to other Muslim rulers he has occasion to interact with, like Bahadur Shah, heir to the Gujarat throne, and Mahmud Khalji, Sultan of Malwa, men who he thinks he might have been friends with if the natural hostility between Hindu and Muslim had not at some point cut such a friendship short. Again, these too evoke Gandhi, whose views on Hindu-

Muslim relations and whose consequent opposition to the Partition that became inevitable cost him his life, whose own autobiography is subtitled *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, whose sense of the need for dialogic thought and for an understanding of truth as inevitably perspectival almost all his biographers and analysts attest to, and whose deep suspicion of history in the form of kingly chronicles of military encounters lost and won manifested itself in many of his writings and speeches. Gandhi's ideas about androgyny are also referenced in the figure of the court eunuch Bruhannada. Finally, the manner of the Kumar's death in the novel is a bold reconfiguring of the legendary Mira's death, a version that a reading of the history of Mira's songs serves to illuminate more richly. In giving the Kumar Mira's death, Nagarkar reenvisions both Gandhian notions about empathetic identification and the Gandhian ideal of androgyny in personal and political life.

Nagarkar's novel, which often references the Gita (the Song of Krishna), and whose protagonist is himself a worshipper of Krishna as well as his "rival" in love, was written against the backdrop of large-scale violence against India's minority Muslims. Accompanying this violence was a very controversial revision of school history textbooks to portray Islamic rule as India's darkest hour, a time that led to the further shame and oppression of British rule. The right-wing religious parties then coming to power presented a militant, aggressively male-identified, socially conservative Hinduism as the best antidote both to Islam as well as to Western influence in the form of politically wishy-washy secularism, socially pernicious feminist ideas, and morally corruptive satellite television. In responding to the violence and sexism of ruling-class Hindu propaganda, Nagarkar, a progressive, non-sectarian, activist-author, proposes a new ethic.

Nagarkar redeploys *bhakti* devotional music in its role as a protest form, this time against modern sub-continental religious and gender biases. His decision to write a novel based on early modern India in English - he is also an award-winning author in Marathi - militates against the now well-iterated critique of English language writing on the subcontinent as excessively conscious of an international – more specifically, Western - readership, unacceptably exoticized, and essentially untouched in all but cosmetic details by the issues that concern an overwhelmingly vernacular-educated local populace. With the provocative new songs Nagarkar writes for Mira, he opens up a debate on the relation between bardic "history", hagiography, and more official chronicles on the one hand, and the voice of the subaltern, particularly the female subaltern, on the other, posing important questions about the authenticity of the various kinds of evidence that constitute the archive and the ways in which the archive is used. He depicts not just a heroine who defies contemporary gender strictures, but also a hero who does likewise, subverting notions of masculinity and femininity to posit a new version of the androgynous Gandhian socio-political ethic. Ostensibly the story of a man and a male god told by a male writer, The Cuckold could be seen as post-feminist by virtue of this focus. In fact, however, the novel uses the androgyny always inherent in *bhakti* singing to suggest quite another sensibility, one which reduces the gender distinction to irrelevance in the search for a wholeness that is both increasingly difficult to accomplish, and increasingly essential to human well-being and to ethical action.

The historical Mira was all but expunged from the Rajput chronicles, and while some of what we know of her today is derived from the *bhakti* hagiographies, she is best known by and through the songs attributed to her. Criticism has highlighted Nagarkar's

focus on the husband rather than the woman saint herself, and he breaks new ground with this (Meenakshi Mukherjee, V.Padma, Manjula Padmanabhan, all 2004). Several scholars have analyzed his approach to the historical and his preoccupation with assertive women characters in the Mewar court. These women stand out in a novel that pertains to 16<sup>th</sup> century India, a milieu in which even queens apparently had no significant influence on social structures or state policy. (Anirudh Deshpande, Usha Hemmady, Mukherjee, Padma, Padmanabhan, all 2004.) What has not received the critical attention it deserves is the role of music and the lyrical in the novel. Makarand Paranjape insists that the newfangled lyrics Nagarkar writes for Mira are among the few weaknesses of an otherwise brilliant work (2004:20). I argue that the aesthetic value of these lyrics or their dissimilarity with Mira's songs as heard today are of far less import than their political worth. Careless of their often doubtful status as poetry, Nagarkar uses his songs for a very specific purpose. Indeed, the obvious dissimilarity or dissonance that Paranjape complains of is precisely the point. Nagarkar's lyrics blur the multiple larger-than-life images of Mira created in the appropriative controversy between cultural historians, politicians, feminists scholars, proponents of dialect poetry, academics in Hindi departments across North India, and various "low" caste/*dalit* and politically marginalized constituencies. In doing so, these lyrics constitute a profound examination of the ways in which gender and sexuality, indeed all interpersonal relationships may be represented, first in modes of worship, and then in modes of social interaction. Music and musical performance become key sites for the contest between a variety of new gender-based possibilities, and for the emergence of a call for a more responsible and empathetic politics that eschews both sectarian violence and easy labels. Built into the songs is a

debate on issues of training versus spontaneity, of abstract or pure music as opposed to music with words to it, of the relationship of human to human and human to divine. Built around the songs are the equally crucial questions of authenticity, authorship, and “true” history.

*Bhakti* - literally meaning “worship” or “devotion” in Sanskrit - has come to stand for a particularly intense relationship with a chosen personal god. This worship was truly individual because it required no mediation by the controlling authority of Brahmin priests. It has therefore functioned within and against high Hinduism as a potentially liberating protestant spiritual ethic and a catalyst in, if not, perhaps, the direct cause of, micro-level social change. Requiring nothing except a truly devoted heart, from as early as the 6<sup>th</sup> century in South India and the 11th century in North India, this *bhakti* movement spread over the subcontinent, growing in force as it allowed *sudras* (the “lower” castes) and women, both groups originally banned from reading or learning the scriptures, a language and a space in which to articulate and negotiate needs that were not always religious.<sup>60</sup> *Bhakti* was regarded as not just a state of mind, but as constituted of actions, one of the most important among them being the offering of worship in the form of song, and quite often, dance. Finding expression most powerfully in poetry and music, *bhakti* inspired thousands of *pads* or rhymed couplets and *bhajans* or devotional songs

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<sup>60</sup> Madhu Kishwar writes: “The bhaktas asserted equality of all souls before god, regardless of caste and status, even indicating that high status and wealth were impediments to finding oneness with god. They emphasized love as much more important than knowledge gained from book learning, positing self-realization as accessible even to the lowliest, and denounced the pride and self-righteousness of religious and other authority figures....(Thus they) opened their doors not just to supposedly low status groups but also to women. Even though most bhaktas, including the women bhaktas, rarely address themselves specifically to women, the shift in the languages of worship from Sanskrit to the languages spoken by the common people brought about a new opportunity for women’s creativity to express itself in devotional religion. The women poets were among the shapers of the modern Indian languages...they helped make the vernaculars more flexible, suitable for expression ranging from proverbial wisdom to complex philosophical thought.” (*Manushi* special Mira edition, 4-5)

that continue to engage the 21<sup>st</sup> century popular imagination. The Sanskrit root verb *bhaj* from which both *bhakti* and *bhajan* derive, variously means “to share in”, “to belong in” and “to worship”.<sup>61</sup> The *bhajan* therefore is *bhakti* in action, devotion practiced. To sing, in *bhakti*, is to worship. Further, as the alternative meanings imply, to sing a *bhajan* is also to be a part of, to share and belong in that which one worships. This latter idea of identification with the divine, and with other humans through the concept of the divine, revolutionary in the time of its first flowering, and possessed of tremendous significance even today, is the driving force behind Nagarkar’s novel.

The foremost North Indian *bhakti* singer-poet-saints are Mira, Surdas and Kabir. Mira is arguably the most popular, most remembered, and most sung woman *bhakti* poet across both North and South India; if there is one early woman poet and singer whose name is known, and whose work has travelled outside the country in this century, it is Mira.<sup>62</sup> While women *bhakti* poets enjoy a special position within the vernacular canon today, most of them led lives that were regarded as extremely unorthodox in their times. There are several versions of Mira's life on offer. In the best known ones, the story goes more or less as follows: she was born into a Rajput ruling family in what is present-day Rajasthan and became romantically attached early in life to a statue of Krishna, believing that the god was her lover and husband. Married in her teens to a prince from another powerful royal clan - an individual whose identity remains fuzzy to this day-, she either refused him sex or, as some would suggest, submitted to it in obedience of his will, but in either case did not produce an heir. Here the story is unclear, or rather, breaks up into

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<sup>61</sup> Lindsay Jones, ed (2005). *Gale Encyclopedia of Religion* Vol 2. Thompson Gale, 856–857.

<sup>62</sup> The famous South Indian classical singer M.S.Subbalakshmi did Mira signal service both in South India as well as in the diaspora by starring as Mira in an early Hindi film version and by singing her *bhajans* at concert after concert. Cassettes of “MS”’s Mira *bhajans* may be found even in South Indian households where little or no Hindi is spoken.

various possible alternatives, on exactly how her husband dealt with his unusual situation, but we are given to understand in some versions that he fell in love with her, was not entirely unsympathetic in spite of feelings of jealousy, resentment, and shame, and, according to some relatively modern commentators with upper caste sympathies - though this idea is furiously debated - by and large behaved in a surprisingly restrained way for a Rajput male of his feudal time. Mira continued with her devotions, flouted the rules of *purdah* to meet holy men and discuss Krishna-*bhakti*, and wrote songs that she sang and danced to in public.

If, in *bhakti*, to sing was to worship, for a woman in marriage, particularly a royal marriage, to sing was to defy. It is impossible to emphasize how scandalous the acts of singing or dancing in public are for many sections of conservative Hindu wives even today. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century they were definitively the arts of the courtesan and it was twice as unthinkable for a woman from a royal household to conduct herself like a bazaar woman in this respect. Mira, the story tells us, survived many attempts on her life by her enraged in-laws, defied the disciplinary strictures of her own natal family as well as an unnamed Rana (ruler) – her husband in some accounts, and her father-in-law or brother-in-law in others - wandered North India for many years singing and dancing in the clothes of a renunciate, lived in Vrindavan - where Krishna is supposed to have grown up - for a while, and eventually died, it seems, at a relatively mature age inside the main temple at Dwarka in modern Gujarat, where the mythical Krishna is said to have given up his own corporeal form. Legend has it that her body was embraced by and merged into the statue of Krishna, no trace of it later being found except for a few scraps of cloth on the statue.

On the popular front, over the last 70 years the Indian imagination has been deluged with media representations of Mira. Her life has been the material for at least ten films. Her songs – though not themselves “classical” in any sense, but set to motifs from classical Indian *ragas*, and sung by some of the highest paid divas - enjoy an everyday circulation on most radio channels, particularly those that broadcast religious songs and/or songs that do not originate in Bollywood. Before or after songs are played, Indian radio stations regularly announce not just the singer, but also the music director and the lyricist, so that listeners are always aware whose words they are hearing. And the aura of this songwriter is not limited to Indian listeners and readers. John Stratton Hawley informs us that the Barnard students who honour founding mothers every spring by writing their names on banners that temporarily obscure the eminent male names on the walls of Butler Library at Columbia, have included the name of Mira from 1994 (2). Though recognized by what are now read as hagiographies from as early as the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (starting with Nabhadās’s *Bhaktamal* or ‘Garland of Devotees’ in C 1600), the early Mira seems to appear in them most frequently as the highest *bhakt* or devotee, rather than as a saint as the western world would understand the word. The Hindi word *sant*, now most often used to describe the *bhakti* poets, is perhaps linked etymologically to the English “saint”, but more often refers to someone who is wise and virtuous, and is also specially, even extraordinarily, gifted, but may or may not be capable of the defining miracles that promote humans to sainthood by traditional western standards. This is not to say that there are no miracles ascribed to Mira, but merely to emphasize the difference, and to note that she plays varied roles even in the hagiographies.

Politically speaking, and from the mainstream religious point of view, Mira was "canonized" - albeit in an unofficial way, since Hinduism has no actual ceremony of canonization - in the second quarter of the 20th century. Hindu leaders in the anticolonial movement, Gandhi in particular, searching for women exemplars during the freedom struggle, sanitized Mira of the sexual rebelliousness that had caused her to be deleted from, or cursorily included in, the Rajput chronicles, and promoted her to a revered space alongside Sita and Savitri, women from the epics reputed for their strength, single-mindedness and virtue. The difference between her and these mythical heroines lay in her defiance of the rules of marriage, but this, as Gandhi highlighted, was perfectly consonant with his idea of *satyagraha* or nonviolent resistance to injustice. Defining *satyagraha* as "an effort to discover, discern, obtain or apply the Truth", he writes:

In the application of Satyagraha, I discovered, in the earliest stages, that pursuit of Truth did not admit of violence being inflicted on one's opponent, but that he must be weaned from error by patience and sympathy. For, what appears to be truth to the one may appear to be error to the other. And patience means self-suffering. So the doctrine came to mean vindication of Truth, not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but one's own self. (CW)

Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita write: "explaining that the doctrine of *satyagraha* 'is merely an extension of the rule of domestic life to the political (CW 17: 153) ....he saw non-cooperation as par excellence the weapon of women....Arguing that a wife had the right to undertake national service even against her husband's will, he said: 'Mirabai has shown the way'" (CW 31: 512). (Qtd. in Manushi 86-87). Gandhi's was a masterstroke; unlike many thinkers, he refused to play down Mira's independence. Instead, perhaps drawing on and modifying the existing Rajput *virangana* tradition – wherein women are reputed to develop “male” courage and resolution in times of war or other crises – he used her arguments to substantiate his own widely broadcast appeals to women to join the

struggle for freedom from colonial rule. (It is another thing altogether that in all other affairs - and certainly in the matter of legislation that tended to equal rights in everyday life - women continued to get a raw deal from the government that Gandhi's movement brought to power.) Feminist critics like Ruth Vanita, Madhu Kishwar, Kumkum Sangari and Parita Mukta have appropriated Mira in their own ways, making her into an early symbol of resistance to patriarchy, feudalism, caste-ism, militarism and consumerism. Rashmi Bhatnagar et al argue very convincingly that Mira's oeuvre as we know it today is not just the handiwork of one woman, but the collective work and voice of generations of women and *dalits* (untouchables) in North India, protesting gender and caste strictures in one of the few and limited ways open to them: through recourse, in worship, to an entity more powerful than their human authorities. Feminist deployment of Mira thus makes an interesting comparison with Gandhi's.

In Mira's life as wife and princess though, Nagarkar brings us a woman who is willful, self-absorbed and given to worldly pleasures. She owns upward of two hundred sets of green clothes to match her green eyes and, quite unlike Gandhi's non-violent heroine, is Rajput and martial enough to enjoy hunting wild animals. Her plans for the Pushkar outing include a decadent dress code that puts the women's quarters into a ferment of sartorial activity. This is not the feminists' Mira of subaltern sympathies who complains about capitalist accumulation or ostentation, nor is she Gandhi's self-denying saint. This is an eminently more human version. This Mira is skilled in matters of statecraft and often advises her indulgent father-in-law. The Mewar court Nagarkar presents is not puritanical, affording space for various discreet and not-so-discreet dalliances. The royal women sing raunchy songs, ogle at male guests. Nowhere do we hear that Mira is not

among these merry-makers; if anything, she co-ordinates these high-profile and expensive revels with an un-saintly relish. Nagarkar's singing saint is not above cheating at chess, or feminine vanity, or an irrational dog-in-the-manger jealousy in her dealings with her husband. The prince's nickname for her is Greeneyes, and we see how jealous she is of Sugandha, her husband's pregnant second wife.

Mira's songs become particularly vital to our understanding of Nagarkar's novel because in the absence of a significant early manuscript tradition, and thanks to a powerful but fluid oral one, the historical-legendary Mira's interiority is unavailable for analysis except through songs that, at the very least, are often seen as being of questionable provenance. What we know of her from the songs that have survived – we have no certain dates, not even an idea of what came before or after -, or from the songs that might have been written under her name subsequently, may or may not bear any relation to the living woman. As Kumkum Sangari argues:

At one level the saint's life is a consensual and so socially legitimate pattern which inherently contradicts the normative requirements of wifedom. Mira's transgression of the norms for a good Rajput wife and widow may have necessitated seeking protection in the alternative norms of sainthood. Or, conversely, her life may have been retrospectively 'fitted' into the ideal-typical life of a saint thus erasing all the signs of personal suffering, isolation, vulnerability and daring in the life of the woman. At another level *both* the historical figure and the legendary saint belong to the realm of public transcription, both inhabit a hierarchising, prescriptive social domain where the 'norms' of the one can be invoked to 'punish' the other....Finally, the narrative of the saint's life projects modes of behaviour which arise in response to expectations or proscriptions as simple and pure expressions of spiritual being, and interprets 'character' as deriving from such a substantive self rather than from the exigencies of changing, accrued experience. (1465)

To the extent, then, that Nagarkar has created a more human and believable character than the feminists' Mira, as well as the self-flagellating, white-clothed embodiment of spiritual strength that Gandhi promoted, he has certainly re-visualized her.

Even had *The Cuckold* not tried to recreate the human figure rather than the saint for us, it merits analysis on account of the newness of what Nagarkar embarks on, in terms of the themes that Indian English novelists have seen fit to take on. This is not, of course, the first time that Indian saints and/or mythical/legendary figures have been depicted as subjects in formation, rather than as always already perfect exemplars.<sup>63</sup> Nagarkar's novel is unique, though, in that it is the first ever – in fact, to date, the only – effort by an Indian novelist in English to engage with the *bhakti* movement and with the lives of the singer-poet-saints who made it the force it became. Indeed, very few Indian English novelists have taken up themes like this, themes that are unlikely to find an international audience or, therefore, an international publisher. Paranjape, highlighting Nagarkar's earlier award-winning Marathi fiction, and identifying him as part of a group of bilingual Marathi writers that includes Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre and Vilas Sarang, argues that Nagarkar's choice of subject here and elsewhere has to do with his special status as an insider-outsider in the Indian English tradition, calling his brand of modernity one “which is rebellious without rejecting tradition totally, irreverent without necessarily being totally impious” (4). For Paranjape, Nagarkar's work, thus, belongs to the Indian English family inasmuch as it is “the product of a cultural outsider, but it is, at the same time, different in

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<sup>63</sup> V.Padma points out that Michael Madhusudan Dutt's 19th century epic poem *Meghnadbadhkavya* in Bengali, Pratibha Ray's Oriya novel *Yajanaseni* (1984) and, in Malayalam, M.T. Vasudevan Nair's 1977 novel *Randamoozham* retell the epic stories of Ram and Meghnad, Draupadi, and Bhima respectively, all these authors shifting the traditional focus in powerfully revisionary ways. More recently Sunil Gangopadhyay brings the same sort of scrutiny to the lives of real people in history, in novels like *Those Days* (1981) and *First Light* (1996), written in Bengali, where he deglorifies such saintly personalities as Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda, both of whom have had a seminal influence in forming the modern Bengali psyche. Other examples of such iconoclasm like Iravati Karve's Marathi collection *Yuganta* (1969), which highlights and reworks the stories of the major women characters in the Mahabharata, can also be cited.

that it reflects not just a bilingual sensibility, but one that is deeply grounded in Indian traditions....the...heterodoxy of the critical insider more than that of a rank outsider" (5).<sup>64</sup>

The only other Indian English effort at depicting Mira, one that Paranjape, surprisingly, does not mention, comes in the form of poetic drama in Dilip Kumar Roy's 1955 play, The Beggar Princess: A Historical Drama in Five Acts. Roy stays well within the confines of the sanitized, upper-caste, reverent mode. However, he does make a few changes to the otherwise well known plot, including a courting scene in which Bhojraj, impassioned by Mira's musical talent and religious fervour, presses his suit after an initial rejection and persuades Mira to marry him with the promise that she may continue with her devotions as his wife. Other twists include a scene in which Mira sings before the Mughal Emperor Akbar's court singer Tansen while an indulgent Bhojraj looks on. This would, of course, have been completely unthinkable for a Rajput princess even had Tansen not been Muslim. The fact that he is Muslim becomes the main scandal of the play, rather than Mira's other more unconventional behaviour, and Roy makes the debate around it part of an argument for Hindu-Muslim unity, something always topical on the subcontinent, and even more so immediately after Partition. The changes allow the story to articulate one widely held, uncomplicated – but again, bitterly argued – conception of Mira's virtue and obedience to her husband's wishes as long as he was alive. The white-clad, submissive cover illustration and the descriptions within are of a kind with popular

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<sup>64</sup> Paranjape's effort to locate Nagarkar in Indian English writing is however complicated by the fact that while there is a flourishing Indian English tradition of writing about the nation under and after British rule, unlike in languages like Marathi and Bengali, there is a lack of any fleshed out tradition of literary work which deals with medieval or early modern history within the Indian English ethos. Finding only two very early examples, Sirdar Jogendra Singh's *Nurjahan: The Romance of an Indian Queen* (1909) and Subramanier Panchapakesa Aiyar's *Baladitya: A Historical Romance of Ancient India* (1930), and just one lone modern precursor, Bhagwan Gidwani's later televised 1989 novel, *The Sword of Tipu Sultan*, Paranjape points towards the uniqueness of Nagarkar's decision to write on *bhakti* and 16th century Rajput governance in the face of Indian English authors' overwhelmingly late 20th century postcolonial preoccupations.

post-independence visual representations of her. Yet, as the language of the play shows, it was not an easy piece to write. In his Introduction, Sisir Kumar Ghose foregrounds the problems Roy clearly faced: "It is doubly difficult when we have no homogenous audience, and the language used, as here, has been but rarely used for such purposes. From this point of view, the songs included in the play deserve more than a passing mention" (15). Roy's songs then, throw up in relief, the problems that Nagarkar would have faced, as well as the logic to his eventual choices.

Here are extracts from two of Roy's songs for Mira, lyrics that will make an interesting comparison with those of Nagarkar, the next person to make an attempt with Mira's songs in English. Like Nagarkar, Roy's songs too are not translations, but actually new songs, though they include themes and motifs that would not be unfamiliar to any reader of the primary *bhakti* poets:

Sometimes I think I am His Magic  
 Flutelet's melody  
 Or a dart released from  
 His Name's Bow,  
 Aimed at Eternity.  
 Sometimes I feel I am a song  
 Sung by a devotee,  
 The victory a lover wins  
 By losing joyously.  
 But then I know I am a nought,  
 All all in the world with Him is fraught:  
 I know not who or what I am,  
 How can I tell you, friend?  
 'Tis a mystery I fail to plumb,  
 A veil I cannot rend. (111)

Another song goes:

My hand, a woman's is not strong  
 So how can I, Lord, hold for long,  
 You, in my arms, my King!  
 But I defy you to depart  
 For even a moment from the heart  
 Of thy helpless underling. (161)

Krishna, who often appears in Mira's dreams in Roy's play, is amused by this song, and comes back with a flirtatious riposte:

But when did Krishna ever deceive  
 The helpless hearts that would fain grieve  
 If He declined to sing?  
 But the underlings He came to hail  
 Would every time his Grace repel  
 And still call Him their King! (166-67)

The problems of using an archaic and - here, as so often in Indian writing of an earlier period - an extremely awkward English to create an Indian ethos, an idiom already well outmoded within the English writing establishment itself by the '50s, are apparent. But the more important issue for us is the unquestioning emotional surrender of Mira as human female to Krishna as divine male. Even the anglicized Roy does not seek to question the established paradigm of Krishna as seducer of multiple women, or of Mira as one swooning devotee among many. In keeping with the generally pseudo-Victorian tenor of the play, there is no sexual consummation portrayed, whether in fact or in dream. Nancy Martin-Kershaw gives us some interesting information in her chapter on Indira Devi, an upper class Bengali neo-Mira religious figure of the 1950s, on whose famous dream visions of Mira Roy's play seems to have been based, though there are no formal acknowledgements to this effect (261). Indira Devi, who knew no Hindi, "heard" Mira sing Hindi songs in her "visions". She later published them in eight books of songs, some

in Hindi and Bengali, and others in English translation. Roy had a close personal relationship with Indira Devi, and while – were we to take her claims at face value - it would appear that some of the linguistic confusions that must have been inherent in her transcription should logically have found their way into his work, here we see those confusions erased by his recourse to a version of the Judeo-Christian spiritual vocabulary, the only one he saw fit to deploy.

The historical-legendary Mira's songs, or at least most of those attributed to her that have survived, are a great deal more hard-hitting in their defiance of patriarchal norms. It is true that in many of them she speaks of herself as having taken leave of her senses, but not in any way that we would recognize as either purposeless or unconscious of her reality. To the contrary, as the feminist critic Kumkum Sangari writes:"...(O)rality may well be a domain where assertiveness accentuates personal risk. The acquiescence of the listener has to be sought and established....Choices are explained and dramatized, public opinion is taken into account. Mira repeatedly describes herself as mad, is acutely and defiantly conscious of how she is perceived" (1468). Sangari quotes from two of Mira's songs in this context, the first addressed to the Rana or ruler of Merta:

ranaji mujhe yeh badnaami laage meethi  
koi nindo koi vindo main to chalungi chaal anuthi (p 81)  
(O Rana, this scandal is sweet to me  
no disgrace touches me, I shall walk a different path  
(my own translation)

And again, revealing how well she is aware of the effect her actions have on both her families: "log kahai Mira bhai baavri, nyaat kahai kulnaasi re" (people say Mira has gone mad, her own people call her a destroyer of family).

The identity of the Rana or ruler addressed in many of Mira's songs has been debated for centuries. Was he her father-in-law, her own husband Bhojraj after his ascent to the throne, or her brother-in-law Vikramaditya after Bhojraj's death? The legends tell different versions; history is almost silent. The identity of the Rana becomes important to our analysis of Nagarkar's songs because if the real Mira's songs were addressed to anyone other than her husband, they may have been written and sung when she was a widow, Bhojraj having died young in battle. In which case, we might begin to think of Nagarkar's verses as possibly the outpourings of the same woman but in her younger days, in her sexual prime, possibly seriously repressed sexually, for whom bodily and romantic needs were still more important than social or spiritual abstractions. But this idea of an early Mira, as yet unfamiliar with public attention, might have been easier to accept if Nagarkar's Greeneyes had not already achieved the status of a saint by beginning of the latter half of his novel: "Choti Sant Mai", the Mewar populace calls her, the Little Saint. The novel's Mira is admittedly young in years, perhaps in her twenties by the time the novel ends, but seems already to have come to her intellectual and spiritual maturity, in fact, commands considerable authority in Mewar by the time we last hear of her. Though we are given no formal indication of her middle or old age because she gradually disappears from center stage, Nagarkar allows us to believe that this is his saint fully formed, i.e. that she has formulated an ideology that will stay with her unchanged for the rest of her life, even if we know that many of her extant songs bear witness to her renunciation of the two hundred green outfits. The second half of the novel then focuses on the prince in the imminent battle between the Rajputs and their political rivals, foremost among them being the Turkish chieftain Babur, future founder of the

Mughal Empire, who makes forays into the north-western wings of Hindustan, then captures Delhi from the Lodi Sultan, and later goes on to defeat the Rajput confederacy, thus consolidating his hold on North India.

It is important also, for us to think about the question of the Rana's shadowy identity in relation to the appropriation of Mira's songs by other women and by people of the "lower" castes. Kishwar and Ruth Vanita observe:

...it is significant that the Rana addressed in Mira's songs is not explicitly identified...in terms of the familial relation...nor is he even named. He is referred to only by his title as a chieftain. His most important function in her songs is that of a figure of authority. His power extends over the family as well as the community and the larger society. The women described as hostile to her are identified in familial terms... but the hostile male figure is clearly more powerful and dangerous. His displeasure has more fearful consequences – he attempts to kill her and also persecutes the other devotees. The larger significance with which the Rana is invested by the lack of explicit identification leaves his figure open to more diverse interpretation. This in part explains how this figure lends itself to the traditional interpretation as her husband. (*Manushi* 78)

This is of particular significance when we examine the effect of the historical-legendary Mira's songs as protest against Rajput/patriarchal/feudal values in general. The figure of the Rana/ husband, present in some songs, absent but implied in others, and addressed in the way that Kishwar and Vanita highlight, allows others to participate quite easily in her protest, since they would not otherwise think of intervening in a quarrel between spouses, traditionally proscribed on the subcontinent, where a husband's authority over his wife was and continues to be seen as final. Complaining about a king, and not a husband – even had the Rana referred to been her husband - makes apparently private issues public in a way that nothing else can. The historical Mira appears, in her songs, to have learnt the lesson of politicizing the private several centuries before it became a feminist mainstay. Yet, while admitting that “the metaphysical core of Mira's *bhakti* is labile and

abstract enough to provide a medium for unarticulated human possibility”, Sangari maintains that “the solidity of patriarchal assumptions in metaphors and analogies...raises questions about the role figurative modes play in reflecting or forging a social consensus in oral traditions” (1469, 1465). She insists that in taking recourse to god as the apex of the patriarchal structure, Mira’s *bhakti* is “internally poised to lose the ground it gains” (1551). Nagarkar’s writing takes cognizance of these arguments, and, as we shall see, talks directly back to them.

Nagarkar's Mira *bhajans* make little or no mention of the Rana. The singer in most of his versions is more intent on winning and keeping Krishna's exclusive romantic attention than in either campaigning for gender- or caste-related social justice, or replying to her critics then and now. Indeed, almost throughout the novel her opponents appear helpless in the face of what must have seemed to them flagrant disobedience, willfulness, and neglect of duty. There is an attempt on her life by arson when the Kumar is away at war, but her detractors seem to be largely unsuccessful in suppressing the princess, who openly defies both familial and priestly authority. Her husband, while he acknowledges his frustration, sexual attraction, jealousy and anger, actually defends her when his stepmother attacks Mira in public at the official Janmasthan ceremony to celebrate Krishna’s birthday, even as in the midst of his humiliation, he thinks: "Where were all the peacocks? Why weren't the parabolas of their lonely cries drowning out the song of my wife?" (167) Such small social consciousness as Nagarkar allows Mira makes an appearance when Mewar is struck by a cholera epidemic. But even then it does not surface in the form of visits to the sick, or charity, or any other practically useful activity. Mira’s way of dealing with the sickness is to pray, sing, and dance in public, whirling,

ecstatic performances in which the commoners of the capital city of Chittor are free to join her, and which end with her swooning at the idol's feet.

Though these songs in the time of the epidemic are not about Mira herself, as the Kumar observes, even here the lyrics are not devoid of romantic or sexual content, the sensual merging seamlessly into the spiritual:

What is a flower, if it cannot bloom?  
 What is air if it cannot fill the lungs?  
 What is water if it cannot quench thirst?  
 What is the sun if it cannot give the body heat?  
 What is a body if it cannot give pleasure....  
 Save us from cholera, save us from the plague, save  
 us from harm.  
 What is a saviour if he will not save? (315)

When Mira too takes ill with cholera, her sickness is seen as a sign of her saintly unconcern for her own health, her sacrifice of herself on behalf of Mewar's people; but Nagarkar means for us to see that there is, in fact, no sacrifice made, that she finds fulfillment in her singing as in no other activity, that the epidemic becomes both an excuse for public recitals and a means of garnering public support for her defiance of gender norms, that her complaints to Krishna are just another aspect of her larger relationship with him, one in which she demands and he must comply. In the context of *The Cuckold's* preoccupation with the idea of Gandhi, the Kumar's observation on the sexualized spiritual lyrics leads to us the question of whether a *sant* or *mahatma* must, by definition, be either celibate or disinterested in sex. If Gandhi took the vow of *brahmacharya* or celibacy and urged others to do so too, his teachings carried a caveat: sex was acceptable for the purpose of procreation only; pleasure in sex is anathema to those who would lead a virtuous life (Kishwar 308, Patel 348). Leelavati, the Kumar's young friend and admirer points out to him, that the Little Saint is "too self-centred" to

give him an heir. “No living creature can be more self-centred than saints”, Leelavati writes. “They are self-sufficient. There is no life beyond themselves. When they need you, they use you. There is no malice in them, nor is there memory” (442, 563). Thus, if Nagarkar’s Mira believes, as she sings, that the body was made to give pleasure, and then denies the Kumar not just that pleasure but also a husband’s right to an heir, her actions are exactly the opposite of those Gandhi recommended. Further, the question “What is a savior if he will not save?” is one that can logically be posed in regard to a saint as well. What social purpose might a saint fulfill? Surely a *sant* or *mahatma* has to justify that status with relevant and practical good works, with ideas that can improve the lives of others in meaningful ways? We can also read in Nagarkar’s question an interrogation of the status of Gandhian ideology in independent India: a “saintly” philosophy revered in principle, and flouted in practice; the statues, the roads named after him, the cotton clothes worn in his honour, juxtaposed with the breaking of every rule he stood for. Yet, as we shall see, Nagarkar’s novel does not propose an unconditional return to a mode of thinking that may or may not be comfortably accommodated in the present day context; instead, it suggests ways in which what are regarded as high ideals and the great questions behind them may be renegotiated to become relevant to contemporary needs.

Gandhi and Mira had in common the rejection of many orthodox Brahminical Hindu ideas. While in Mira’s case many of these may have been (as *The Cuckold* often implies and as scholars like Parita Mukta point out) retrospectively attributed, Gandhi’s support of *dalits*’ “low” castes and his attack on untouchability and other discriminatory caste norms are historical realities. *Dalit* leaders of the time, particularly Babasaheb Ambedkar, took issue with Gandhi for his perceived support of the *varnashrama* version of casteism

and for not supporting their demand for separate electorates, and it is certainly true that Gandhi toned down his critique of caste practices after the South Africa days as he became aware of increasing resistance to it within the largely upper-caste Congress mainstream. Yet whatever the strategic political reasons for his quite complicated and often conflicted stand on caste, on a personal ideological level his abhorrence of the inequalities caste perpetrated, and particularly of the practice of untouchability in denouncing which he did not in fact back down, is well documented. Among significant pieces of evidence are the 1935 article "Caste Must Go" (cited by Hardiman 127), and the 1936 article "Untouchability" (cited and reproduced in full by Bidyut Chakrabart 157). One brief passage in the novel describes the growing animosity of the priests of Mewar towards Mira, Nagarkar appears to deal somewhat hurriedly with the power of protest against priestly authority always evident in *bhakti* lyrics. When the priests suggest the Sankat-Vighna Yagnya, an expensive ceremony which they claim will ward off the cholera epidemic, a "small voice" from the crowd announces: "The Little Saint is our Yagnya. She is the fire that will cleanse this land...and all of you." (317). But it is the 16th century and the Little Saint's surety is not enough yet; the priests still have the last word, *bhakti* alone will not yet suffice:

The people of Chittor attended the Little Saint's overwrought prayer sessions. She sang and danced and they could join in and she didn't ask for a copper tanka and they could follow her words and the songs were simple and striking and sharp with barbs and insights and the turn of phrase was familiar yet surprising in its juxtapositions and sincerity and emotion and the tunes she set them to were on everybody's lips. But they also went to the Yagnya. They couldn't understand a word of the Sanskrit and even if they could, most of the priests concatenated three or four lines...so it came out garbled and rushed... but the good people of Chittor attended the Yagnya off and on, dropping some money and felt good. It was a great spectacle, this ritual, and besides, it was best to play safe. (319)

Nagarkar seems to treat this important confrontation with an inappropriate, almost trivializing haste, given what the “barbs and insights” of *bhakti* singing came to mean to the socially marginalized. However, these barbs did not have quite the same widespread social resonance at the time that we know them to have later enjoyed. The Indian south had seen earlier women *bhakti* poets and singer-poets like Andal, Avaiyyar, Karaikalammaiyar, and Akka Mahadevi (Chakravarty, *Manushi* 18). But in a time of slow communication aggravated by multiply fragmented political principalities, whose borders presented obstacles to the most intrepid bards and pilgrims alike, for the common people of the western region of Rajputana, Mira was too unprecedented, too far ahead of her time to have become worthy of serious note yet. For most of her life she was a sensational conversational centrepiece for her commoner audience. While she became a religious figure, during her own day, from what we know of the legendary-historical Mira, she never became a political force in the feminist or social sense, but lived out her time with the reputation of a scandalous royal eccentric. This passage, then, is firmly in keeping with Nagarkar’s overall method. He presents Mira not read backwards from our perspective, but as she was seen in her own age. Her songs at this stage are merely exciting novelties in Chittor, lyrics that do not yet have the power to make people forsake the certainty of the patriarchal or brahminical folds; protest or serious rebellion is still at the level of the individual, not the community at large.

The choice of language used in the songs is also significant. Nagarkar's innovative use of modern English technical and administrative jargonese to describe an early modern Indian setting has been remarked upon by critic after critic. The consensus arrived at is that this deployment of 20th century terminology serves to bring the Kumar to life as a

man with modern sensibilities. Stuck well before his time in a backward-looking feudal-martial social apparatus that seeks to coerce appropriate behaviour from him as its future leader, he speaks to us with what can only be called a vernacular immediacy on subjects as varied as committee meetings, irrigation systems, battle manoeuvres and adultery. Janet Giltrow, commenting on the use of phrases like "competitive figures", "preliminary report" and "top priority", argues that such words "perform 20th century domains of administration, corporate offices, transnational economies, and technological transfer....(they) draw the Maharaj Kumar into, as Bakhtin says, their "orbits"...cycles of interest and attention typifying the organisational ethos which in modernity manages not only the state but all the branches and procedures of what Foucault calls governmentality (40)." The author uses much the same technique in composing songs for his singer-saint, with even more startling effects. The first of the songs that the Kumar hunts out and reads, for example, uses a rather fantastic range of modern medical terms to enact a fairly universal commonplace of love poetry, love as a sickness that only the beloved can cure:

Get him on the double  
 Tell him its an emergency  
 The doctors have given up.  
 I can't bear it  
 I think I'm going to die  
 It's a slipped disc  
 A shooting pain up the spine  
 A fire in the brain  
 A comet bursting in the kidneys.  
 Is he here?

Call him, tell him to rush  
 Tell him, it's the end I've got galloping TB

The left lung's collapsed  
 The right one's dead  
 And the soul it's fled  
 Has he come?

Sound the alarm  
 Knock on the door of heaven  
 Get him out of bed  
 It's terminal  
 Cancer of the upper intestines.  
 It's spread into the oesophagus.  
 Spilt into the lower bowels,  
 The liver, the bone, the breast.  
 What? Hasn't he come yet?

Ask him to come fast  
 I'm about to breathe my last  
 Nothing serious really  
 Just a routine heart attack. (91)

Now while the slipped disc, the comet in the kidneys, the TB, cancer and heart attack are all familiar to today's readers, the initial effect of these opening verses is exactly the opposite of the effect of the Maharaj Kumar's verbal patterns. Surely this is not a serious love song, the reader asks, surely this is comedy? How different is this exaggerated inventorising of ailments from sitcom dialogue? Viewers of *Scrubs* would recognize the reaction immediately. Other phrases in the concluding lines reinforce this impression of ludic excess:

Tell him I died  
 With one eye open.  
 Lying on the pyre  
 Just to check  
 If he came

With a smirk  
 On his face.  
 And a tart on his arm.....  
 Giridhar Lover  
 Move over I've got another. (92)

The prince fears his wife's singing may be burlesqued. His fears seem misplaced; such a song cannot be so reduced for the simple reason that it appears to be, in and of itself, pure burlesque. It is significant that our first encounter with Mira's writing, set up under a cloud of suspicion and secrecy, is mediated by the prince's rapidly communicated autobiographical comments. Though this encounter naturally emphasizes the musical rather than the poetic aspect of the Mira persona, it alerts us early to other themes that will recur in the book: the searching for and locating of fragmentary texts, their being commented upon, or translated, and put to various uses, the layering of the reading and reading/"listening" gaze, our own reactions sometimes simultaneous, sometimes superimposed on those of the fictional reader/listener.

A telling comparison can be made between Nagarkar's song and the one best known to scholars as the Kartarpur song. Found in a 1604 manuscript, this song is widely acknowledged by most scholars today as the likeliest to have been written by Mira herself. Hawley provides us with the original and several translations. Here is Martin-Kershaw's modern translation:

The sharp arrow pierced me clear through,  
 Mother. When it hit, I didn't know it  
 Now I cannot bear the pain.  
 I've tried spells, incantations, drugs –  
 even so, the pain won't go.  
 Can't anyone bring relief? Such agony, Mother!  
 ...Mira's Mountain Bearer, the compassionate Lord,  
 has quenched her body's burning. (104)

Hawley's own translation highlights the indeterminacy of address in the poem, Mira alternating between speaking to Krishna and to the "mai" or mother repeatedly called out to in the poem. There is no "mai" in Nagarkar's poem; it is addressed to the world at large. But the crucial difference between the Kartarpur song and Nagarkar's variant is the over-the-top indignation, the angry-funny, exaggerated verbosity, the outright contemporariness of the latter work.

Almost echoing Ghose on Dilip Kumar Roy's writing in terms of the difficulties both authors face, but arguing to the contrary, Paranjape insists that Nagarkar's songs are "very unconvincing....an aggravated example of the Ramanujan problem of rendering in a modern idiom a sensibility which is essentially not just non-modern, but unavailable and unrecoverable to modernity" (20). He sees "a great gap, a gulf that cannot be bridged" between Mira's songs as heard today and Nagarkar's versions. Though he agrees that the songs are not intended to be translations, he insists that they do not sit comfortably with the figure of Mira as she is known today. He writes:

This is one area where I believe the novel has a major problem. In the Maharaj Kumar, Nagarkar comes up with a credible historical character; in him, history is illuminated by fiction. In Meera...we see a veiling of history in a character who bears little resemblance to the popular idea of Meera.... (n)or to modern methods of reconstructing the lives of female saints and mystics as exemplified, say, in *Manushi*. (20)

This judgement fits in with Paranjape's general thesis that Mira is the only unrealized character in the novel, a creation who remains weird and inscrutable to us because we see her through the baffled eyes of the Kumar (19). While Paranjape's overall analysis of the novel throws up very useful comparisons between Nagarkar and other writers working with similar issues of language and audience, what appears to have slipped between the cracks here is that Nagarkar's point is precisely to blur all the current images of Mira in

an effort to highlight her ultimate opaqueness, as indeed the opaqueness of all such larger-than-life figures. Yasmeen Lukmani feels that the songs constitute a supplementary component of Nagarkar's narrative technique. She writes: "...they provide occasion for the expression of passion, lyricism, irony, and become a means, not only of expressing the soul of the princess, but of adding another perspective to the story....Both the epigraphs and songs bring in new approaches to godhead, and the line between divinity and humanity becomes illusory" (126). In fact, as with the real Mira, it is *only in the songs* that we are able to read Mira's interiority *at all*. They do not merely, as Lukmani would have it, provide "another" viewpoint, they provide *the* other viewpoint, the one we most want to hear, Mira's, a perspective that she is unable to otherwise articulate in her dealings as princess and wife. Moreover, if Mira's songs were new and scandalous to listeners in her time, the only way Nagarkar could do justice to the idea of Mira was to give her lyrics something of the same shock value in their 20th century versions, to couch his songs in language that his readers could understand and identify with, yet load the lyrics with controversial content even in the current context.

Let us look at the beginning of another song:

Stop him, stop that arsonist  
 Pin him down, manacle him.  
 Put him in solitary. Give him the third degree.  
 He set fire to me, in broad daylight.  
 Made a raging torch of me.  
 People watched, he laughed.  
 'Try and put that one out, it's spontaneous combustion.  
 It's self-immolation but she'll never burn out.' (93)

Here, the thrusting in-your-faceness with which we are slowly becoming familiar is applied to jailhouse legal terms: arsonist, manacle, solitary, third degree. In fact however, though the Mira that Paranjape and most modern listeners of *bhajans* know could not

have conceived of such jarring language to describe her god, the aggrieved sentiments are not completely removed from the traditional Vaishnav *bhakti* rhetoric of *viraha*, in which Krishna is repeatedly arraigned for his infidelity both by and with the *gopis* of Vrindavan. Conventionally, Krishna represents the ideal male, to whom all women - and in fact, though primarily on an emotional and ideological rather than literally sexual level, many men - are attracted as a matter of course, and to whom the normal sexual protocols and restraints never apply, not only because he himself does not abide by them, but because they cannot rein in the love-crazed women who follow and offer themselves to him. It is important to remember here, though, that the majority of *bhakti* poets were men, who when they sang of Krishna, very often assumed the role of the desiring, languishing woman, the one-time lover hopeful of reunion with the always amorous god. Writing about the blurring between Krishna and Kama (the Hindu god of love) in many of Mira's songs, Hawley remarks not just on the longing and lament evident in the songs of male *bhakti* poets who projected themselves into female personae but also, significantly, on the humour. This humour, he points out, has its own misogynist slant: "Does a woman contemplating this romantic paradigm of faith experience the same sense of amusement as might be expected in a man? Does she get the same sort of buzz that a man does from the idea that Krishna serves as a magnet for numberless, often rather faceless women?" (173). Elsewhere, he notes that the contemporary Mughal culture, for instance, offered alternative models of desire for the divine, where the godhead was visualized as a beautiful woman or even as an elusive adolescent boy. In *bhakti*, instead, Hawley remarks, we find reason to question the supposed evenhandedness of a paradigm that allows women equal right of worship but in which the burden of the illness of love should

be so preponderantly shouldered by the woman, while male authors only too often luxuriate in her distress (167).

Something of this distaste comes through in the Kumar's musings on *bhakti* lyrics, though his jealous thoughts tend to focus on "the entire population of the country" carrying on "one continuous love affair" with the promiscuous, teasing, importuning, faithless Krishna:

How he loathed these songs. Didn't the bards of India have anything else to write about? There were thousands of songs about the divine eve-teaser and everyday someone or the other was adding to the genre. In plaintive, vexed,...angry voices the women complained about him....No more, no more...they said when they meant more, more, more, and please don't stop. If he turned his back on them, instead of rejoicing they went berserk with grief. They pined, they fretted, they had nervous breakdowns. Frankly, if they were painful when their modesty was compromised, they were unbearable when they were wailing with lovesickness.... Who...wrote these songs of soft pornography... keyholes through which...the entire male population lead a fantasy double life? The voice and the persona of the lyrics was that of women, but the majority of the writers were men. And yet, given half a chance, any housewife who could manage a rhyme would dash off a song about 'Look Ma, see how the Flautist is undoing my plait and pulling my pallu'....the Flautist was wish-fulfillment for both men and women. (414-5)

This, then, is the context in which Nagarkar writes his lyrics for Mira, and the rest of the song under discussion now makes fascinating reading:

So, resident incendiary, Shyam, Philanderer,  
 What's the score? Seventeen thousand ladies incinerated to date.  
 Died of puppy love, infatuation, yearning,  
 Flaming dervishes of desire and illicit passion.  
 Calling and cursing you, your infidelity stoking the fires further,  
 The simpering fools, I'll not say a requiem for them  
 Better dead than pining for a lecher  
 With a third-rate ditty on his lips  
 And the disrobing leer in his eye. (92-93)

Here is a voice that is evidently *not* luxuriating in womanly distress. Two things are happening simultaneously in these lines. First, the thematic genre expectations from the romantic *bhakti* lyric are being subverted even as they are met. The tradition of Krishna's

almost hypnotic attractiveness and his many and varied romantic/sexual escapades, always somehow sanctioned and glamorized within both high Hinduism and *bhakti* literature, is referenced, and the immediately brought into serious question with reality-check words like "philanderer", "illicit", "infidelity", "lecher", "third-rate" and "disrobing leer". Second, while some scholars have described Nagarkar's work as post-feminist on account of its sympathy with the male protagonist - and certainly, many otherwise sympathetic characters in the novel express their anger and hostility towards Mira's unwillingness to fit the role of wife and princess - the voice in this song sounds decidedly feminist. However, it is feminist in a way that is quite remote from feminist assessment of Mira's work. Sangari, Kishwar, and Vanita all emphasize the fact that Mira independently makes, and lives with, a choice between a god and a man, thereby defying the patriarchal regulation that required her to bear children for her marital family. But here we do not have a voice that decides in favour of an eternal godly lover as opposed to a mortal one, and then merely resigns itself to that god's popularity with women, finding release in the occasional petulance. This is a voice that takes on rather than suffers male promiscuity, even if that promiscuity is divine. More important, by the terms of this voice, divine promiscuity cannot, any longer, provide an example for mortal behaviour. "(R)esident incendiary.....seventeen thousand ladies incinerated to date" continues the quasi-legal idiom, holding Krishna squarely to blame for the demise of the women he loves and leaves. The sound of his flute, always a potent element in his seduction of Radha and the *gopis*, is no longer a magical tune but a "third-rate ditty", all the attendant connotations of bawdiness effectively bringing the amorous god down to the level of the roadside catcaller. Upon further reflection, of course, there is the third level, on which we

hear not just the song, but Mira singing it, a level on which we can wonder at the un-wisdom of throwing up sex, respectability and political discretion for an imaginary relationship with such a god.

As the song continues, though, we hear Mira's voice threatening vengeance:

But there's news for you, my god,  
 I'm closing down spectator sports.  
 About time too.  
 I'm going to turn the heat on you, my friend.  
 A nice change of pace, don't you think,  
 Your turn to roil now.  
 Light the spit please,  
 Let's have a nice slow fire.  
 Turn and turn and turn  
 The Blue One a soft golden brown,  
 Nice and juicy like a sheish kabab.  
 This time round I'm going to rip that heart of yours.  
 A little more than a heartburn I would say.  
 A heart attack really.  
 Fatal. Call it love. (93-94)

In this final stanza, the discourse of law ("closing down spectator sports:", "turn the heat up") combines with that of medicine, ("heartburn", "heart attack", "fatal") seen in an earlier song, and is joined by a third metaphor from the culinary world. But these categories - helpful though they might in our efforts at taming the song, as it were, in analysis - create between them an outrageous wildness in the actual lyrics that refuses any kind of categorization. The resultant image of the god turning on a spit and having his heart ripped out, is without precedent in any Indian literature and shifts the balance of the song from Krishna as partaker of delicacies to Krishna as the victim of an equally voracious and much more violent, almost cannibal, hunger.<sup>65</sup> Scoffing at his flute as a

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<sup>65</sup> The only other song that truly compares is '*Ebar Kali Tomay Khabo*' ('*Now, Kali, I will Eat You*') attributed to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Bengali *bhakt* of Shakti, Ramprasad Sen, but there the words communicate intimacy more than resentment.

cheap trick, Mira seizes the right to create her own music, music that does not hesitate to announce its difference from the seductive and the untruthful.

Giltrow argues that Nagarkar's language in the novel consciously creates differing levels of comprehension between Indian readers and such Western readers as may have chosen to read a book so Indian in its themes. She writes:

Experiencing separation from other sections of *Cuckold's* audience, Western readers might nevertheless adjust to the(se) terms, inferring the relevance of *tawaiifs*, *bhajan*, *mushaira*. But they will never get close to the precise calculation of trespass....sometimes they are hospitably addressed in modern terms, sometimes they find themselves in less hospitable circumstances but they can accommodate them; other times they must step to a periphery and only listen in.... (47)

In the song being discussed here however, Nagarkar means for every reader to know exactly the calculation of his - and his saint's - trespass; almost every Westerner knows what a kebab is. A comparison with Roy is telling. In Roy's play, talking to Mira of Radha, the most special of his many women, Krishna says:

...to be fair to you - she did, often enough, rail at me even more indignantly than you do. (He smiles.) One day I shall never forget - when she prophesied, with tears in her eyes, in a vindictive little song - (He hums softly)

Can man ever feel a woman's heart  
To whom love's all in all?  
But wait till you're reborn as Radha  
And I as Nandalal  
For then I'll play the cruel flute  
And you come running to me  
But I shall laugh, unseen - ah then  
You'll know love's agony. (61)

At his most daring, then, Roy allows for the possibility of revenge, but only from Radha, and only through a potential reversal of roles in a later life as a man. Nagarkar's Mira will not wait so long and her revenge is rather more violent.

Discussion of Indian English writing almost automatically makes reference to the contentious issue of writerly self-consciousness in the face of an international, and more particularly, a Western readership. The accusation flung at Indian English writers with somewhat monotonous frequency is that their work does not represent the reality of the Indian masses and is aimed at a small minority of elite English-speaking Indians and - here are the really big bucks - a huge international audience willing to pay for selective details about an exoticized East, and eager to show its progressiveness to the ex-colonies in the form of prestigious, politically correct literary awards. We therefore need to re-examine with particular interest the politics of Nagarkar's choice of English for *The Cuckold*. Unlike most other Indian authors in English, he is also a well known Marathi play-writer and novelist. Both *bhakti* and Krishna are themes he had previously dealt with in controversial plays like *Kabiracha Kay Karaycha* and *Bedtime Story*, written in Marathi and English respectively. The latter play was banned from the theaters for 17 years and even when it was staged, continued to raise hackles, with the RSS (the extreme right wing Hindu Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) cadres picketing performances and threatening violence. The first of its kind, it features a Nazi war criminal retelling four stories from the Mahabharata while armed security personnel force a restive "audience" to stay seated. Insisting that audience members understand their collective and individual responsibility for violence and wrongdoing, the play reminds them that "whatever happens, wherever in the world, someone has to pay". Doordarshan, the national television network, had successively aired questionable versions of both the Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, on Sunday morning prime time, causing a furore among liberal/secular cultural critics, the loudest voices being heard from the English

press. There was every reason for the RSS and the Shiv Sena to be threatened by Nagarkar's play because, not only does it emphasize both the overt and covertly coercive nature of the way in which the epics continue to be transmitted, it also implicitly but vehemently critiques the ongoing pogroms targeting religious minorities.

Writing in English then, meant that *The Cuckold* would reach all sections of the English-speaking intelligentsia almost immediately, without the immediate hindrance of RSS/Shiv Sena censorship in Maharashtra, where a Marathi book or play could be hobbled before it reached a wider public both in India and abroad. As Giltrow points out, the book makes itself strangely inaccessible to all but the most knowledgeable international reader. By using many complex Indian terms in their original untranslated forms, Nagarkar ensures that the average international reader is defamiliarized and has to depend completely on the author's version of events for any contextual understanding. In a text studded with strange words and ideas however, with language that repeatedly highlights its own otherness, the songs stand out almost in bold face as those parts of the book that are the most easily understood by an international readership and that most do not fit with any of the general ideas about love, Krishna worship or Indian womanhood. The reader, whether Indian or international, is unmistakably alerted to the fact that something new is happening here and that there is a need to be especially attentive to the songs in which the princess finds voice.

It is significant that even the Indian reader is unable to begin identifying the princess as Mira until as late as page 41. Amazingly enough, she is not referred to by name anywhere in the text, the Kumar speaking of her as his wife, the princess, Greeneyes, and of course, much later, the Little Saint. Even on and from page 41, in the chapter

describing the prince's wedding, the reader who knows Indian history has to make her own quick and surprised deductions. The name Greeneyes makes Mira ordinary, a woman whose most striking characteristic is, above all, bodily. It is a name that makes her the prince's wife in the intimate sense, sexualizing her in a way that is incongruent with the popular image of her as a woman who rose above the physical.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, one of the most noticeable things about Nagarkar's songs, and indeed the book itself, is their remarkable bodiliness. We are given indication of this early on when the Maharaj Kumar tries to rape his wife on their wedding night but disengages from the encounter shaken and with his member torn and bleeding. The reader is left uncertain as to whether penetration has in fact occurred. But here we are, in the middle of a song that understands penetration very well, the song the prince first hears his wife singing in his chambers:

Stand on your head Flautist, it's a topsy-turvy night.  
 My arms are a black snake. Come, I'll wrap them around you.  
 I'll slither and slide inside and over you, twist and cling to your limbs.  
 I'll be your masseuse, the black rain my healing unguent. (129)

This is not an ethereal, disembodied love for an invisible or abstract god. Here is a woman who is well aware of the power of sex and very capable of using it. The night she describes is topsy-turvy and not merely because the elements make it so. The singer

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<sup>66</sup> Hawley, Kishwar and Vanita all comment on the images of Mira in the popular Amar Chitra Katha comic book series which brings characters from both Indian history and legend – often without distinguishing between the two, which poses serious problems - into the lives of upper middle class English-educated Indian children. In this series, when Mira actually "meets" Krishna - in a dream/fantasy sequence familiar to all viewers of Bollywood films -, her immediate reaction is to "swoon" helplessly at his touch. That is the sum and substance of her sex education. In real life, the story describes her as a "dutiful wife" and sex, of course, is never mentioned. This may or may not be out of place in a series meant for children, but in fact, this is one of the versions widespread among Indian adults who know the story too. Mira's sexual rebelliousness is also regularly played down on celluloid. Even Gulzar's film 'Meera' (1979), a relatively recent version made by an otherwise sensitive and progressive director, while it depicts a prince occasionally dazzled and emasculated by his wife's spiritual force, provides hardly any details on how the couple negotiates its sex life. The prince is shown tying a necklace around Mira's neck on their wedding night, but otherwise the audience is allowed to decide for itself on the idea of her "fidelity" to her chosen god.

asserts the right to the aggressor's position, *she is over him*, and, even more significantly, to the penetrator's position, *she is slithering inside him*. The song continues:

Body on body, breast on breast, tongue coiled with tongue.  
 We'll tie a knot that can never be untied.  
 We'll intertwine into a double helix.  
 Weave vein, artery and capillary into an inseparable plait.  
 Everything has a place and purpose, you told us.  
 A viper must be true to his creed.  
 The fang needs sharpening, the lethal venom a victim,  
 Come my beloved, lie with me today and always,  
 No telling if poison and ambrosia are the same  
 Unless you savour them both. (130)

Again, the scientific and medical terms, and this time, again, the male god as victim. Here, also, is that self-identification with the divine that the *bhakti* poets so often claimed, but with a new twist, not a male poet pretending to be a woman the better to enjoy a male (god)'s lust, but a woman poet pretending to be a male, *pretending in fact, to be the male god*, the better to enjoy her pleasure. Nagarkar's songs would seem to be responding to Sangari's anxieties; the patriarchal structure can certainly be discerned in his lyrics, but always turned on its head, and always under inquisition. Because this is the first song of his wife's that the prince actually hears her sing, because it is sung in the privacy of their shared quarters, because he happens upon her singing it as he comes home in the evening, because he is stunned at her audacity, and most of all, because *the reader knows who it is before the prince does*, the reader senses the prince's inner feelings even before they have been made apparent in writing. The contrast between the passionate congress of the lyrics and the prince's failed attempts to possess a woman who defies human possession is far too painful to be missed, and Nagarkar, well aware that

the reader has made this comparison, now needs only to hint at the prince's desolation: "It's a black snake, it is, this song of night and longing....Would one be as alone but for the people one loves?" (130).

If Mira's songs are often about the reversal of conventional gender roles, other characters and situations in the book also point towards Nagarkar's interest in the Gandhian ideal of androgyny. As Martin-Kershaw points out in highlighting Mira's attraction for Gandhi, Gandhi tried to "reclaim androgyny" for India and the British, believing that the full or ideal human being had to be possessed of several critical "female" qualities, instead of merely an "overdeveloped masculinity" (243). She cites Nandy's theory that Gandhi posited two different models for human virtue at different times. In the first, male and female were equal, and their characteristics needed to be equally balanced. In the second, which helped him to delineate his concept of non-violence, *shakti*, the feminine principle, was held to be superior to the traditional hyper-masculine *kshatriya* or warrior ideal (Nandy, *Intimate Enemy* 7, 51-53). Nandy writes elsewhere:

(T)he greater Sanskritic culture tended to give less importance to woman and to value her less in comparison to the little cultures of India...(T)he colonial culture too derived its psychological strength from the identification of rulership with male dominance and subjecthood with feminine submissiveness....Gandhi's innovations in this area tended to simultaneously subvert Brahminic and Kshatriya orthodoxy and the British colonial system" ('Final Encounter', 65-66).

If, as Sangari argues, the historical/legendary Mira attempted to defy high-caste Kshatriya patriarchy in the form of Rajput martial and gender ideals, her fictional counterpart appears to collaborate with the martial aspects, but is uncompromisingly original in regard to gender norms.

The overt androgynous figure in the novel is the senior royal eunuch Bruhannada,

named after a mythical androgynous figure in the Mahabharata. As in some other cultures, eunuchs were used as guards in Indian harems to ensure the chastity of the queens. Bruhannada turns out to be a fully functional male, a fact that he discovers relatively late in life. This becomes public knowledge when he impregnates one of the harem maids, also the mistress of the Kumar's stepbrother Vikramaditya. Bruhannada is formally tried for the perceived slur to the honour of the inhabitants of the harem and, apparently at Vikramaditya's behest, is poisoned during the proceedings. But not before he has communicated some of the sadness of his situation. During the trial he says: "Every eunuch has just one regret and just one dream: that he has no gender, and wishes that he had. If I was even occasionally a man, I was not about to deliberately destroy my good fortune" (535). And it is in Bruhannada that the Kumar finds many valuable characteristics which he comes to appreciate and which he would have described as belonging to the ideal individual: intelligence, courage, a capacity for tenderness, and a continuing and fierce loyalty to benefactors that prevents Bruhannada from betraying or injuring them even when he has the opportunity to do so. Nagarkar makes an oblique gesture to Gandhi in this section with the discourse on Bhishma that Bruhannada presents during the court's Pushkar outing. Bhishma, a revered Mahabharata character always referred to as Pitamaha (great or grandfather), took a famous vow of lifelong celibacy. He was also granted the divine boon of *iccha mrityu*, i.e. death only at a time and in a way chosen by him. We may remember that Gandhi not only encouraged celibacy in his followers, but took the vow of celibacy himself soon after his children were born at around the time that he entered Indian politics. Further, Nandy argues that Gandhi, disillusioned by post-Partition communal violence, both foresaw the way he would die

and his own last words, and was instrumental in his own martyrdom by repeatedly appearing in public in spite of threats from Hindu hardliners and ignoring the security lapses evident from the two failed attempts on his life in the weeks before Nathuram Godse finally shot him ('Final Encounter', 83-84). This association of Gandhi, the 'Father of the Nation', with Bhishma 'Pitamaha' (though played in the popular televised Mahabharata by a personable young man who ages with improbable glamour) is corroborated by Shashi Tharoor, in whose allegorical *The Great Indian Novel*, Gandhi is represented by a querulous Bhishma who has outlived his usefulness, a leader who receives lip service but is ignored for all practical purposes. It is in responding to the Gandhian ideal of personhood that Mira's songs, can be read as apiece with a certain valorization of androgyny as the most evolved gender position, even if Nagarkar's version of this is very different from Gandhi's.

The text gives us the lyrics of nine songs in all, of which five are the new ones written for Mira. Of these five, the prince reads two in secret, and hears her singing two of the others, while the last of them is sung by a chorus of common people. Not just Mira, but several characters at the court are accomplished singers. This includes the prince himself, whose singing voice we hear quite late in the novel, significantly, after Bruhannada's death. The prince sings what are possibly the most oft-quoted lines from the Gita, lines that encapsulate much of the Hindu attitude to birth and death:

The soul is never born; it does not die;  
 Never having come to be, it will never cease to be  
 Unborn, immortal, perennial the pristine soul  
 Survives even after the body is slain....  
 Ever-present, immovable, eternal, ...  
 If both birth and death are inevitable,  
 Wherefore wilt thou moan? (546-7)

These lines issue forth somewhere between song and chant, as is the case with verses from the Gita and other Hindu religious texts. The intonations of chant lend, as always, an extra solemnity to the occasion, one that highlights the difference between Mira's almost crazed performances and the prince's more thoughtful, though also spontaneous singing. Further, the lines also bestow a special significance on the death of Bruhannada and on his role in the Rajput body-politic.

The songs in *The Cuckold* also raise important questions about the nature of authorship and the authenticity of what constitutes the archive. Much Indian literature from the Vedas downwards has been orally transmitted; thanks to centuries of interpolation there is a sense in which the oldest commonly recognized texts, the Vedas, Puranas, and epics may be said to be of collective intergenerational authorship. Broadly, as Hawley points out, this continued to be true of a lot of Indian writing even up to the early modern day, particularly religious writing. Such writing may not have been orally transmitted, yet gives the appearance of belonging to authors only in the sense that they are working on something inherited that needs to be passed on in its turn. However, in the *pad*, the most typical song form for the majority of *bhakti* poets including Mira, the individual author's contribution and persona are far more prominent.<sup>67</sup> Hawley finds himself intrigued by the requirement of an oral signature in the last few lines: "Although many of these signatures express authorship in the familiar sense, others touch more on a meaning of 'author' that has lost its currency in modern English. They say less about the authorship side of 'author' than about the author's authority...." (22-3). Again, he writes:

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<sup>67</sup> The *pad* is not the only sung form to require the poet's name. Among other major sub-continental musical-poetical genres, the *ghazal* too calls for the poet to announce his name in the *makta* or concluding couplet. Like the *pad*, its separated-at-birth Muslim spiritual twin the Sufi *ghazal* also makes claims for a whole new ethic, its writers authorizing behaviour that is often completely anathematical to the rules of conservative Islam.

"the authors of *bhakti* poems such as the pad are authors in the sense that they give a poem authority before its audience" (12). While Nagarkar's prince finds *pads* among Mira songs, the songs we get to read are not rhymed and do not carry her signature. In this too, then, the novel's songs depart from tradition. Could Nagarkar use the signature on his songs, though? What would the ethics of such an impersonation look like, even from a fictional perspective? Be that as it may, he is able to deploy the idea of Mira's authority without the formal signature. He can do so because each of his songs, apart from bearing the stamp of an extraordinarily bold personality, is also, like all Mira's songs, a call for a new way of thinking about human interaction both with the divine and the human. It is here that one could argue against Paranjape's opinion on the songs on quite another basis, because in the songs where gender roles are not called into question, Nagarkar is, in fact, often entirely faithful to the essence of the *bhakti* tradition. The ethics of his songs boil over and out of the rims of the verses, exceeding, and in a very real sense unrequiring of, the formal authority of the traditional signature. Albeit voiced within the overall framework of submission, they demand what in Mira's time was a new stature for the *bhakt* or devotee, one in which the god becomes a god not because he is powerful in himself, but because his devotees make him so by offering him their worship. As Mira lies in the grip of cholera, her followers sing her lines:

In death and in life, I'm yours, yours alone.

Take me. Do what you will with me.

As stone or stray dog, as roach or rose, as fish or fowl,

Whatever the shape of reincarnation,

I am yours, yours alone.

You are free to reject me: I will never deny you.

Beware, my beloved, of the pleasures of my body and soul.

You are mine, mine alone.

I'm your bride, your mistress, your slave.

Has it occurred to you, my Lord,

you can only take and I can only give?

You've had your day. Time to listen to me now.

A god is but a stone till a devotee comes along

and paints it vermillion.

In death and in life, I'm yours, yours alone.... (325)

That these lines are sung in chorus, and this time without the lead voice of their author, tells us much about the position that Mira-the-Saint has begun to enjoy. That these lines are also sung just outside the palace walls tells us even more about the complex conflation of divine and kingly power that has lain, from the very beginning, at the heart of *bhakti* protest. A king - we hear the unsung but defiant words - is also only a king when he deserves his kingship and is recognized as the leader of his people. In their defence of *bhakti* poetry, Rashmi Bhatnagar et al confront Ranajit Guha's critique of what he labels *dasatva ras* or the aesthetics of servitude that submission to a personal god implies. They argue against Guha's insistence that the servant-master relation in *bhakti*, in fact, kneaded the lower castes into ultimately submissive attitudes towards the ruling classes. The Bhatnagar essay's emphasis on collective authorship and a collective voice is almost graphically illustrated here. In staging this song as a performance that the worried prince can hear his subjects sing, Nagarkar brings together some of the

preoccupations of the novel: the protests - and possibly, the lyrical interpolations - of worshippers, the duties of a ruler, the woman who inspires the words.

The Kumar searches for and finds Mira's writing hidden among her objects of worship. Significantly, he does not read the lyrics: "There were quatrains and broken verses and entire poems....padas that she had started and scratched out. The lyrics were the only text that he didn't read. Poetry left him cold. His curiosity was intense but try as he might he couldn't overcome his resistance to verse. And anyway there was so much prose...." (79). Here, and at other points, the novel enters into the debate over the relative value of song words as opposed to the more intellectual attractions of "pure" or abstract music. In his hurried itemizing, the prince recognizes the verse forms without actually reading the verses. His approach to music marks him out as very different from Mira. In classical music, it is music in the abstract rather than the lyrical content that is of value to him. He frets at the need for words at all: "...my wife's preferred mode of expressing religious fervour is poetry. Her singing and dancing were but variations and extensions of her lyrics. (But) If the purest form of music, its very essence and distillate are the singing human voice why do we debase it with words?" (365). In one of the third person chapters the author writes of the prince:

If there was one major shortcoming in his appreciation of classical music, it was that he rarely paid attention to the words. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that he couldn't bring himself to read poetry. If it was folk song or a popular street melody, his ears pricked up and he wanted to know what it was all about. He was amazed at the bawdy vitality of some of the courting songs that the Bhils sang and the pungency of the satirical verse that went the rounds of the city....In classical music on the contrary, he tended to think of the words as a peg on which to hang the song,....banal in the extreme. (128-9)

But if the lyrics of classical music are banal, the Kumar still brings genuinely keen interest and a discerning understanding of that "ragadari music" to the court concerts he

attends. Sajani Bai, the court singer, is his favourite, and when she sings the Kumar is particularly appreciative of the slow, abstract, introductory sequences of the *alaap*:

The *alaap* is the part... I like best....an inward voyage, an odyssey into the unknown....a wordless meditation, a rumination on matters that human thought cannot encompass. ....I would enlarge the scope and emphasis of the *alaap*, and make it mandatory as the true test of the artist. For like all meditation, the *alaap* has the solitude and form of a prayer. It is a cathartic and purifying act. You are blessed, touched by the divine and made to partake of the sacred. (176-7)

Here we are also in the territory of that familiar paradox found in Forster's aversion to music that reminds him of something else, and Seth's preoccupation with the fugue: music shorn of everything except its purely musical content and unrelated to the world outside it is the way to truly understanding and thus transcending the complexity of that world. If *bhakti* music allows one to "partake of the sacred" through the worshipful word, the raga *alaap* makes that identification possible precisely by its avoidance of words. Further, if the actual words used in a raga are "banal" it is because the raga, in truth, does not require them except as a positioning "peg" for those ignorant or inexperienced enough to need one. Placing himself squarely in what we have seen is a tradition common to more than one culture, that of the abstract and cerebral nature of the most elevated music, the Kumar insists: "To speak of music is to speak of intangibles. To attempt to catch its essence in words is foolhardy and doomed. The images music conjures in my mind...are not of a coherent extended metaphor. They are dissonant and diverse but coalesce with a natural dynamic that has its own internal logic" (177). Casting music as his escape from life's big questions and challenges, he muses: "...music. Now that is a reality without reason, rationale or explanation. Who pulls the strings, why are we moved, why are we transported to a different world? Who knows? What difference does it make?" (343) On an outing to the Ranakpur temples Mira, unusually for her, and

possibly to please her husband, sings an invocation to the Sun-god, regarded as the ancestor of all Rajputs; the prince, however, enjoys her performance because her singing is “not entirely bereft of words, but almost so” (365). As she sings, the sun rises splendidly, and the prince writes: “My wife’s song was pure joy. The temple tilted, and we were airborne. We flew at the speed of light, and were at the heart of the stillness that is the universe” (367). Verse and words are therefore placed in an explicitly delineated hierarchy in which the body, the “bawdy vitality” and “pungency” of folk songs, and the satire of the lower social strata, are contrasted with the “cathartic and purifying” intellectually “airborne” voyage of the wordless *alaap*.

If the Kumar glosses over his wife’s poetry, he cannot help but be curious, jealous, and fascinated by her singing. Destroying her accompanying instrument, the *ektara*, in a fit of jealousy one day, his rigorous musical ear listens for an error as she continues to sing, but cannot find one. “Would she go off-key without the *ektara*, sing a false note?” he wonders. But “her voice was steady as a surgeon’s hand” (147). Yet, aware that Mira’s singing in his palace quarters where she can be heard by all who serve them is a public act of defiance and an announcement of nonconformity, the Kumar accosts her with his stepmother’s taunts about his *tawaif* wife (a professional entertainer, often also a prostitute). Though Mira proves herself perfectly capable of dealing with the older woman’s machinations, sometimes even beating her at her own game, in this case she does not accept responsibility for what she does, and responds to the Kumar’s questions by disavowing her own acts of musical creation and performance: “I didn’t know I was going to sing. I sit down to pray and I lose consciousness of my surroundings. When it’s all over I discover that I have once again disobeyed your injunctions” (148). In these

lines, music continues to be connected with the transcendent, and Mira's insistence on the involuntary nature of the singing act renders any possible training behind it opaque. While we do know that Mira can sing an inspiring *alaap*, we have no sense of how she has come by this knowledge. The women of the court do sing lighter songs at festivals and celebrations, and Sugandha (the Kumar's second wife) plays the *veena*. But because singing in public was not considered respectable for women, it is uncertain whether either the historical Mira or Nagarkar's counterpart have had any formal vocal training in classical music, perhaps being exposed to some instruction in music appreciation instead. Protest that denies itself in this way, as not just involuntary but "only a *bhajan*" also distinguishes Nagarkar's Mira from the crusading Mira claimed by modern feminists. In any case, the deprecatory "only a *bhajan*" label hardly contains either the very real issues raised or indeed some of the angry, funny, and erotic lyrics that we have inspected earlier in this chapter.

Along with Mira's words, her voice too is bold and unorthodox. The Kumar, who, strangely enough for a man of conservative tastes, believes that grammar is merely "a sign of competence, not of excellence", knows immediately that Mira's songs are not about grammar (127). He comments on how easily such embarrassing excess of emotion could lend itself both to scandal by those who take it seriously and to burlesque by those who do not. Again, it appears to be not the lyrics, but primarily the voice that gives her songs that special charge for him:

The intensity of this new voice was unsettling. She flung it as if she would encompass earth and heaven. It was a javelin whose flight path was unaffected by storms and hurricanes because its own element was the flash and turbulence of lightning. It was difficult to imagine how anyone could sustain such raw power.... that voice...what it did was to expose the innermost being of the singer, no half measures, no private spaces, no room for equivocation. It bared all in

public....dangerous because it did not respect your mores and your hypocrisies, and had no room for compromises. (128)

The Kumar's suspicion of the sung word is intimately related to his notion of truth and the truthful telling of history. He is critical of the panegyrics of the bards and *charans*, whose metrical glorification of Rajput valour is accepted as historical truth in Rajput society. Alongside his many administrative improvements, in moving which he proves himself a progressive future ruler, and his various more or less unsatisfying sexual encounters with the women his retainers procure, he takes on two literary projects: his own autobiography, and an introduction to the court military strategist Shafi Khan's treatise on "The Art and Science of Retreat". The first-person parts of the narrative are presented as extracts from the autobiography being written as the novel progresses. Both texts are preoccupied with ideas about practical politics and military strategies rather than the swashbuckling heroics favoured by the Rajputs, whose self-consciousness about their own legendary martial gallantry often leads them to take decisions which end in wholly unnecessary losses of men and materials. The prince writes: "Shafi...dealt with seventy possible scenarios of fleeing. What the book needed was a full-scale treatment of the philosophy of defeat and retreat....(that) effectively conditioned the populace and soldiery to think of long-term objectives. My first task, perhaps doomed from the start, was to remove the stigma from the word 'flight' and then from the act itself" (343). He offers his motives for embarking on the autobiography:

(It)...went a little further than the search for lost and new opportunities or even introspection. The past was with my countrymen every moment of their lives. History for them was that fabled second chance. They could rework the past and get it right this time round. It was an act of faith and invention where defeats turned to glory; courage, bravery and heroism were chosen above vision or long-term gains and enmity was more precious than alliance.... you did not have to tot up the

accounts and pay for the grandeur of your delusions or the vacuity of your mistakes. To them five hundred years ago was the same as yesterday, an episode outside the orbit of time. The past was never your responsibility. (344-5)

The prince's version aims to reverse what the bards of Rajput rulers had done down the centuries, to show "how they failed, what mistakes they made and how they picked up the pieces and started anew" (345).

In the latter half of the novel he is gradually made privy to a series of stolen pages from the young Babur's diary (later to become an autobiography, the *Babur Namah*), work then in process in the still nights of a north-western frontier camp. This experience offers the prince an insight both into the thoughts of his would-be opponent and into the nature of, and the relationship between, contemporary autobiography writing and history. As with early modern Hindu rulers, for the Mughals and other Muslim rulers in India before them, history writing was closely connected with and often inextricable from the careers of individual kings. Unlike the Rajputs though, in fact, unlike many of his own Mughal successors (including Akbar, the official account of whose reign, the *Akbar Namah*, was written by the royal historiographer Abul Fazl), and probably because as a homeless if ambitious leader he has few such resources at his command, Babur does not delegate the task of chronicling events. He does it himself and, to the Kumar's amazement, his writing has much less to do with the past or with self-glorification, and much more to do with the future, with the territories he hopes to seize, and his strategy for capturing them. Here are words that the Kumar can take at face value, words that are not necessarily suspect even if they often convey news or information he finds unwelcome. Earlier we have seen him piecing together the scraps of Mira's songs to try and understand the enigma she presents; now he waits for each dispatch of the stolen

extracts from Babur's camp eager to understand the writer, analyzing not just the threat Babur represents, but also his hopes and aspirations, and his approach to the telling of a king's story. The Babur sections also give Nagarkar an opportunity to comment on religious intolerance, in particular, on the continuous violence against minorities that surrounded the Babri Masjid issue. Remarking on Babur's language, which becomes more militantly Islamic as he approaches and conquers parts of Hindustan, and to his ritual breaking of idols, the Kumar wonders: "Nothing special about that. We've done the same with Buddhist sacred places as well as mosques....This is truly one of life's great mysteries. Why this obsessive need to occupy the very precincts of a defeated belief?" (489).<sup>68</sup>

Echoing Nagarkar's concerns about language and style, the prince worries about his own language and the different styles of his two projects, the formal wording of the introduction vis a vis the colloquial expressions of the autobiography. But he decides against touching up the story of his life:

...to censor it would be tantamount to a kind of doctoring. I would be just as guilty of a normative version of the past as the *charans* (bards) and their ilk. And not to write at all would mean that I, too, believed that truth was a good slogan, but not to be confronted in the corridors of real life; that it emasculated us instead of endowing us with a quality of rigour and introspection. (346)

Writing on Gandhi's Indianization of the art of autobiography, Bhikhu Parekh notes that it was Islam that brought to India the "Persian penchant for historical details", and attempts to explain the traditional Hindu idea about historical truth. He observes - perhaps controversially in the postcolonial context - that because "transience or change was equated with illusion, historical details were dismissed as mere gossip devoid of

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<sup>68</sup> This relates to the 1992 destruction of a mosque apparently built by Babur on the ruins of a Hindu temple he is supposed to have destroyed in Ayodhya, regarded as the birthplace of the mythical hero Rama.

value and significance. Historical truth was important only as an exemplification of universally valid moral truths. Historical understanding, therefore, never occupied an important place in Hindu epistemology” (Parekh 252). Substantiating his case, Parekh cites the philosopher and historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, who stresses that Hinduism has traditionally prioritized “spiritual freedom” over “ego-expression”. Coomaraswamy writes: “Anonymity is thus in accordance with the truth; and it is one of the proudest distinctions of the Hindu culture. The names of the authors of the epics are but shadows, and in later ages it was a constant practice of writers to suppress their own names and ascribe their work to a mythical or famous poet, thereby to gain a better attention for the truth that they would rather claim to have “heard” rather than “made” (quoted by Parekh, 253). Parekh then goes on to show an interesting connection between Gandhi’s autobiography and Mira’s *bhajans*, tracing the beginnings of quasi-autobiographical Indian writing to the song-poems of the *bhakti* tradition. He offers as examples the work of Basava, Akkama, Chaitanya, Mira, Kabir, Tulsidas, Tukaram, Akho and Narasinha Mehta, whose songs containing stories of their experiences as “illustration(s) of human life in general” were widely memorized, recited or sung, and became the “common currency of moral intercourse” (253-4). The Kumar’s narrative and his search for personal autobiographical truth as well as its broader historical counterpart then places him where the Islamic historical urge cathects the *bhakti* lyric’s insistence on both the primacy of lived experience as well as the need to share it. Parekh argues that Gandhi worked to carve out of the rudimentary and still primarily religious/spiritual Indian autobiographical concept what he called a more modern yet “morally innocent” style of autobiographical writing, formally shaped on the Western model but purged of what he

saw as the destructive egoism and self-assertion of the original. In the process, though, his telling of his own experiments with truth becomes intensely moralistic, the “story of how he evolved into a Mahatma....(W)ith serene detachment the Mahatma narrates the way in which Mohandas Gandhi had tried to live his life according to certain principles” (261-2).<sup>69</sup> In the Kumar’s story however, moral innocence is forsaken in favour of facticity: a corruscatingly truthful eye records all the prince’s own failings and those of the Little Saint.

The prince, significantly, is also a worshipper of Krishna; his devotion is not as obvious or as delirious as his wife’s, but is almost as faithful. Krishna and the Bhagavad Gita have been a practical support for him from early adulthood. He is stunned at her choice of Krishna for a lover: "Did she know what the Blue God meant to him? He had never told her....never singled Krishna out for any special...worship....Was she a clairvoyant...? Had she chosen Krishna deliberately knowing how vulnerable...how confused and hurt he would be?... He felt a shimmer of fear under his skin. Who was she? What was she up to?" (103). We do not know if the prince's private worship of Krishna is mentioned in the Rajput chronicles or even selected from the many hagiographical legends that surround

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<sup>69</sup> David Hardiman writes of Gandhi’s ideas on truth: “For Gandhi, academic history was...an exercise in bad faith - claiming objectivity in relation to the myths that it sought to construct. The great myths of the past, most notably the *Mahabharata*, were more honest in this, as they did not claim to be factual or scientific. Because facticity was such a dubious matter, Gandhi preferred to judge all narratives of the past not in terms of their historicity, but in terms of the spiritual truths to which they provided access. In this respect he believed the statist histories of Gibbon and Motley to be very inferior to the *Mahabharata*, a work of profound and lasting truth. He concluded: ‘Truth transcends history’ (Hardiman, 35). ” It is therefore entirely logical that Gandhi’s autobiographical ‘My Experiments with Truth’ should relate his experiences in a way that he himself saw to be timeless and moral rather than merely factually truthful, though this should not be taken to imply that he did not aim for factual truthfulness as well. Akeel Bilgrami observes: “(Gandhi) is quite happy to discard as illusory our tendency to think that apart from the moral virtues involving truth (such as that of telling the truth and living by and exemplifying our moral values) there is also...a value or virtue in getting things right about the world and discovering the general principles that explain its varied phenomena. This latter is not a moral virtue, it is a cognitive virtue, and for Gandhi cognitive virtues are a chimera ....There is a palpable mistake in collapsing the cognitive value of truth with the moral value of truth-telling” (Bilgrami, 263).

Mira. What is on record in several of the hagiographies is the fact that the ruling deity of the house of Mewar was Durga, the mother goddess, and that Mira first upset her in-laws by refusing to pay obeisance to this goddess. We begin to wonder why Nagarkar makes his prince a Krishna worshipper. Given that identification with the divine is so prominent an aspect of *bhakti* thought, the scenes in which the prince paints himself with indigo to enact Krishna the Flautist at night so he can finally have sex with his wife assume a new significance.<sup>70</sup> These scenes are entirely Nagarkar's imagination at work, as no version of the Mira story allows for such a possibility. Yet the idea is implicit in both her fantasizing about sex with Krishna, acts the prince surreptitiously watches, writing afterwards “I wanted in”, as well as his own theory about the Krishna legend being a collective sexual fantasy that reaches across genders. As if wanting to confuse him completely, as soon as he has forced himself to become used to the indigo Mira begins to make him dress in her own clothes when they dance Krishna’s *raas* at night. He writes of this:

His feet had begun to shrink, and worse, he no longer minded the bangles on his arms. He had the distinct feeling that he had grown small and delicate. If he had been horrified at the thought of masquerading as a transvestite, why was he not incensed that his step had become light and his torso lissome? Or were the reasons for this quite simple and banal? That at heart he was a woman or perhaps all human beings are really bisexual? What was the source of a person’s sex? What does it mean to be a woman? ....What is the most complete and sufficient idea that mankind has had? God. And yet if you assign sex to God, then he or she too becomes finite and incomplete. (495-496)

These are not unfamiliar ideas for many Hindus, since the concept and the image of *ardhanarishwar* (“god who is half woman”) already exists within mainstream culture though it is not an image as constantly in focus as more popular ones like Krishna and Shiva. In evoking the notion of human and divine bisexuality here though, Nagarkar

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<sup>70</sup> For the Indian reader though, this image is not unfamiliar; stage and screen actors playing the part of Krishna often daub themselves in blue paint for the role.

seems to want to remind readers that this idea can have real practical ramifications on the way in which men and women regard each other, on their acceptance or denial of assigned roles, on a contemporary and revitalized understanding of themselves as humans-in-God. While this certainly relates to and references Gandhi's tougher concept of desexualized androgyny and its political uses, Nagarkar presents an easier and kinder androgynous ideal, one paradoxically closer to the traditional Hindu concept, yet also updated for the present day, in which sexual and divine acts are not mutually exclusive, and sex plays a positive part in human interactions.

Several actions on the Kumar's part evidence the changes in his approach to music and to the people around him. He accepts, though unwillingly, a rough flute carved by Bhima, a Bhil tribal soldier in his ally Puraji Kika's army. If the flute automatically evokes Krishna the Flautist, with whom the Kumar's self-identification becomes more and more complex as the narrative progresses, his response to the tribal man is even more revealing. Bhima, named after an epic character best known for his bodily strength and appetites and his strong personal loyalties, unselfconsciously instructs the Kumar on how to play the flute: "It is a magic wand....Blow into it Prince. There's a void inside of it that you can turn into a note and then another and then another till it becomes a tune and a melody and then a raga that can move the very gods....A flute is a friendly accommodating instrument....One day the notes will come together and sing a song of enchantment. All you need is practice" (238-9). While the Prince is initially resentful of what he sees as the lowly Bhil's unnecessary familiarity, and regards the flute as a symbol of his rival and enemy Krishna, and thus as a "calamitous augury" in a time of war, he is unable to get rid of the gift; weeks later he still has it on his person: he "threw

the flute up in the air and twirled it around as if it were a baton. When he had had enough of this juggling he put it against his lips and blew into it. The notes were clear and well-formed but the tones were disharmonious....When he lay down... it was stuck under him like an extra backbone....He knew he was going to get rid of it for sure...but it had stuck to him like a pariah puppy” (240). The flute thus becomes a way in which he moves closer to the older idea of a playful Krishna that he has known as a young man but admits he has lost somewhere, and also towards a heightened understanding of the “low” caste Bhil whose musical advice he has, however unwillingly, internalized. The other music teacher - one he accepts more easily, referring to her at one point as his “guru” - is his second wife Sugandha, who turns out to be an accomplished *veena* player in the Carnatic or South Indian style (529, 557). Here, as in several of our texts, musical instruction and sex come together, since the Prince’s *veena* sessions with Sugandha begin at the same time as he finally consummates their marriage, a union of political convenience that he has not been enthusiastic about. The section ends with his thoughts on male sexuality: “Impotence is a strange thing. You live in perpetual fear....You learn that the body is no longer your creature, you are its plaything....No defeat on the battlefield....can eat at the heart of a man as (this) fear....it will happen again and I will begin to resent Sugandha for revealing my failure to me. Will I end up hating her? Who knows, for the time being happy days are here again” (529-30). The lessons he learns from the physically unattractive Sugandha, therefore, are not only musical: if she has surprised him by her musical talent, his desire for her, after a long period of being unable to perform with the most tempting women money can buy, takes him equally by surprise.

It would appear from all this that Nagarkar wishes to present an alternative mode of

*bhakti* in the prince. Earlier, we have already encountered the Kumar pondering at length over the Upanishadic chant of "So hum: I am that", in which the human soul claims identity with the divine when in meditation. He writes:

It is a truly staggering and daring thought, this interchangeability or, to be precise, the oneness that the individual living creature shares with the cosmos and the Almighty.... If my individual actions can affect and change the complexion of 'that', then I bear the responsibility for the state of the cosmos or universal consciousness.... Is that the outer limit of deluded solipsism and megalomania or is it the highest and noblest concept of dharma and our roles in life? (342)

In the feudal Rajput world, as in many such traditions, the nobility claimed divine origin as *sooryavanshis* or descendants of the Sun. The idea that it was a king's *dharma* or duty to serve his people as god's representative on earth is as old as the concepts of kingship and divine right. What the prince brings to this ideal of kingly responsibility through his understanding of *bhakti* is indeed as "staggering and daring" as he thinks it is, because he makes it not just a royal responsibility, but a human one, to be of service, an ethos in which he shares both his humanness and his consequent responsibilities with all human beings regardless of birth. This too evokes Gandhi, whose famous fasts unto death were based on his belief that his own actions as an individual could influence the course of history. To be sure, this does not automatically make the prince less of an autocrat, whether in his personal or his public life. His Rajput blood runs too deep for any immediate drastic changes in his lifestyle; but we begin to see how the demotic notion of So'hum, reflected again and again in his wife's songs, gradually transforms his approach to what he has previously seen as her unpardonably delinquent behaviour. Before he goes to his final battle he sees her sitting before her statue of Krishna in her room, but worshipping herself with a coconut and flowers:

‘Worship me,’ she told the Flautist. ‘There’s as much of the divine in me as in you.’ There. She had done it. Said the unsayable. The Maharaj Kumar was appalled by the gall and audacity of it. And yet he had to admit that it was the most logical and natural thing for her to say. Hadn’t he recited and believed in the mantra ‘So’hum’ all his grown-up years? ‘I am that’, that which pervades, inspires and encompasses the universe. And yet they had been nothing but empty shells of words. The Little Saint’s faith had made the final leap. She could change roles with the Flautist. She was the substance and the power and the force that was God. (568)

The figure of Sajani Bai, the leading court singer, is also important to our understanding of the Kumar’s developing ideas on music, truth, and the telling of history. Sajani Bai is a tawaif or courtesan from Awadh, not a bard or teller of stories. The prince, unable to take his pleasure from the bodies of the professional women his retainers procure for him, identifies Sajani Bai’s voice as the power that can potentially cure him of the sadness of his relationship with his Mira and the stresses of his more official responsibilities. He writes of the recital at a court soiree: "There's only one test for Sajani Bai today. Not so much a test for her as the hope of a lifeline for me. Will she cast a spell on me and draw me down into the wells of oblivion? Will she release me from the torment of this afternoon? Will she heal me? Will I be made whole again?" (177). The experimental and improvisatory character of raga music, especially in the solitude of the *alaap*, makes it a particularly appropriate emblem of the Kumar's sense of alienation within his marriage, his isolation at court, his sense of the importance of Shafi’s work, his fretting over what constitutes responsible princely behaviour, his preoccupation with truthful documentation, his lonely memoir writing. He describes the *alaap* as a search for existential truths: "You are alone, truly alone in the cosmos, no pakhawaj and no sarangi, just your voice feeling the way the way.... Anchored in the schema enunciated at the very start, you are free to explore the full range of the human condition. It is the quality of the probing and the free-wheeling that exposes you and decides your worth as an artiste”

(176).<sup>71</sup> Talking to Sajani Bai about her stress on not “consign(ing)” even a painful song or one which brings back troublesome memories “to amnesia”, the Rana, the prince’s father, asks: “Why is it so important...to remember...?” and the singer responds: “Because otherwise our lives would be lies and we may never tell our children to speak the truth again” (473-4). The Prince thinks his father is getting “a little carried away” when the old man pronounces Sajani Bai “the remembrancer of Chittor...Then the truth will never be in jeopardy...in Mewar” (474). Yet, going forward a little in the novel’s time, when the Kumar writes his last journal entries before his final mysterious disappearance, we see that it is Sajani Bai who is eventually entrusted with his words, with his last papers, and therefore with the responsibility of preserving and making his autobiography public. The woman raga singer thus, rather than the male bard, becomes the repository of his life’s story because the raga singer has sought and found her own truth in the mystery of music; while those mysteries may themselves be approached only in wordless forms, she, rather than the bard, can tell his life in truthful words, allow it to be read warts and all.

Nagarkar admits to a life-long fascination with the contradictory aspects of Krishna, and the novel, in its turn, reflects the two sides to Krishna that the novelist would have contemplated: Krishna as the young, playful, romantic-sensual, philandering cowherd-flautist, in other words, Mira’s Krishna, and Krishna as the mature warrior prince,

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<sup>71</sup> The *pakhawaj* is a percussion instrument and the *sarangi* is a string instrument; both were used as accompaniments of raga music. In the modern day it has been more common to hear the *tabla* with *khayaals*, the *pakhawaj* usually accompanying the more somber and introspective *dhrupad* genre. The Prince’s description makes Sajani Bai’s performance sound more like a *dhrupad* recital than a *khayaal* in this and other respects, not least the sense in which the singing is represented as a profound inner search, as having a metaphysical aspect; the text does not specify which genre. From all accounts the *dhrupad* dates back to pre-Muslim times but the *sarangi* is of Persian origin; the traditional accompaniment for the *dhrupad* would have been the *veena*. In the context of our discussion of lyrics as opposed to abstract sounds though, the *dhrupad* would certainly have found favour with the Kumar, since many renditions consist largely of meaningless syllables believed to have a mystic resonance beyond human understanding.

capable of deep introspection, spirituality and renunciation on the one hand, and decisive military-administrative action on the other, the Kumar's Krishna. The warrior prince half, though, as Ashish Nandy shows us, is of quite recent origin. Nandy, analyzing the work of the nineteenth century nationalist Bengali novelist Bankimchandra Chatterjee, argues that Chatterjee and other early anti-colonial thinkers were searching for an image of Hinduism that could respond forcefully to the British stereotype of the majority of Hindus as an effeminate and cowardly race, deserving of both guidance and servitude. Krishna as he spoke in the Gita provided the early nationalists with just what they needed. Chatterjee, according to Nandy, worked on developing

a historical and historically conscious Krsna - self-consistent, self-conscious and moral according to modern norms.... (He) argue(d) away all references to Krsna's character traits unacceptable to the new norms relating to sexuality, politics and social relationships. His Krsna was not the soft, childlike, self-contradictory, sometimes immoral being - a god who could blend with the everyday life of his humble devotees and was only occasionally a successful, activist, productive, and chastising god operating in the company of the great....His Krsna was a respectable, righteous, didactic, 'hard' god protecting the glories of Hinduism as a proper religion and preserving it as an internally consistent moral and spiritual system.... a normal, non-pagan male god who would not humiliate his devotees in front of the progressive Westerners (*Intimate Enemy*, 23-24).

Given this background, it is not hard to see how another generation led by Gandhi refashioned Mira, Krishna's best-known devotee, to fit the requirements of the virtuous nationalist wife and daughter.

The point one is making here, though, is that Nagarkar sets out to interrogate both aspects of Krishna using precisely the means that have traditionally been used to worship him. The young lover god, as we have already seen, is held up to scorn in the songs, albeit scorn of a certain affectionate kind. What of the warrior prince, who in his aggressive avatar, and in the hands of Chatterjee's successors to hardline Hindu ideology, becomes representative of something even more dangerous in modern India: the

proliferating nuclear race with Pakistan, Hindu right wing violence against Muslims, Hindu fundamentalist overwriting of history texts, *shuddhikaran* or forced re-conversion and “cleansing” of new converts to Buddhism, Christianity and Islam? The Cuckold repeatedly points up the use of the Gita’s message as justification for political aggrandizement and necessary violence. As Aravamudan observes, if concepts from the Gita are currently being used in modern day Hinduspeak to justify and celebrate nuclear armament, this is only consistent with Robert Oppenheimer’s own citing of the Gita at Alamogordo and later.<sup>72</sup> Arnold, Weber, and Rudolph all point out that Gandhi’s ideas about *ahimsa* were crucially influenced by the Sermon on the Mount, read during his student days in England. Nandy argues that Gandhi borrowed his notion of non-violence from the Sermon’s stress on the meek inheriting the earth, but claimed that the idea was “the core concept of orthodox Hinduism”. Nandy sees this “distortion” as one in many attempts that Indian civilization has repeatedly had to make to ensure survival by “updat(ing) its theories of evil” (2004:23). Since *ahimsa* is also one of the primary tenets of Buddhism and Jainism, which while they differed from Hinduism in important aspects, certainly drew on the vocabulary of Hinduism, as well as influenced Hinduism in their own turn, Nandy’s insistence on the wholly Christian genesis of the idea of non-violence in Gandhi’s politics is open to argument.<sup>73</sup> Yet it cannot be denied that the Gita - “Song

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<sup>72</sup> In a 1965 television interview, Oppenheimer cited the lines *kalo asmi lokaksayakrit pravardho, lokan samartum iha pravattah*. His actual words were: “We knew the world would not be the same. A few people laughed, a few people cried, most people were silent. I remembered the line from the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita. Vishnu is trying to persuade the Prince that he should do his duty and to impress him takes on his multi-armed form and says, “Now, I am become Death, the Destroyer of Worlds.” I suppose we all thought that one way or another.”

<sup>73</sup> This is especially so since Gandhi would have been exposed to Jain beliefs in his native Gujarat and neighbouring Rajasthan, the two states where modern Jainism has primarily been practiced. Jain monks and sometimes also the more devout lay believers cover their mouths with cotton masks so as not to breathe in and thus kill even the bacteria in the air around them. Visual evidence of Jain *ahimsa* must certainly have been a part of Gandhi’s early life.

Celestial” though it may be - is hardly the ideal text for a proponent of non-violence.<sup>74</sup> While it explicates human *dharma* or duty in a way that was both attractive and useful to Gandhi, functionally the Gita is an exhortation to take up arms, even against one’s own family, if such violence is justified by the moral need of the hour. The Prince, who has himself given orders more than once for the killing of as many soldiers as it takes to win a battle, thinks: “Our greatest call to war is the Bhagavad Gita. And what does the Gita say? Fight the war or perform the duties of your vocation...but without thinking of the fruits and consequences of your actions” (208). Leelavati, depicted as the woman who would have best suited him as wife and queen, writes in a letter to him:

There are, you used to tell me, two Flautists. The warrior and the lover. We need to study the warrior....the Princess’s pursuit of her paramour has made the philanderer Blue God the paradigm for Mewar....We are a warrior race, not a tribe of adulterers and gay blades....It would be timely to remind the Mewari people that the Flautist’s greatest achievement is the *Bhagavad Gita*. Its avowed purpose was to tell a warrior called Arjun to stop shilly shallying, to take up arms and to fight the religious battle. (563)

Written at a time when, once more, the religious battle has become the “just war”, Nagarkar’s novel, because it also evokes Gandhi’s use of the Gita for non-violent purposes, underlines the dangerous double valences of one of the most popular and venerated Hindu religious texts and, by implication, all texts that encourage violence justified in the name of “moral” or religious truth.

*The Cuckold* also gives a gender-inverted twist to the conventional end of Mira’s and the prince’s lives. Almost all the versions of Mira’s story depict her death as miraculous, not really a death at all, but a literal merging into the body of Krishna. Martin-Kershaw cites Deviprasad, as late as 1898, claiming that bits of Mira’s clothes could still be seen

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<sup>74</sup> *The Song Celestial* is the title of Edwin Arnold’s 1885 translation; Gandhi read it with the Theosophists in England.

on the idol of Krishna as Ranchorji at the Dwarka temple. “Ranchor” literally means “one who gives up the battlefield” and the name relates to a strategic retreat that the Mahabharata describes Krishna as having made when Mathura, the capital of his kingdom, was besieged by Jarasandha.<sup>75</sup> The Kumar eventually chooses the image of the warrior god in retreat, the god who thinks in practical terms before he considers his own military reputation. Accepting in his final diary entries that there is no other woman for him but his wife, and fleeing possible assassins after his father’s murder by poison, the prince finds himself before the idol of Krishna at Baswa, where the historical Rana Sangha - Bhojraj’s father or grandfather according to different accounts - died after his defeat to Babur at the battle of Khanua. Wanting to express his fury towards his divine rival, the prince tries to behead the statue, which responds by speaking to him: “Do you not know that you and I are one? My flute and song are on your lips. We love the same woman....no power on earth can separate or divide us” (602). As his would-be assailants catch up with him, the prince becomes, in one moment, one with both Krishna and his own wife, who, while still alive, has already made the devotional leap into togetherness with her chosen god: “...the Flautist embraced the Maharaj Kumar....One minute the Maharaj Kumar was there, the next he had become invisible.... There was just the end of the Maharaj Kumar’s turban, the kesariya bana, showing outside the lower left edge of the Flautist’s chest” (602-03). In this final scene, the Kumar achieves the reality of ‘So’hum’, an idea he has taken to be both effrontery and impossibility.. Among the

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<sup>75</sup> This retreat, the epic says, was made to prevent a large-scale massacre of his own soldiers and - rather more lamely - because he had other urgent business. The idea of retreat sits uncomfortably with the present-day image of Krishna, whose exhorting voice we hear in the Gita counseling a vacillating Arjun to be constant even in a fratricidal war. This wrinkle is smoothed over by the prevalent contemporary notion of Krishna as strategist of genius, an idea that has lately made selections from the Gita required reading in several business schools. "The key point," says Ram Charan, a coach to CEOs such as Jeffrey R. Immelt of General Electric, "is to put purpose before self. This is absolutely applicable to corporate leadership today" (Extract from a 2006 *Business Week* article entitled “Karma Capitalism”).

Kumar's last thoughts are these: "He could have almost mistaken the Flautist for himself. He was playing the flute and the song he was seeking had closed his eyes. There is no truer meditation than music and no journey of discovery greater than that of looking within (602)". Significantly therefore, though Nagarkar offers us several briefer alternative endings to the Kumar's story, he implies that this more fleshed out one is Sajani Bai's version and is therefore due the most respect

Several associations with Mira and the songs she writes make this scene remarkably rich with possible interpretations. It appears that Nagarkar keeps the Kumar in Baswa for reasons of logistical accuracy since the historical Bhojraj died young in battle, having very likely fought at Khanua alongside Rana Sangha. But while the Baswa idol is not one of Krishna as Ranchorji, Ranchorji is unmistakably evoked in the manner of the prince's disappearance, almost identical to that of the legendary Mira into the Ranchorji idol at Dwarka, but charged with a powerful inversion of gender positions. The current temple of Ranchorji is in Dakor, apparently shifted there from Dwarka at some unspecified time in the past. The present Dwarka idol is a very similar one, both statues being made from the local black stone. And, crucially for us, Mira's most widely recognized songs are to be found in what has come to be known as the Dakor manuscript, writing apparently discovered in the main shrine of the Dakor temple. Hawley comments on the fact that the Dakor MS contains Mira's most socially acceptable songs, the songs that fit most easily with the sanitized version of her made popular post-independence and which are still most often heard on recorded collections or radio programmes. With other modern scholars, he finds reason in this, as well as in the relatively recent appearance of the MS at a time when Mira was becoming useful to the nationalist project, to question the

provenance of the Dakor songs. What Nagarkar does in his final scene, while it relates to these concerns, renders the question of authenticity almost irrelevant. Indeed, if the songs are at some later stage conclusively proved not to have been written by Mira, Nagarkar's critique of their appropriation will have been even more forcefully presented.

Nagarkar's songs then, it would appear, continue a long tradition of writing in the name of Mira-as-Saint by men and women in their efforts to fight their own battles, battles that may or may not have had Mira's endorsement. Nagarkar offers his story as just one more version of Mira, perhaps more plausible than others, but always qualified by the question that the Dakor manuscript asks: who wrote this, for whom, and why? He writes in his Afterword: "The last thing I wanted to do was to write a book of historical veracity. I was writing a novel, not history. I was willing to invent geography and climate, rework the pedigrees and origins of gods and goddesses, start revolts and epidemics, improvise anecdotes and economic conditions and fiddle with dates" (604). Nagarkar thus makes an important intervention in the debate on how gender norms, religious orthodoxies and "historical" "truths" can be questioned in a multi-religious society like India. Paranjape's reading of him as an insider-outsider is particularly relevant here. The Cuckold does not pose religion as the problem and throw it out of the window, as do many contemporary solutions. Instead Nagarkar's new songs and the context they are framed in show us a way in which reworked versions of Gandhian ideology and *bhakti* music could be used to interrogate a variety of dangerous assumptions in the new century.

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