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Aesthetics and music in Bhyrappa's novels.

Abstract I: Metaphysics and Aesthetics, Literature and Music form the foundation on which Bhyrappa's twenty-two novels are based. The present article is an analysis of three of his novels, *Tantu (The Thread)* (1993), *Sartha (The Caravan)* (1998) and *Mandra (Lower Octave)* (2002) - all three translated into English by the present writer. The relationship between Life and Art, Art and the Artist, Aesthetic Experience and Ethics, Art for Art's Sake, Art and Morality are the themes in these novels which are structured on the form of Hindustani Classical music. Personal relationships too are allegorically represented through the partnership of various arts.

Abstract II: Metafisica ed Estetica, Letteratura e Musica costituiscono le fondamenta su si basano i ventidue romanzi di Bhyrappa. Nel presente articolo si analizzano tre suoi romanzi, *Tantu (The Thread)* (1993), *Sartha (the Caravan)* (1998) and *Mandra (Lower Octave)* (2002)- tutti e tre tradotti in inglese da chi scrive. Il rapporto tra Vita e Arte, Arte e Artista, Esperienza Estetica ed Etica, Arte per l'Arte, Arte e Moralità costituisce il tema dei suoi romanzi, la cui struttura riproduce la forma della musica classica Hindustani. Anche i rapporti personali vengono allegoricamente rappresentati attraverso una *partnership* tra forme artistiche diverse.

Literature should aspire to the condition of music. It is only to the extent to which it achieves this, that its greatness is determined. The characteristic aspect of the Indian approach is that it has always been an integrated approach. That is why Indian Poetics, Aesthetics and Metaphysics are an inseparable single entity. Bharatamuni's *Natyasastra* is an example of partnership between and among apparently disparate genres but actually yoked together as a unified sensibility. This partnership has existed since Vedic times in India and the *Samaveda* is inseparable from its musical foundation - *udatta* (upward denotation) *anudatta* (downward denotation) and *swarita* (no denotation). The rise and fall, the accent, the stress, the intonation, the cadence, the beat, the timing, the rhyme and the rhythm are the links with music, which has been passed on from generation to generation since pre-historic times.

Our concept of the World itself, handed down from Panini, Patanjali and Bhartrihari, which is known as *Sabda-Brahman* (Primordial Sound as *Brahman*) and *Nada Brahman* (Music as *Brahman*) are an integral part of our tradition. Our integrated approach can be seen in our literary critics or *alankarikas* (rhetoricians), Abhinavagupta (975-1025), Anandavardhana (820-890), down to the greatest art-critic of our times, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947). Whether it is literature or music, painting or sculpture, temple-architecture or iconography, whether it is East or West, ancient or modern, he is absolutely unmatched and a perfect symbol of partnership of disciplines. The greatest literature of the world has always been mystical and

visionary. Insight and not just sight. Vision and not words. Introspection and not description. Doesn't music do the same? Whether it is the poetry of the great Kannada poet Dattatreya Ramachandra Bendre (1896-1981) which rises to the level of music, especially when read by himself, or the musical compositions of Thyagaraja Swami (1767-1847) which ascends heavenward with its sheer devotion where words and sound merge together inseparably lifting one into the realm of philosophical heights, the partnership of various fine arts meet and mingle, resulting into a single cosmic experience. Speaking of the 'cosmic' is not the whole universe conceptualised in terms of the 'music of the spheres'?

The dimension of Music in *Tanthu*, *Sartha* and *Mandra*

To begin at the beginning, Bhyrappa's love of music is congenital. In his autobiography, *Bhitti*, he mentions how as a baby, when his mother sang, he would stop crying and listen to the sound of music. As a student in Mysore, his musical propensity augmented and he narrates how he was fascinated by the concert of Gangu Bai Hanagal and instilled in him the preference for Hindustani Classical music. His autobiography describes how he and his wife used to attend concerts regularly in Delhi. I myself know that he travels to distant places just to listen to a famous artist. One reason why he became a *connoisseur* of Hindustani classical music is perhaps his long sojourn in North India. His stay in places like Mumbai and Gujarat provided the proper *mise en scene* before he settled in Delhi from where he could go round North India listening to concerts all over. Indeed, his job in the National Council For Education and Research Training (NCERT) took him on official visits to various places and he put to good use these visits to indulge in his pastime. Indeed, music in his novels is more than a pastime. It is with this background that one should approach the musical dimension of his novels. He has said that his novels are structured on the form of Hindustani classical music. Though this can be seen in varying degrees in all his twenty-two novels, three novels stand out in particular as music-oriented. They are *Tanthu (The Thread)* (1993), *Sartha (The Caravan)* (1998) and *Mandra (Lower Octave)* (2002). In his autobiography, *Bhitti*, Bhyrappa states: "The form of Hindustani classical music which I have listened to and admired has influenced the conceptual form of my novels" (my translation). Though this undercurrent is present in all his novels, in *Tanthu* (1993), *Sartha* (1998) and *Mandra* (2002), it is not only a conscious narrative technique and construction device but a mode of characterization. We can see this in these three novels in the ascending order until it reaches a crescendo in *Mandra* (2002).

Tanthu

The musical element centres round the character - Hemant Honnatti. In a manner of speaking, it is about the rise and fall of an idealist, a devotee of music. He is a dedicated artist who is aware of the fact that to achieve something significant, a choice - a conscious choice, has to be made which involves sacrificing something else, what Honnatti sacrifices is his whole career in the management world. An M.Tech from Bombay I.I.T. and an M.B.A. from Ahmedabad, he had a lucrative job. He landed a top executive job, a house, a car, phone and a fat salary. All this he sacrifices for music - his sitar was his world. He chooses to live like a recluse on top of a hill, immersed in music day and night. This seems to be the first sketch for the character of Mohanlal, a professional music maestro in *Mandra* (2002). However, the music-lover in Bhyrappa makes all his novels 'musical thought'. He is not only a *connoisseur* but deeply into it, an aficionado, listening regularly to the concerts of Ali Akbar, Bhimsen Joshi, Hariprasad Chaurasiya, Gangubhai Hanagal, Ravishankar, Dagar brothers, Bismilla Khan etc. Jasraj seems to be his favourite. This is the background in which Honnatti's character has been created. The references to Honnatti's playing on the sitar is described in such technical detail that translating it into English is difficult.

There are two approaches to music delineated by Bhyrappa in this novel - the secular and the religious. The two can be and are synthesised into an artistic, aesthetic unity which is brought out in the example discussed about Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda*. The secular aspect is what is found in the concerts of the professional musicians who give public performances and the masters of this art exhibit their skills in order to get more contacts, what with their desire to go abroad and come back rich. The contrast to this is presented in the music of Omkara Baba and the Sri Hari School of Music at Mathura. The portrait of Omkara Baba represents the acme of the spiritual dimension of religious music. His question "How can music attain sanctity until it is offered to God?" summarises the opposite point of view to the commercialization of music. Honnatti meets the Baba at a time when he is consumed by a sense of sin - the sin of consorting with the wife of his friend and benefactor. The connection which he sees between music and his fall makes him disillusioned about music itself. This disillusionment is paralleled in the American visitor - John's disgust with it because of his wife's affair with the hypocritical charlatan Harishankar Prasad. The opposing polarities can be seen in the attitude towards *Gita Govinda*. Harishankar Prasad insisting that it is an erotic lyric and Omkara Baba's interpretation of it as a spiritual allegory. "Art for Art's sake", "Art and Morality", the relationship between Life and Art, that of Art and the Artist, Aesthetic experience and Ethics, these questions naturally get discussed in Bhyrappa's novels whose Ph.D thesis deals with the subject "Truth and Beauty". The later novel *Mandra* is entirely about this "overwhelming question". However, from this point of view the Honnatti episode in *Tanthu* may be said to be a forerunner of Mohanlal's life and art. While D.H. Lawrence says "Trust the tale, not the teller", W.B. Yeats asks the question "How can you separate the dancer from the dance?"

In Indian philosophical thinking, Music is the realisation of *Nada Brahman*. It is the means of realizing God and attaining *Moksha* (spiritual salvation): *Advaita siidiki Sangeetamesaramu* (music is the pathway for God Realisation). This is the Indian Ultimate Goal, not mere pleasure - not just entertainment. No wonder our musicians were sages and saints and not womanizing philanderers. This is the difference between dilettantish charlatans like Harishankar Prasad and the saintly Omkara Baba. The dilemma of Honnatti is that he is caught between the two horns. His self-disgust and sense of sin for having transgressed the ideal *Paradara sahodara* (brother of another man's wife) makes him come out of the affair and makes him utterly ashamed to meet the gaze of Ravindra and his blaming music for it prompts him to turn to the service of the poor. His encounter with Harishankar's interpretation of *Gita Govinda* makes him turn to Baba and seek an explanation of the Radha and Krishna relationship. Baba explains: "If you take a sensuous and sensual point of view the meaning gets distorted". Radha is not a woman. It is the *Jivatma* or "Individual Soul". Krishna is not a man, but the Absolute Self. Call her Radha, Meera, Gopika. We are all 'Radha' without sexual implications. Call the 'Ultimate Reality' by whatever name, He is Krishna" (my translation). This allegorical dimension is the basis of all religious texts and literary masterpieces in Hindu thought. This may be termed as 'Sublimation Theory'. The *Nayaka-Nayaki Bhava* (relation between the hero and the heroin) is one of the traditional modes of literary composition. Speaking as a translator this was the element which brought out the sheer inadequacy of my ability. Lee Siegel, the English translator of *Gita Govinda* says:

"The *Gita Govinda* is not a sacred OR profane work, it is a sacred AND profane work. The ambivalence reflects a coalescence of traditions, literary, erotic, folk and religious" (Siegel 1990 [1978])

The *Gita Govinda* is a text not to be read 'silently' as we say but should be read aloud - indeed sung aloud - as it has been composed musically. The *raga* and the *tala* have both to be adhered

to and that is why the dancers who dance *Gita Govinda* mouth the words to themselves to keep the beat, the rhythm and the emotion while they are dancing. Some of the *Ragas* employed here are - Malavagoud, Gurjari, Basanth, Ramkari, Karnat, Deshakhya, Deshivaraadi, Bhairavi, Vibhas etc. I will quote only one short passage to illustrate the difficulty in translating the musical dimension of Bhyrappa. This has to do with Honnatti playing *Raga Bagesri* in *Tanthu*:

“On this particular day, he was exploring the alap, improvising around the melody that preceded the raga Bagesri...He had just discovered the whispered secrets of the raga’s delicate, sophisticated rise and fall, which he felt he had nearly captured. He was totally absorbed in creating and examining every possible variation and counterpoint and determining with the relationship between point and counterpoint in his innermost spiritual car. This had led to the raga yielding more than his Guru’s teachings had suggested was possible and Honnatti had immersed himself in this bliss, unaware of the fact that the Sun had begun its journey Westward” (Bhyrappa 1993).

If Honnatti is frustrated in his ultimate goal of finding fulfilment as a musician-maestro, Mohanlal in *Mandra* does achieve this goal but “What Price Glory”? (*Mandra* 2002). Macbeth may be remembered at this point - “What doth it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul”!

Sartha

In this novel, the musical element centres round the character of Chandrika, a unique woman character created by Bhyrappa and one of the greatest characters in the entire body of Kannada fiction. Here music is partnered by acting, dance, yoga and tantrism. Though allied to other things in this multi-faceted artist, her story is inextricably interconnected with her mellifluous voice and her extraordinary physical beauty. In the narrative technique of this novel, the “story within a story” is excellently integrated. This entire episode is the musical history of the life of Chandrika. An analysis of this story alone yields a rich treasurehouse of the partnership between music and life itself. All this is the narration given to Chandrika herself by the novelist; she, as a spiritual aspirant, mind-reader and *yogini* separates from Nagabhata which confirms the hero as a picaresque wanderer. They are re-united, but she is abducted and repeatedly raped by the Muslim invader, tortured and after being set free she re-joins Nagabhata on the advice of her Guru and at the end of the novel we see her as the future wife of Nagabhata, leading a housewife’s life without giving up her spiritual *sadhana* (practice) which is lovingly protected by her husband.

Another aspect of the Feminine Divine (Riem Natale, 2007) can be illustrated by the same novel, *Sartha* where Bhyrappa throws significant light on the *Shakti* (Mother Goddess) worship in India in the Tantric tradition. Antonella Riem dedicates her book *Coleridge and Hinduism* (2005) “to the Goddess in all Her forms and manifestations”. These manifestations are mentioned and worshipped in many works in Sanskrit literature - especially Stotra Sahitya (devotional literature). For example, *Devi Mahatyam* or *Durga Saptashati*, so called because it has seven hundred mantras and more than a dozen Devi Stotras (devotional hymns on the Goddess) of Adishankara, or *Anandalahari*, *Sri Lalita Pancharatnam*, *Kalyana Srishti Stavah*, *Sharada Bhujanga Prayatashtakam*, *Gauri Dashakam*, *Annapurna Stotram*, *Meenakshi Pancharatnam*, *Bhavani Bhujangam*, *Kanaka Dhara Stotram*, *Bhramarambashtakam*, *Mantra Matrika Pushpamala Stavah*, *Navaratnamalika*, *Devi Chatuhsashtyupachara Poojastotram*, *Tripurasundari Vedapada Stotram* etc. In Sanskrit, in addition to the *Devi*’s’, there is the concept of the *Dashamahavidyas* (Ten cosmic powers of the Goddess) and the *Vidyas* too are “Goddesses Awakened”. These are Kali, Tara, Tripurasundari, Bhuvaneshwari, Bhairavi,

Chinnamasta, Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi, Matangi and Kamalatkika. Of these, three are mentioned by Bhyrappa in his delineation of the character of Chandrika in *Sartha*. In his version of the “Goddess Awakened”, Bhyrappa describes a special approach to this idea by using *Tantra* texts. The Tantric worship of invoking the *Shakti* in a human elevated to the divine is called Yoni Pooja.

With this we go on to the third novel *Mandra*.

Mandra

Mandra (2002), which is equivalent roughly to “Lower Octave” in Western Music is perhaps the greatest novel about music in Kannada. The subject-matter is music, the protagonist is a musician, the other characters in the novel are connected with the world of music and the language in which it is written is totally in musical terminology. It is an excellent *kunstlerroman* as it is about the life of an artist - Mohanlal, the Hindustani classical musician, vocalist and teacher *par excellence*. The novel raises the important question of the partnership between the Artist and his Art. Why is it that great though some artists are, technically speaking, their private lives are mean, mercenary and mechanical? Morals, as we understand the term normally, seem to be the first casualty and they descend to the depths of depravity in their private lives. This basic question is explored in this six-hundred-page novel focussing on the rise and fall of Mohanlal.

The structure and texture of *Mandra* (2002) is too complex for a simplistic approach. It is possible to analyse the novel with Mohanlal as the focal point. The counterpoint is Madhumita. In a manner of speaking, their relationship is the *Sthayi-Bhava* (fixed mode of emotion). The *Sanchari-Bhava* (varying mode of emotion) is his relationship with the dancer, Manohari Das, where we see illustrated the relation between music and dance.

The tragic figure who is central to the novel is Madhumita, a woman with a wealthy family background, loving parents and brothers, loved by a devoted and noble husband. Her fascination for pursuing music relentlessly, sacrificing everything including her virtue, brings to her mind that priorities, when consciously chosen, involve giving up everything else. Not only does she become the mistress of Mohanlal, which he imposes as *Gurudakshina* (student’s offering to the teacher), but she also makes the second mistake of inviting him to California to her happy home with her husband. The husband himself, by no means a naive simpleton but a very successful company executive who has made good in America, is nevertheless a trusting gentleman. Mohanlal’s meanness is seen when he not merely demands that she sleeps with him as in her pre-marital days but that she should sleep with him in the same bed she shared with her husband in the ‘master-bedroom’ in the beautiful California house - her home. The gullible husband brought up according to the strict traditional moral code of conduct cannot share his wife with the womanizing *maestro*. The goal of attaining true greatness as a musician on the part of Madhumita condemns her to a life of loneliness though she achieves her professional goal. The story touchingly emphasizes the irrevocability of the existential choices when once firmly made.

Mohanlal meets his nemesis in his relationship with the dancer Manohari Das, an extremely accomplished dancer, married to her own old *Guru*, in the style of Chandrika in *Sartha*. She gives herself to the rich man Mittal who sets her up professionally and entertains him regularly as her benefactor - lover. She reduces Mohanlal, the first grade singer to a second-rate accompanist to sing to her tune! There are ups and downs in their relationship. He accompanies her abroad and is kicked out of her house at home. She ‘uses’ him and then rejects him. Here great music is seen as being enslaved by another unscrupulous artist - a dancer.

An unusual dimension in Bhyrappa’s novels is found in *Mandra*. It is what is generally discussed as the theme of the East-West partnership. It is common to find this theme in novels of Indians writing in English, including Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* (1995 [1960]). There

are any number of such studies in the “Raj Literature” - exploring man-woman relationship. However, what Bhyrappa has done in *Mandra* is more than that. He brings out the essential difference between the Western - in this case an American - and the Indian approaches to music, especially in the *Guru-Shishya parampara* (tradition of teacher and pupil). It is expected of the *Shishya* to surrender himself completely, body and soul to the *Guru*. It is not the same thing as the relationship between the teacher and the taught or the preceptor and the disciple in Western terminology. Indeed the *Shishya* has to willingly submit to any punishment that the *Guru* chooses to inflict. This aspect is brought out very effectively in the relationship between Lauren, the American student and Mohanlal. When Mohanlal slaps her, she slaps him back promptly. She even rushes to the newspaper office and gives a statement so that the enemies of Mohanlal make the most of it. The affair which started in New York is continued nonchalantly in India and there is no particular taboo or ethical principle involved. Lauren is given the poet-name Bhopali by her *Guru* as she was the very personification of everything that this magnificent raga symbolises. The Indian male-counterpart of Lauren is Dr. Harishankar of *Tanthu*, a shameless philanderer who ruins the marriage of Helen with her husband and makes him disgusted with Indian music itself - an extended metaphor of Indian double-standards and arrant hypocrisy. Bhyrappa is satirising this through Harishankar as there are pseudo-intellectuals with carefully cultivated charm who are dilettants and charlatans infesting the world of art and literature. Bhyrappa doesn't spare the so-called art-critics, self-styled journalists who are parasitic exploiters of artists. They want their ‘cut’ like anybody else and they are sensation-mongers.

Thus one can see in the complex texture of *Mandra* the partnership of Art and Life - with music as the focus. What has been said about the novel so far by way of describing the plot or story-telling does not do justice to the intricate nuances in this novel of epic proportions. It must be mentioned at this point that the novel yields more to a reader who is an initiate into Hindustani classical music than to an uninitiated one. The texture of the novel is interspersed with exact letters and scales printed as in a text-book on music and this lends authenticity to the kunstlerroman that *Mandra* (2002) is, much the same way as the ‘score’ is printed in a work dealing with Western classical music. But this does not mean that the common reader cannot enjoy reading the novel. The musical notations that are printed in the manner of the ‘notes’, and the ‘score’ in Western classical music are unique in an Indian novel. In addition, there is, of course, detailed analyses of the various *ragas*. What is of special significance is that the *ragas* are associated with the characters in the novel. For example Bhopali is the name given to Lauren. The initiated will immediately see the connection when Bhyrappa associates Madhumita with Kalyani which proves to be his nemesis at the end of the novel. He uses complex symbolism in this “musical novel”. That is how as a novelist he can be profound and popular at the same time. Some of the *ragas* he expounds and relates to his characters are Bhyrava, Bhoopali, Suddha Kalyan, Malkaus, Gandhara, Bihag, Durga, Shahana, Malhar, Todi, Bilaval, Bagesri etc. Bagesri must be specially emphasized because it runs through as a recurring refrain and meanders, appears and reappears like a river skirting events and characters throughout both *Tantu* (1993) and *Mandra* (2002). Bagesri occupies a very important position structurally and thematically in *Mandra* as it brings together two artists a musician and dancer together in a partnership of two fine arts. Mohanlal and Manohari come together when the dancer tells the *maestro*:

“Mohan, I want to dance your Bagesri on the stage. I am desirous of creating a new dance-drama. The rehearsals started. I am not fond of ‘tumri’, no respect for it either. Now, I had to do “alap” which was accessible to acting. What should she do if I stayed on elaborating the subtleties of the raga? It became a form of literature itself. I adjusted. Because what we set out to do was showing the visual version of Bagesri...” (Vedas:79)

It defines and refines the sentiments and feelings of characters and at one point the author makes an 'outside' statement that music is equal to the Vedas. Thus music is the warp and woof of the very texture of his novels and is the beauty and complexity of Bhyrappa's fictional narrative. The technical terminology of Hindustani classical music like *Mandra Shadja*, *Avaz*, *Uthav*, *Swar*, *Sanchar*, *Alap*, *Tal*, *Sum*, *Avartan*, *Tan*, *Meend*, *Bol*, *Rivaz*, is the very breath of the novel and is an extra delight to the initiated. The entire life-history of Madhumita, the protagonist of the novel in her relationship with her Guru, her rise and fall and resurrection run as the undercurrent and as a sub-text. The complex pattern of *Mandra* (2002) consists of providing a counter-point to Madhumita - the dancer Manohari and the Mohan-Madhumita partnership is paralleled in Mohan-Manohari partnership of music and dance. When Manohari meets Mohan she tells him: "There are two types in dance - 'Lasya' and 'Tandava'[...]. In your singing emotional representation ("Bhava") is primary. That is also my *forte*'. That is why I love your singing" (Bhyrappa, 2002: 219) This leads to their affair. The relationship of the dancer with her Guru, whom she marries, occupies an important aspect of the complex narrative of *Mandra* (2002) which is another kind of partnership. It is *Raag Bagesri* which brings together Mohan and Manohari. It is *Bagesri* that brings Honnatti and Kanti together in *Tanthu*. Whether it is "jungalbandi" in music and dance, Mohanlal makes it a full partnership with Madhu and Manohari. Thus the complex partnership models at the personal, artistic and national levels are woven together in a complex pattern which forms a homogenous holistic approach to life. One passage from *Mandra* must be quoted to illustrate his musical style and approach to language which, according to the present speaker, brings home the truth of the Italian saying "traduttore-traditore" - the translator is a traitor. The end of *Mandra* (2002) signifies the tragic realisation on the part of Madhumita, that in achieving her musical goal she has lost an ideal husband. The subtlety of her self-realisation through her final *solo* to herself is the despair of any translator, including, of course, the present one.

In the three novels *Tanthu* (1993), *Sartha* (1998) and *Mandra* (2002) one can see the idea worked out systematically by Bhyrappa. His popularity is partly due to this dimension.

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