Digital Visualisation of Sufism: A Study on the Select Sufi Songs of *A.R. Rahman*

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the influence of Sufism in the select songs of A.R. Rahman and its prominence in the current scenario. The objective of this study is to represent Sufism and its intersection with computationality and consequential influence in our day to day life through cinematic visualisation, singing and dance. This study will be significant in the field of digital humanities which is still an untouched area of research especially in India omitting exceptions. The scope of this study is to construct ways for research in the field of Sufism with digital lens of scholarship/DH in order to extract the prominence of Sufism and its sustainability against the emerging pop culture in India. Since ancient time, Sufism had a great impact in art, culture, cinema, painting and literature which also functions in society as a moral guiding force and a pure form of experiencing spiritual ecstasy. With the advent of digital technology the disciplines of humanities are also affected, and therefore, Sufism gets entangled with the Information Communication and Technology through which its moral approach in the modern technological world with the help of digitized tools like multimedia, images, blog writing and archives etc. is being transmitted.

Keywords: *sufism, A.R. rahman, Digital Humanity (DH), computationality, ICT.*

Introduction

With the advent of Information technology everything starts evolving into a new shape. Similarly it affects the various disciplines of humanities and has given birth to a new field of research in recent past i.e. Digital Humanity- that stands for an amalgamation of computing and humanities where a written document is replaced with the digitized text and other forms and modes of production of knowledge in digital formats like multimedia, visualization, networked media etc. It is also defined as, 'the best Digital Humanities pedagogy and research train students both in "reading" and "writing" . . . in understanding how they reshape and remodel humanistic knowledge. This means developing critically informed litracies expensive enough to include graphic design, visual narrative, time based media, and the development of interfaces . . . (Burdick 2012). In today's modern world philosophy itself is influenced with computational methods when,

> "Thought processes are enhanced when ways are found to link external perception with internal mental processes by the use of graphic aids . . . Digital

humanists are applying digital version of these age-old tools in many areas of research, from these graphs generated by text analysis applications to virtual reality models of ancient buildings, methods known collectively as 'digital visualisation. (USC, 2019)

With the help of digital technology and its intersection with humanities, people can have quick access to the ancient philosophical concepts, Sufism, sculpture, painting, songs, preachings digitally. Holy shrines in India represent the ancient Sufi culture since centuries ago can be seen in single click on computer. Those days are gone when this ascetic philosophy reaches to people through texts but is now replaced with digital media or computational methods.

Digital humanities is defined in *Doing Digital Humanities: Practice, Training, Research,* as follows, . . . digital humanities can be in context of the history and . . . embraces and engages in many ways, ultimately working towards suggesting further points of intervention and actions in areas that further define who we are, what we are, what we do, and what

brings us together in the places that we do things. (Cromption, 2016, p. xxxii)

Figure 1 Sultan Bin Zayed – Mosque in Dubai (1960 photograph

Simanowski (2016) in *Digital Humanities and Digital Media* poked the conscious of researchers with a striking question, "Is Digital Humanities – the new 'big thing' in the humanities at large – be the best place? He believes that the digital humanities provides, ' a home for Digital Media Studies or sit with it at the table. . . the best way to do Digital Media Studies is to combine philosophical concerns with empirical data. The best way to do Digital Humanities is [Figure.1 Sultan Bin Zayed – Mosque in Dubai (1960 photograph) to trigger hermeneutic debates that live off of the combination of algorithmic analysis and criticism.

Philosophy of Sufism is now getting represented digitally with various digital resources like Sufi blog writing, archives, social media, online digital library (Sufi book – Online Digital Library), Sufi journals (Sufi – The Nimatullahi Order, BRILL) and websites where a reader can have ease of access (digitally) to the Sufi verse or songs, ancient Sufi sculpture and painting or look over the holy shrines representing Sufi art as is given in the image above.

Indian culture and civilization always remained influential with the essence of Sufi culture and philosophy. Indian cinema has played a great role in the development and preservation of Sufism through which different communities gets merged into one and lost themselves in the union of self with others and ultimately complete devotion to the Lord through singing and dance as a Sufi mode of expression. Digital Humanities is the new evolution in the production of knowledge of various forms. The legendry singer of Hindi cinema Mohd. Rafi had great contribution with his magnificent voice in the field of Sufism with the songs like *Me tere dar pe aaya hun kuch kar ke jaunga*, which continuously influence the modern music composers as another hit song of the movie Bajrangi Bhaijan echoes this i.e. *Bhar do jholi meri ya Muhammad laut kar me na jaunga khali*, which is now entertaining the listeners digitally through Youtube and other resources available on internet. Sufism ruled Hindi music since its inception that assimilates the listeners into one single vibe to be one with the God and have the realisation of the oneness and the nobility of Sufism in the song like, *Tu hindu banega na musalman banega insaan ki aulaad ha insaan banega* where the significance of plurality, oneness and humanism is strengthened. A very fine article entitled as, "Mohd. Rafi and Sufi Songs" written by H.A.K Walijah, states that, "His Mystic voice still enchants all the music lovers and will continue to enchant them forever, Rafi Saab remained immortal through his voice . . ."

Sufi Music (2010) a blog on Sufism provides an outlook of a Sufi Saint that, 'Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti (also known as Gharib Nawaz) apparently never wrote down his teachings in the form of a book, nor did his immediate disciples, . . . His firm faith in Wahadat al – Wujud (Unity of Being) provided the necessary ideological support to his holy mission to bring about emotional integration of the people amongst whom he lived.' Sufism also gets reflected in the form of dance and it is observed that when Sufi songs are tuned, the dancers appear to be lost in communion with the Sufi tune comparable to any other form of dance (see figure.2)

Figure 2 Brehmer, M. "Sufism and Bollywood." *Quantra.de,* 2018

Objectives

The prior aim of this study is to build the emphasis on computationality in philosophy or computing in humanities in general. It attempts to show how computer and information technology along with networked media is emphasising the prominence of Sufism in modern times.

The long-lasting effect of digital mode of disseminating philosophy (through singing and dance as a Sufi mode of expression) is uncertain in memory as compared to written text but with the help of computational techniques philosophy, knowledge or truth comes up as an easy mode of comprehension. Sufism also finds a new outlet to get not only represented through digital technology but also influence people from inside incessantly through networked media. This paper demonstrates the prominence of Sufism in modern times in context to the songs of A.R. Rahman who perfectly maintains the ethos of spirituality among audience. Modern cinema has seen the immense impact with the emergence of pop culture and music with the songs initially of Hony Singh and then of Badshah but when it comes to Sufi music, pop music stands nowhere and seems a dwarf before the aesthetic appeal of Sufi music as it touches the soul of the listeners which is incomparable.

Discussion

In this section, the discussion is focused on the introspection of the selected songs of A.R. Rahman that he has sung in the form of medley which is available on YouTube as *The Sufi Ensemble – Showreel*, that glorifies the significance of Sufi music in India and abroad. The songs of the medley are, *Khwaja mere khwaja, Kun faya kun, Maula Maula Maula mere maula, Piya haji Ali, Kirpa karo Maharaj Moinuddin.* The purpose of choosing this digital resource is to demonstrate the effect of computational methods in the glorification of Sufi art and aesthetics which is also emphasised with the help of images as occurred in the concert.

The given image below is taken from the background which is represented digitally during the concert when A. R. Rahman , Javed Ali and a finest Palestinian sufi singer form middle east Sana Musa, resonates the audience with holy chanting like, '*Ya Muhammad ya habibi & Allah hu'*. The image glitters in the background is a symbol which is compact together as a cosmic planetary force in order to signify the importance of unity in diversity and humanism in plurality.
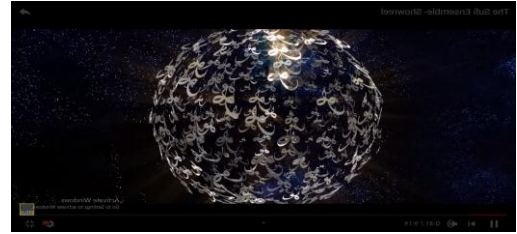

Figure 3 Snapshot (EP INvision 0:41)

The second digital image (Figure.4) that appears in the background led the effect of Sufi essence with the word 'Allah' floating, and all the singers and musicians stand on the stage in white robes to symbolise the uniformity of all so that the whole environment can become Sufi and audience can come completely under the shadow of single essence of Sufi music.

Figure 4 (The Sufi Ensemble- Showreel 1:40)

There are other images also that appear in the background on stage to maintain the ethos of Sufism as it is evident in the Figure.5 where ancient Sufi art and sculpture is shown to emphasize the greatness of Sufi culture which is truly justied through the digital images along with the lighting of various colours.
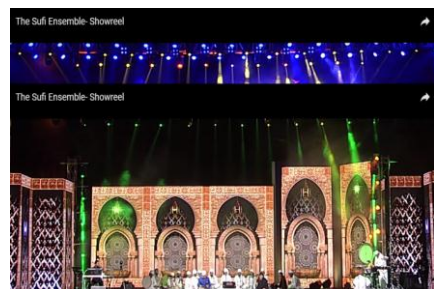
Figure 5 (2:28; 7:01)

In the same medley, digital appearances of Sufi art, sculpture and painting and the unity of being is stressed. This concert with the help of digital tools does not only profess the significance of Sufi music and philosophy but also highlighted the unity of being with images as there are ample of colours used in the background on stage. This performance undoubtedly tries to perish the boundary of religion so the audience or listeners can feel the oneness of all as it is evident that the colour whether green, yellow, red or white all are focused in the background so that people must learn that colour has no religion and should not be used as a symbol of one's identity as Hindu or Muslim. A.R. Rahman himself wears the red thread on his wrist (kalava) while singing (See image.8) which is a practice of Hindus who wears it as a symbol of religion and spirituality which is quite identical to the practice of wearing a *tabiz*. He tries to prove that it is completely illogical to divide ourselves on the basis of colours as Hindu and Muslim while a colour has nothing to do with the religion of man. In the images below, different colours are represented to unite all Indians. The single importance to a colour is avoided as Sufism disseminates to love, peace and prosperity.
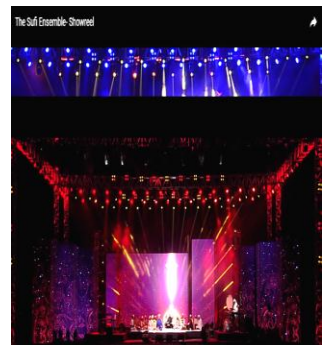

Figure 7 (5:47; 6:02; 8:12)

Now the focus is on the lyrics of the songs of the medley that is Sufi and holy in its appeal to the listeners, audience or readers. Shahida Bilquis (2014) in her article "Understanding the Concept of Islamic Sufism" states that, "Sufism being a marrow of the bone or the inner dimension of the Islamic revelation, is the means par excellence whereby *Tawhid* is achieved . . . (55)"

The very first song starts with a very deep and profound invocation to the Lord to have a communion with the speaker as one. Therefore it is lyrically represented in a great sufi tune, *'Khwaja mere Khwaja/Dil me sama ja/ Shaho ka Shah tu/ Ali ka dulara'* (Indicine). The second song *Kun Faya Kun* from the movie Rockstar is full of sufi aestheticism and morality, as it says, *'Wo jo mujh me samaya wo jo tujh me samaya Maula wahi wahi maaya . . . Rangreza rang mera tann mera mann/ Le le rangai chahe tann chahe mann . . .'* where the speaker acknowledges the presence of Lord everywhere and is ready to devote his conscience, body and soul to the Lord in order to have a communion. Furthermore, in the same song, the speaker wants Lord to release him from himself so that the communion with the Lord becomes possible. It is cleared

with the following lyrics, *'Ho mujh pe karam Sarkar tera/ Araj tujhe kar de mujhe/ Mujh se hi riha . . .'* (Rahman), which is quite similar to the song '*O dunia ke rakhwale sun dard bhare mere nale*' sung by Mohd. Rafi. The song *Maula Maula Muala Mere Maula* also emphasised the oneness with the God and the speaker in the song wants to be in the obedience of Lord and do not want to go away from that heavenly state of bliss, so he states, '*Sajde Me Rehne Do, Ab Kahin Na Jaunga/ Abb Jo Tumne Thukraya To Sawar Na Paunga . . .'* Rahman in the same medley of Sufi songs sings a very fine versatile peice of music i.e *Kirpa karo Maharaj Moinuddin*, which tunes similar as a bhajan. The popularity as well as the reach of the song online is immense that it has been watched by 19,51,981 viewers on YouTube which shows that in modern times digital technology is one of the best tool to propagate the best knowledge to the future generation and digital humanities is the way to preserve such noble ideas of Sufism and other philosophy. In an article "Sufism and Bollywood – A Glittering Antidote" Merian Brehmer (2018) asserts that, 'the Sufi composer Rahman would like to bring people together, as an envoy of peace. During his show the star invokes unity between all Indians: "We are all India; We are one . . .'

Significance

This paper is going to be significant in the field of digital humanities which is now influencing humanities with digital tools. It is noticed that from Mohd. Rafi to A.R. Rahman, Sufism remained an inspiring force that binds all these singers and musicians together who with their magnificent talent conglomerate the audience with Sufi tunes. In modern days, philosophy is controlled by digital tools where complex concepts are now getting comprehensive with the help of digital technology and computational techniques, which is becoming appealing to the masses as compared to the effect of printed text. It offers a platform where millions of people across the globe have the access to the knowledge provided by digital media. This paper emphasise that Sufism especially in cinema through songs is maintaining its sustainable development and spiritual ethos while having a rivalry of pop music. This study do not aim to demean the importance of other forms of singing

and dancing but to demonstrate the greatness of Spiritual essence of Sufism which is hardly to be noticed in any other forms.

Findings

After studying and exploring the digital visualisation of Sufism in the form of songs, dance, art, sculpture etc, it is observed that the great Islamic philosophy of Sufism with the digital tools and seems to entertain and guide people with its pious essence through digital modes so that the complex as well as abstract ideas can be explained more clearly and comprehensibly. In the selected medley of A. R. Rahman, computational methods are used in order to create Sufi environment with digital images of ancient buildings especially Mosques, verses from The Holy Quran, various colours, and the name of Allah, costumes etc. It is also explored that the digital tools are becoming helpful not only in preserving Sufi music, art and sculpture but also gaining prominence in research, theory and practice of teaching with the advent of Digital Humanities. DH as a field of research, theory and practice is one of the best way to preserve the knowledge at one place which is getting produced with the help of computers and Information technology in abundance. The concept of Sufism, pluralism and humanism in Indian perspective or in context to the other nations of the world can be propagated in a very fine manner and expression through the empowerment of research in the field of digital humanities which is affecting with each and every aspect of life in 21st century.

Conclusion

To sum up, it is to ascertain that the printed text that used to propagate philosophy and other disciplines of humanity is now getting replaced with digitized text in various forms like Archives, Blogs, Journals, Facebook post, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, Digital Libraries etc. which is producing and disseminating knowledge digitally at large scale. It is clear from the above discussion that song and dance remained one of the finest forms in Hindi Film cinema in order to express the spiritual essence of Sufism. Since the inception of Hindi cinema, Sufism ruled and took the pivotal position besides all soothing songs. But modern

cinema has numerous hindrances for the philosophy of Sufism and its reflection is cinema when Hindi cinema is governed by pop culture where most of the audience want to lost themselves on beats and are less careful about lyrics and spiritual essence of songs but Rahman's songs once again like Rafi Saab maintains the spiritual ethos of Sufism and proved that the highest form of singing is one when an individual is completely lost in love for the Lord or in the performance of the art. His songs look influential not only in disseminating the Sufi art and philosophy but also appear as one of the classical form of art even in modern times when it has a big rivalry from hip-hop.

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