

Musical hide-and-seek: the predisposed Lennon-Salil

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Abstract:

The prelude of the paper concentrates on situating lyrics of the song as an extended part of literature and, consequently, places it as a valid source in reconstructing the past. At the next, the study would make an attempt to extract ideas and facts out of the lyrics of purely entertainment-oriented songs that neither has been authenticated by the composer himself in connection to specific historical coordinates nor can be placed in terms of their direct portrayal of contemporary socio-political milieu. A synthetic approach of analyzing tool can be exercised here by situating the dates of creations of them with known chronology of contemporary events. Kind of literary analysis also becomes imperative here. Application of such method would be done here by scrutinizing two musical pieces of same sort composed by Western rock master John Lennon and Indian musical genius Salil Chowdhury. Conclusion endeavours at seizing the psychological state of mind of both composers who got perplexed under vicious circle of ideological beliefs at one end and decent livelihood at the other. The dealt songs tend to represent exactly such crisis of identity.

Key words: Music, Lyrics, Historicity, John Lennon, Salil Chowdhury, Crisis of Identity

Preamble to the theme:

In respect of more recent objective approach of analysis, literature, particularly the kind that has been blended with the creative intellect of the author, is a form of consciousness that reflects realities in artistic images embodying human mind's aesthetic attitude to it. Such kind of literature often deals with different dimensions of human emotion and behaviour. Apparently, the work of a historian demands more materialistic approach, whereas the art of creative literature involves more passionate narratives on inner and subjective perspectives of human mind. Yet, at certain stage, a true instance of literature ought to be situated into its own time and space. German philosopher Karl Marx, as a believer of socio-economic reality, put forth the argument that human beings are born in a few definite social realities that ultimately contribute in shaping their mental faculty. Thus, in view of Marx, all the ideas and discourses are the outcome of both social and economic realities. Marxist theoretician Georgi Plekhanov, in his article *Art and Social Life*, strongly recommended that, like wealth or science, the variable spheres of art also must possess noble intention or attribute towards serving mankind for useful purposes and not

for mere ineffective pleasure¹. Again, in course of emphasizing the importance of culture in revolution, Mao Tse-tung, the legendary leader of China's social transformation, remarked in his famous *Yenan Forum*—"In the world today, all literature and art belong to definite classes and are geared to definite political lines. There is, in fact, no such thing as art for art's sake, art that stands above classes or art that is detached from or independent of politics"².

The question can predictably be raised here—how far a piece of literature, having its own shade of imagination, can be accepted as a faithful representation of the-then social reality and thus can be treated as an authentic source material in history claiming to be more materialistic in approach towards the matter it is supposed to be dealing with. George Lukacs, the Hungarian philosopher and Marxist literary historian, referred to the fact that the issue of correlation between the imaginations of an author and existing social realities heavily depends on the degree of author's own involvement or isolation³. Following Lukacs, anticipation can be made in favour of the existence of a common factor in both of literary creation and historical reconstruction—the space for good art of guessing in depicting social realities. This observation can be aptly supplemented by the vision put forth by Chinese litterateur Lu Hsun who reiterated that a piece of factual literature gets its shape through socio-political aspects of the-then surroundings.⁴ Such kind of analysis with further more intensified applications of literary discourses on historical reconstruction in more recent days have cultivated a noble practice of drawing our attention towards extracting factual ideas out of literary imaginations.

Now, as poetry forms a distinct part of literature and of its various thematic and structural types like narrative, dramatic or lyrical, the 'Lyrical Poetry' stands for exclusive thoughts and feelings of the poet himself, where he addresses the readers (or listeners) directly with accompanied music, thus, as a part of poetic literature, theoretically lyrics can be regarded as an extended part of creative literary art. The words of lyrics blended with musical tune formulate the foremost crucial factor in harmonizing a sort of correspondence between the ideas embedded in the lyrical part and the intellect of the recipient. Thus, in pursuance of socially committed artistic approach, songs and music may have a commanding prospect of being a kind mirror that would tend to reflect contemporary social realities.

Music as the conveyer of social and political messages:

In course of attaining the glimpses of social and political history that reflected through and between the lines of lyrics and tunes, one has to look forward for it from two distinct angles. At one end, there are few instances where the composers recreated songs with reality-based flavor out of their own urge and commitment towards portraying different facets of contemporaneous life. And on the other, at some vital crossroads of history, few socio-political movements and upheavals generated such an enthusiastic zeal out of which the composers and lyricists could find themselves as a part of the whole and could not restrain themselves from composing songs that would propagate the spirit of the ideological aspects of the contemporary movement. Instances are plenty both in cases of indigenous as well as international history. Here the primary investigation should be guided first by the composer's own narratives about contextual influences that produced such lyrics. If such kind of primary source is not in hand, the study would rely next on the reminiscence of the persons, who had been associated directly with that circumstances or chain of events. And if both of such core evidences are not accessible, a

thorough investigation is required to figure out the psychology of connected people with some major movements, who used such lyrics or songs in those particular historical points in juncture.

But a separate category of songs or metaphor still left that has neither been authenticated by the composer himself or his associates in connection to any particular historical context, nor been used by participants in some other allied context. To grasp an idea on how far such compositions would communicate settled historical facts a synthetic approach of analyzing tool can be exercised here by situating the dates of creations of such compositions with the known chronology of contemporary events. How far such consequences are consistent can be determined by such assessment. Kind of literary criticism for the words of lyrics also becomes a crucial factor to extract social realities out of symbolic metaphors. This paper would make an attempt to deal with songs of this specific sort, where primary consideration for the composer belongs to the act of highlighting the elements of entertainment for purely listening pleasure with a longing for sizable profit to feed the record companies. Here, basically the composer becomes involved in producing the type of music that would fit for mass consumption as per the existing trend of popular culture. But the innate propensity of associating himself with contemporary milieu never let the composer to put off his socio-political commitment. Eventually the metaphors, used in the lyrics, would portray more serious and symbolic messages than they tend to represent from outward structure. As for case studies, musical pieces of two distinct personalities, both from indigenous and abroad, would be undertaken in order to grasp the contextual instigation that provoked these two composers to create such songs irrespective of the confined barriers of geographical boundaries.

John Lennon—pacified articulation of rebellious nature:

John Winston Lennon (1940-1980) was a famous British singer and composer who cofounded the phenomenon rock band *The Beatles*. Though, in spite of attaining huge commercial success in music industry, throughout almost whole of his career Lennon evoked much controversy through his political activism and rousing voice in favour of global peace. After settling in New York from 1971, his anti-war musical demonstrations even resulted in a lengthy attempt by US President Richard Nixon's administration to deport him out of that country. But, at the same time, some of his songs had been adopted as anthems in anti-war movements, particularly during Vietnam War of Liberation, and in the larger context of anti-establishment counterculture of 1960s. Quite expected that such politically insightful persona could never isolate his long-cultivated vision in pursuing artistic execution through the inherent skill—music. Though disguised under apparently aesthetic simple words for pure listening pleasure, the embedded ideas always incline to arrest the conscience of every judicious listener to situate the song at the platform of specific historical crosscurrents.

Lennon, on behalf of *The Beatles*, composed an unequalled song *Strawberry Fields Forever* with McCartney as co-lyricist. On February, 1967 its market release (Parlophone, UK, disc no. R5570) created history as far as popular music industry is concerned. Both in UK and in USA the album occupied a position in top ten among the best hundred of the year and it has continued to receive acclaim from music critiques over the years. Combination of effortless lyrics with beautifully crafted tune produces a kind of reminiscence over bygone childhood days—

Let me take you down, 'cause I'm going to Strawberry Field

Nothing is real and nothing to get hung about
 Strawberry Fields forever

...Living is easy with eyes closed
 Misunderstanding all you see
 It's getting hard to be someone
 But it all works out
 It doesn't matter much to me...⁵

The entire theme of the song had been located in a Salvation Army children's home just around the corner of Lennon's childhood countryside residence at Woolton—a suburb of Liverpool. With nostalgic vibes seemingly the song advocates an escape into a childlike existence. Lennon himself admitted that he with childhood friends used to hide at bushy garden of strawberry whenever they could hear Salvation Army's band started shouting⁶. With eyes closed their infancy felt secured from an unknown fear of bragging soldiers. But deeper observation over the progression of the lyrics unfolds a confusion and willingness to give up trying to make sense of things and a desire to drop out the whole mess—

...Let me take you down, 'cause I'm going to
 Strawberry Fields, nothing is real
 And nothing to get hung about.
 Strawberry Fields forever...

At this juncture, kind of literature analysis and a synthetic approach of situating the composition on contemporary ambiance become quite imperative to extract political as well as situational compulsion on part of the composer. By early 1964, the members of *The Beatles* became international stars leading the 'British Invasion' (rock and pop music acts from United Kingdom) of United States pop market. Consequently, the increasing business statistics in American music market might place the U.K. based composer under compulsion in sharing closed eyes towards unfair imperialist intrusion of U.S.A. military force over Vietnamese sovereignty. Being hesitant between the suffocating sense of guilt and self-cultivated moral values the composer opted for such sluggish approach, where sharing a closed eye towards hard realities and offering a kind of indifferent stance would appear to him much preferred one in shielding his career.

Almost at the same time, identical suffocation on part of another committed composer is visibly comprehensible amidst different set of environs with separate genre of crisis.

Commercial compulsion against self-cultivation—Salil Chowdhury's mode:

The following theme of this study is to ponder upon another musical composition crafted by Salil Chowdhury (1922—1995), who, by virtue of his initial upbringing and political nourishment through close association with 'Indian People's Theatre Association' (IPTA) during fiery days of 1940s and early 1950s, always inclined to dedicate his creative persona in pursuing artistic executions through music, but, at the same time, rendered his vision with due obligation to social responsibilities. Reflections of such commitment are quite discernible in many of his musical masterpieces (specially the Mass Songs or *Ganasangeet*) where words found expression by means of obtaining stimulus from contemporary socio-political milieu.

However, a sudden shift came in his career in the year 1953 when film director Bimal Roy offered Salil with the opportunity of scoring music for the Hindi film *Do Bigha Zameen*. Its popular acclamation bestowed Salil with national recognition as a gifted music composer and provided adequate scope of making illustrious career in Bombay film industry and the world of commercial music in Bengal as well. On this platform, yearning for sizable profit to feed the Record Companies demands upward graph of selling statistics of recorded discs and the attainment of that the type of music for mass consumption as per the existing trend of Popular Culture inevitably becomes a primary agenda for the composer. Salil devotedly followed exactly this marketing ethics and gained huge success in terms of popularity.

However, the schooling and nourishment during IPTA days that matured Salil Chowdhury's conscience as a socially committed man of art steered his talent to leave a serious pro-people signature while composing of beautifully crafted songs meant for purely commercial purposes. In Bengal, he composed hundreds of basic songs (*Adhunik Gaan*) where instances are plenty that would locate Salil at the confluence of political and popular culture. Out of them this study would concentrate on one particular song, which is thought provoking both for its contextual backdrop and use of controversial metaphors.

In 1969, Salil composed a song *Jaye Jaye Din* (Grazing over flowing days, lethargic and tranquil; HMV, disc no. 45-N 83338). The finest blending of westernized jazz in the rhythmic non-professional voice of popular film actor Biswajit might unfold its immense prospect in business-oriented market. But the evocative words of the lyric, crafted under the cover of entertaining melody, may possibly leave few untold impressions for sensitive listeners—

Jaye Jaye Din, Bose Bose Din
Jani Naa Ekhon, Raat Ki Ba Din

.....

Chhando Kakhon, Chhando Paton Hoy Taa Jani Naa
Mando Kakhon, Mando Je Bhalo Hoy Taa Jani Naa.
Keno Emon Aar Keno Omon?
Keno Je Bnacha Keno Maron?
Somoy-er Nritye Taal-e Diye Taal
Kete Galo Jibon-er Kaal
Shudhu Jani (Ki?) Jani Naa...⁷

English version of this musical piece may be like the following one, though with utter unskilled capacity of translation —

Grazing over flowing days, lethargic and tranquil
Hardly having ideas whether it's day or night
.....
Wilful faculty got stuck when, never know
Vile amass rose coloured high when, even know never
Why this and why that ?
What worth of breathing or why choking ?
Flattering the pace of time are chasing the wheel of moments
Realize only that can't realize anything...

After Salil's demise in 1995, one of our contemporary prominent singers Pratul Mukhopadhyay, in an obituary (in form of letter) written in Bengali monthly *Aneek*, exclaimed over Salil's unusual non-responsiveness towards the upsurge of a political ideology that advocated Maoism as its driving energy during late 1960s, whereas Salil himself promoted the same ideology in one of his IPTA songs *Bolishtho Dui Haat-e Tule Nao Haatiyar*⁸ (Pick up soldier, pickup Arms...hold in firm fists) composed in mid-1940s in order to instill vigour in anti-imperialist struggle⁹. Pratul also mentioned the above-mentioned basic song in the same context, which, he presumed, reflects a symbolic solution in adjusting with surrounding political instabilities with apparent pretext of utter indifference. A more serious listener, thus, would have ample scope in scrutinizing the words of the lyrics to figure out the actual state of mind on part of the composer. On the face of it the lyrics try to symbolize a sort of dispassionate attitude of a withdrawn individual towards contemporary crosscurrents in spite of discerning well the volcanic possibility of such revolutionary upsurge. He confirms that all that he knows is that he knows nothing and even he is unable to differentiate the effects of thick darkness from bright sunshine. Such confession of detached ignorance inevitably produces curiosity about Salil's actual mental status largely because of his so far consistent responsiveness towards contemporary societal twist and turns. Seemingly, here the composer prefers to bow out his political insight in order to drift down the mainstream rat race of secured profession. Factual statistics show that on an average of two to three films from Bombay he got in each year during late 1960s, which marked the benchmark of his capability as a popular music composer. In case of Bengal, the number amounted to at least one in every year. Simultaneously, his entry in South India and other regional film industries eventually raised his repute to the height of a nation-wide popular composer. Apart from film music, his exclusive experimentation with new techniques of orchestration and melody lines constituted a unique genre in the world of Bengali (non-film) basic songs, which, in turn, exerted heavy pressure on him to feed the record companies by producing songs as much as he could. The pursuit of economic stability evidently constituted such a busy schedule that dried out, to some extent, his creative responsiveness along the contemporary political lines. But more serious note comes out when Salil argued that (in one of interviews after being asked about the influence of Naxalite movement over his creative articulation) the far-reaching distance of Bombay from Bengal primarily detained him to respond sharply to this movement with creative eloquence¹⁰. Almost at the same time, Bangladesh War of Liberation (1971) gave a jolt to Bengali intelligentsia, and Salil too here reacted as per the demand of contemporary crisis without showing any exceptional genre. Inevitably question arises here if Naxalite upsurge could not touch the conscience of a Bombay resident like Salil, then how far his strong responsiveness to the War of 1971 is logical on the ground of long stretched distance from the epicenter of the movement? Such contradiction within composer's own conscience reflects a kind of dilemma. Eminent scholar Darsan Chaudhuri, while discussing on the root causes of split and dissolution in enthusiastic IPTA fervour, traces out the allurements of financial solvency poured by capitalist bourgeoisie camps as one of the prime reasons that generated enough confusions and misapprehensions among the workers of cultural wing and ultimately isolated them from pro-people ground-level politics¹¹. At this juncture, Salil's standpoint provides considerable substance to Chaudhuri's accusation. In connection to this inference, an apprehension may occur in mind. Since appeasing the ruling power might draw advocacy to survive in the competitive

world of commercial film industry, donating more emphasis on part of Salil over Bangladesh War of Liberation may lead us towards a psychological mind-set that might help to come in friendly terms with Government of India led by Indira Gandhi who rendered political and military assistance for the cause of said liberation movement. On the contrary, Naxalite movement encountered more repression chiefly exerted by Congress led government. Showing sympathy on such controversial political issue might produce unwanted State antagonism.

But, equally a fact is that a conscious person like Salil could never be psychologically aloof from dedication of uncompromising warrior youth during Naxalite upsurge who dreamt of an exploitation-free classless society—a cherished vision that had once been preserved by Salil and his IPTA compatriots in their struggle against imperialist atrocity. The above mentioned basic song was nothing but an outcome of such subdued agony that came out in form of synthetic pretension.

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Thus, in a way, the much acclaimed *Strawberry Fields Forever* of rocking *Beatles* John Lennon resembles with the above piece of Salil Chowdhury where both the composers want to evade the realities for a safe and easy life in spite of having psychological liaison with the practical affairs of existing milieu. The identity of an artist, thus, confronts with the crux of tight situation. The whole perspective here may draw us towards few eternal words of another legendary composer Bob Dylan, who, in his timeless composition ‘How many roads must a man walk down’, threw a question in as early as 1962—‘...how many times can a man turn his head / And pretend that he just doesn’t see ?¹²’. In fact, socially committed art can never be ignorant for long from mainstream turmoil and its inner propensity either tends to encounter the malformed state or to repent in distress for not having been triumphant over adverse calamity. Contextually here an exclusive Bengali basic song of Salil may shores up our dealt inspection, where exercising of the so far used basic methodology of inspecting metaphoric lyrics in extracting reality-based ideas may usher some lights on treated conjecture. The lyrics of the song *Ei Roko, Prithibi-r Gari-ta Thamao* (Hey, halt, stop the wheels of universe; HMV, disc no. 2226-0245; recorded in 1978; sung by Salil himself) denote insightful assertion of a passenger who boards on the moving wheels of this universe by mistake and pleads for an early alighting—

Ei Roko, Prithibi-r Gari-ta Thamao!
Ami Neme Jabo...
Aamar Ticket Kata Onek Dure
E Gari Jabe Naa, Aami Onyo Gari Nebo
Aamar Swapno Bhora ‘Luggage’ Namao¹³

Or

Hey, halt, stop the wheels of universe
I would definitely get off
Got ticket of far distance
And this planet-vehicle can’t take me to that destination
Unload my dreamful luggage.....

Rendering a rhythmic tune of westernized jazz the composer-singer affirms here that the world he exits is not at all conducive to fulfill his destined aspirations and insists on getting off this planet with all his dreamt years that he puts within quote as ‘Luggage’—a redundant burden for

easy-paced material world. Under metaphoric attire he simply renounces the surrounding milieu that he had gone through the years with self-grown articulations. In other words, it portrays Salil's thoughtful realization of his own rank and file that unsettled him time and again from righteous track. Was it the same fate that Paul Robeson faced under authoritarian McCarthyism, which silenced his voice and compelled him to write *Here I Stand* or was it the misapprehended judgment on the part of Capitalist goons that forced Charlie Chaplin to depart Hollywood industry? Or even was it the turbulence of institutional dictatorial hardship confronted by Debabrata Biswas, which induced him to outburst in *Bratyojoner Ruddhasangeet* (the enchained song of an outcaste)? The only dissimilarity is that even after getting trapped under stiff circle of ideological adherence at one end and pursuance of decent livelihood at the other both Salil and Lennon never left the ground, but strived relentlessly with self-cultivated identity to adjust among situational adversities. Where crisis of identity tends to swallow the artist at every corner, the growling soul, thus, resorts to allegoric metaphors to release the anguish in a concealed mode.

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- ⁷ Salil Chowdhury, *Rachanasangraha 1*, edited by Sabita Chowdhury et al, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2013, p-202
- ⁸ The concluding part of the song confirms the advent of ideological inspiration from Chinese revolutionaries with the lines—“*Chiang”-er Dost-er Rasta To Prastut / Ghore Ghore Toiar “Mao”*”, Salil Chowdhury, *Rachanasangraha 1*, *ibid*; pp-75-76
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