

The story in Indian rap

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, rap and hip-hop, the Afro-American forms, have gained a lot of interest among youth especially within marginalised sections of society, tier two or three cities and even rural areas of India. Both these forms, everywhere in this world, have been a vehicle of protest, of self-exploration, interrogation of society and societal norms and in some case even social change. YouTube and other digital media are being explored as platforms to reach audiences by these performers apart from the more popular battles and live performances.

One of the categories of rap and hip-hop involves storytelling. These range from the intensely personal narratives of poverty, discrimination, exploitation reflecting the angst of these young men and women performers to the broader narratives of changing times and circumstances like living conditions, employability, livelihood issues etc. Issues like urbanization, poverty, broken families, addiction, slum life are also part of these narratives.

This study presents a lyrical analysis of some of the more prominent stories that are doing the rounds of the rap and hip-hop circles in the last five years. Our methodological approach is qualitative, and we have used the in-depth interview method to gain insights into the stories being told by rappers and hip-hoppers from across the length and breadth of the country. The study is exploratory and descriptive, and we present in this study the agenda of the performers their purpose for narration, and their overall approach to the craft and art.

Keywords

Rap, hip-hop, storytelling, narratives

1. Introduction

In a study that we had conducted last year (Ranade, 2018) we found that hip-hop performers in India were using the broad form of hip-hop and the latest technology to do their own thing which included expressing their experiences honestly, using language that embraced the phonetic and linguistic diversity of the audience at the time of their performance. They attempted to reach a common psychological plane with the audience, what is called *sadharanikaran* in the *Natyashastra* and they are keen for the audience to be *sahridaya*, another significant term used in the *Natyashastra* that literally translates into 'of one heart'. In doing this they combine *nritta*, *nriya* and *natya*.

The ownership of media technology has excited young minds, in a manner of speaking, to take matters into their own hands. They are narrating their stories, they are challenging the narration of others, they are critiquing, explaining and even complaining. This is especially true of hip-hoppers and rappers in India. However, the ownership and access to media technology has not led to access to audience. They appear to be speaking to themselves or their own kind. These were our conclusions from a paper where we studied rappers in Marathi that we had presented early this year. (Yatindra, 2018) In this paper we look at the lyrics of some Indian rappers.

2. A review of literature

Rap songs are famous for their double entendres, clever turns of phrase, and general ingenuity. (Buckholz, 2010) They also present a tough challenge to one's vocabulary. According to study by the music website Musixmatch, inside the list of the 99 biggest selling acts of all time, Eminem has the largest vocabulary with 8,910 unique words used in the lyrics of his 100 lengthiest tracks. Eminem is followed by Jay Z with 6,902, Tupac with 6,570, Kanye West with 5068 and Bob Dylan with 4,883 unique words. Eminem also has the overall highest words per song ratio of 1018.5.

(Varma, 2015)

Rappers and hip-hoppers are very keen to introduce new meanings to existing words by the use of wordplay or pronunciation. For instance, it was probably \$short who used the word 'shorty' in 1985 for the first time. (\$short, 2007) The word comes in the lines

Now everytime I see her she be doing it soon

Like ninety in shorty in a motel room

'Shorty' could be the addressee in the track or the singer himself. It was meant to be a double entendre and one of those meanings was definitely a woman. According to one analysis, by 1991, there were fewer than ten instances of the use of 'shorty' in hip hop history. By 1993, the count increased to 50. By 1993, anyone in hip hop, fan or rap, would have heard 'shorty' due to the commercial success of Biggie, Tribe Called Quest and Wu-tang (recorded the iconic 'life as a shorty shouldn't be so rough'). Pre-1992, the first fifty songs that used 'shorty' were not popular and no artist appears to have used the word very often. Then influential albums like Public Enemy's *Apocalypse 91*, Pete Rock's *All Souled Out* and Tribe Called Quest's *The Low End Theory*, each had 'shorty' in them. The use of the word doubled to 100 by 1996. Up to the mid-1990s, 'shorty' referred to female, male and child equally, about thirty per cent each. By 2002, however, 70 per cent of the time it referred to females. In the late 1990s Lil Jon changed 'shorty' to 'shawty' in his 'Who U Wit?' (Lewis, 2019). Lil Jon belonged to Southern hip hop and Crunk music where the setting of rap songs was the club and the focus on eyeing, attracting and dancing with 'shawties' and the songs about female shorties overtook the traditional meanings attached to the word shorty. 'Shorty' is now in seven per cent of all hip-hop songs and as popular as words like sex, glock, rims, pussy and drugs. (Daniels, 2019)

Communication and breathing are two things that put a lot of restrictions on rappers. If one listens to rap one cannot deny that the sounds are very similar to one another. This is because the song's tempo has to be quick and at the same time slow enough to talk over and the rapper has to breath! A bar is a grouping together of four beats. (Vox, 2016) The number of words and syllables that can be fitted into each bar is really tricky and challenging. This is followed by the rhyme. Some of the familiar rhyming structures are given below:

The people along the sand	(A)
All turn and look one way.	(B)
They turn their back on the land.	(A)
They look at the sea all day.	(B)

A = sand, land
B = way, day

Twinkle, twinkle little star	(A)
How I wonder what you are	(A)
Up above the world so high	(B)
Like a diamond in the sky	(B)

A = star, are
B = high, sky

As I drew nearer to the end of all desire,	(A)
I brought my longing's ardor to a final height,	(B)
Just as I ought. My vision, becoming pure,	(A)
Entered more and more the beam of that high light	(B)
That shines on its own truth. From then, my seeing	(C)
Became too large for speech, which fails at a sight...	(B)

A = desire, pure
B = height, light, sight
C = seeing

Upon a nice mid-spring day,	(A)
Let's take a look at Nature's way.	(A)
Breathe the scent of nice fresh air,	(B)
Feel the breeze within your hair.	(B)
The grass will poke between your toes,	(C)
Smell the flowers with your nose.	(C)
Clouds form shapes within the skies,	(D)
And light will glisten from your eyes	(D)

A = day, way
B = air, hair
C = toes, nose
D = skies, eyes

Some of the first rap songs used very basic beat and rhyme structures. For instance, Kurtis Blow from the 1980s says
Breaks on a bus brakes on a car
Breaks to make you a superstar
Breaks to win and breaks to lose
But these here breaks will rock your shoes

This is AABB rhyming. (Blow, 2009)

Let us look at another song –

I came in the door, I said it before
I never let the mic magnetize me no more
But it's biting me, fighting me, inviting me to rhyme
I can't hold it back, I'm looking for the line
Taking off my coat, clearing my throat
The rhyme will be kicking until I hit my last note (Rakim, 2011)

This looks like an AABBC rhyme where A = before, more, B = rhyme, line and C = throat and note. However, notice the number of words packed in. There are more rhymes within the frame like biting, fighting, inviting or the repetition of 'me' or 'my' or 'I'. This lyric is from 1986. In fitting these words into the bar, the rapper has also crossed the bar and gone over into the next beat. Over the decades this has become more complex. For instance, let us look at the lyrics in Hypnotize. (B.I.G., 2008)

Dead right, if the head right, Biggie there ery' night
 Poppa been smooth since days of Underroos
 Never lose, never choose to, bruise crews who
 Do something to us, talk go through us

The rapper has here not only added many words, but also used a variety of rhymes that seem to flow seamlessly into the beat.

A rap lyric also needs what is called a 'hook' – it is a statement, a theme, that the song asserts. Some instances are Can I Kick It by A Tribe Called West, Let me blow ya mind by Eve, Just Get By by Talib Kweli, None Shall Pass Aesop Rock or When I B on the Mic by Rakim.

Rap lyrics are also mostly spontaneous. They are not first written down and then recited. This means that the lyricist has to be fast, have a very strong vocabulary and keep building on it, be able to turn meanings of words and phrases and at the same time take care of beat and rhyme.

In this paper we look at five lyrics from famous MCs in India to understand the underlying theme. An MC, or Emcee is a Master of Ceremonies, someone who maintains the energy of a room, an entertainer who gets the show going and keeps it going. What stories do these lyrics tell? What are the hooks they use? What is the rhyme scheme? These are the questions that we set out to explore in this paper.

3. Findings

All the rappers, except one, used Hindi, but they have written their lyrics in the Roman script. Every syllable has different stresses. The Devanagari script in which Hindi and other Indian languages are usually written in is spoken as it is written.

Let us look at how this this looks and reads.

Ah jara kam kar	□ □□ □□□ □□
Shaanegiri kam kar	□□□□□□□ □□ □□
Ah jara kam kar	□ □□ □□□ □□
Lukhhegiri kam kar	□□□□□□□□ □□ □□
Ah dhandha kar jo	□ □□□ □□ □□
Bukhar tere sar par kam	□□□□ □□□ □□ □□ □□
kar	□□
Guroor yeh khatam kar	□□□□ □□ □□□ □□

The problem of analysis can be seen from the first word itself. In the Roman script it is written as 'Ah' with a heavy sound at the end. Whereas in the Devanagiri it is 'अ' which would be 'Aa' in the Roman script. The word means to come, it is an invitation. It is the same with 'Dhandha' which ends with a heavy 'dha' whereas in the Devanagiri it is 'दण्ड' which in the Roman should be Dhandha. The word means business. This we find is a regular problem since the Roman script does not have syllables for some sounds in Hindi. Another difficulty is the sound signified by 'अ'.

Na rukti ye kalam sahara hai in shabdo ka	□□ □□□□ □□ □□□ □□□ □□ □□□□□□ □□
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In the above example in the word 'kalam' the 'a' is the equivalent of 'अ' in Devanagiri. However, in 'sahara' (lit: support) the 'a' in 'hara' is actually a longer 'aa' sound which in Devanagiri is signified by a stick beside the syllable as in 'साहारा'. This problem of course can be sorted by using diacritics. The issue becomes complex when the actual word is changed because it is written in Roman as in 'shabdo'. The word is 'शब्द' with the 'n' sound at the end signifying the plural. Shabda is word and shabdon is words. We thus find that many words with soft sounds at the end are hardened. This comes from the influence of English. For instance, it is very common for English-influenced speakers to say 'Dhabhol' making both sounds heavy – Dha+bhol whereas the actual sound is Dabhol (दबहल) wherein 'da' is soft, 'Bha' is hard and 'l' is a soft sound peculiar to the Marathi language. Having written in the Roman script therefore, the lyrics emphasise differently creating their own musicality and grammar.

Shaanegiri and Lukhhegiri is slang used on Mumbai streets. This is a feature of the lyrics. For instance, Mumbai ki dadagiri phukkad bhadakte hum pe, Fukat ke lafte dango me, are apun kuch karte na yar apne public ke liye, police aye lagi vat mere gali mein all use slang from the Mumbai streets. There are also turns of phrases that belong to the streets. These turns are caused due to mixing of Hindi, Urdu and English. For instance, the word 'public' is meant as people, our gang, our guys, as well as the conventional meaning of public. In place of the conventional 'hum' meaning 'us' or 'we', the Mumbai slang uses 'apun' or 'apan'. The phrase 'vat lagi' is a complex turn. The word 'vaat' (वाट) means a road/street/lane/path. So, when someone asks another to walk away or get lost it would include the word 'vaat' in the sense 'go away, get out, take your road/street/lane/path'. It is also used in the sense of a threat where one asks another not to cross one's path or 'vaat'. Used in slang, this word can also mean that one is lost, defeated and cannot find one's way.

Most of the lyrics are a very intense and personal commentary of a reality that the lyricist/rapper is living and hence they tell a story. However, the stories are told simply, often in a contemplative mood. The lyrics use equivalents of 'we' and 'us' very frequently right into the opening.

All the lyrics have a hook which is also the title of the song. The address is direct building an interpersonal relation between the narrator and the narrated with use of pronouns. The story is one of poverty, discrimination, exploitation reflecting the angst of these young men and women performers to the broader narratives of changing times and circumstances like living conditions, employability, livelihood issues etc. Issues like urbanization, poverty, broken families, addiction, slum life are also part of these narratives.

4. Conclusion.

The sample we took is obviously very small and cannot be generalized widely. However, we did find that the lyrics use a mix of Hindi, Urdu and English interspersing with slang from the streets, the stories are invariably personal, and the address is directed at the audience with the use of pronouns. The stories that are being told, however, seldom complexity in terms of the subject they handle or the rhyming.

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