



Raising Voices, Breaking Boxes: How Spoken Word Creates Dialogues on Gender

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the ways in which Spoken Word creates dialogues around gender, and how these dialogues change the way one may view gender identities, gender roles, stereotypes and sexuality, by looking mainly at two different aspects:

1. How Spoken Word helps to break silences around issues that are normally deemed taboo – personal stories of abuse, poetry that focuses on body image and sexuality, sexual freedom, voices from marginalized communities. This paper will explore how Spoken Word provides people of diverse communities with both a platform and a voice, and fosters honest, open discussion between performers and listeners.

2. How Spoken Word is used as a tool for both education and activism, through tie-ups with organizations, workshops and poetry events that shed light on certain issues.

This will be highlighted through an exploration of interviews with spoken word veterans, videos of performances and educational talks on Spoken Word through platforms such as TED Talks and Incitement Kuala Lumpur. This paper will look at the poetry scene in countries like USA, Australia and Malaysia, as well as the emerging poetry scene in India.

Keywords: Spoken word, Performance Poetry, Gender, Stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

“The first definition [of slam poetry] is [that] it's performance poetry – the remarriage of the art of performing with the art of writing” - Marc Smith on slam poetry/spoken word (Milsovillan)

While its roots can be traced back to African-American folk tradition and the Beatniks of the '60s, Spoken Word Poetry as we know it today took birth in a lounge in Chicago in 1984, where construction-worker Marc Smith conducted an open mic night. Smith stated, with reference to why he started this space: “The very word ‘poetry’ repels people. Why is that? Because of what schools have done to it. The slam gives it back to the people.... We need people to talk poetry to each other.” (Verses Festival)

Spoken Word is an art form that can transform the personal into the public/political and use it to question the status quo. It challenges its listeners to rethink their perceptions of commonplace stereotypes. Slam and performance poets employ a mix of raw emotion and poetic technique to connect with their audience and involve them in the issue they are talking about. “People don't want to hear about “health care,” Mehroz Baig quotes Josh Healey as saying, “but they do want to hear about your aunt Stacy who had to sell her mom's wedding ring to pay for her cancer treatments.” (Baig, 2014) Poet and co-founder of Speak Out Loud, Jamie Banks, further reiterates this point when he says: “slam cannot escape its roots in

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history and society, and does not want to...it wants to speak to people; it wants to call out structures that oppress”. Performers use their voices to navigate through the complexities of gender, race, class, identity and many other social structures. (Banks 2013).

Through the use of popular culture (music, film, literature, social media), historical narratives, personal narratives, metaphor and symbolism, spoken word poetry allows its listeners to gain newer perspectives. For instance, Rachel Rostad's “To J K Rowling, from Cho Chang” examines diversity in a popular literary text by pointing out the stereotyping of Asian women in Literature. (Button Poetry Apr 2013)

Spoken word is accessible and allows for immediate connection (Kay). A performance “carries a transformative seed, a seed that nests in the psyche of the audience and slowly grows in the weeks and months following the event,” Crystal Leigh Endsley quotes activists Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes as stating, in her book *The Fifth Element* (Endsley 29) It is this transformative element that makes this art form such a far-reaching source of change, and this effect is not just restricted to the slam venue or the cafes where open mics are held. Through the wide reach of the internet and social media, people can gain access to these ideas through just the click of a button, and share them with others – or respond to the poet's ideas – just as easily. Neil Hilborn, famous for his performance piece “OCD” speaks of the conversations the piece opened up “I started getting messages – emails, Facebook posts...just everywhere - of people...saying 'I have bipolar disorder, I have OCD, depression, ADHD...and before I'd seen your video I never saw anybody talking about their mental illness...I can talk about it now” (Hilborn Tedx)

This paper will examine how Spoken Word opens spaces for dialogue, with specific reference to themes of gender, sexuality, gender roles, discrimination and identity. It will look at how poets use spoken word to display their honest, individual truths, open up conversations on taboo topics and use their performance skills to subvert heteronormative standards.

COMFORT THE DISTRESSED, DISTRESS THE COMFORTABLE

“...Andrea Gibson says, 'the reason behind doing these poemy things, is to comfort the distressed and distress the comfortable” - Aditi Angiras, “Doing Poemy Things”, TEDxNizamuddin (Angiras Tedx) Very often, poetry performances can make the abstract, tangible, and knowledge that may be hard to understand within academics and jargon, accessible. A particularly striking example of this can be seen in Lily Myers' “Shrinking Women”, using food, body and spaces as metaphors:

I want to say, we come from difference, Jonas
You have been taught to grow out
I have been taught to grow in
You've learned from our father how to commit
how to produce
how to roll each thought of your tongue with confidence
You used to lose your voice every other week from
shouting so much
I learned to absorb (Button Poetry Myers 2013)

Myers uses these metaphors to illustrate the way in which the women in her life are taught not to take up space. The men in her poem are described as expanding, “round with wine, late nights, oysters, poetry”, “round red cheeks”, “rotund stomach”, while the women as described as shrinking “to make space for the men in their lives”. Cultural conditioning and benevolent sexism are abstracts that Myers makes accessible through the actions of her

mother, grandmother and her father's girlfriend. She further extends the metaphor to the way *she* acts and speaks in general, her tendency to place the word "sorry" before each of her questions in Biology class, making it obvious that she has been taught to believe that her voice does not matter. The performance space also makes it easier to speak of things that are usually uncomfortable to speak out loud, by providing a safe space for topics such as abuse, menstruation, desire and body image.

Poems such as Holly McNish's "Embarrassed" and Sukhjit Kaur Khalsa's "Hair" explore these women's relationship with their bodies versus how society expects them to not even acknowledge these body parts, or modify them to fit an impossible standard of beauty. In McNish "Embarrassed" she juxtaposes double standards, by describing her traumatic experience of being forced to secretly, shamefully breastfeed her child in a public toilet, while outside on billboards breasts are used as commodities to sell products² (McNish). Khalsa, who performed Spoken Word on *Australia's Got Talent*, criticizes body shamers and affirms her religious identity as a Sikh woman³, by stating: "...the strands waving on my body are my beauty/They're my truth/They're proofs of life, marks of birth/Maybe I *am* born with it!/After all, a lioness is a lioness not a kitten/and my mane will remain/my hair" (Jhaji 2016) Poems like Dominique Christina's "Star Gazer", Dylan Garity's "Friendzone", and Kevin Kantor "People You May Know" confront sexism in the various ways it operates. Garity uses the common meaning of the "friendzone" in his performance piece to appear as if to briefly adhere to the stereotype before tearing it down ("He performs everything a boyfriend would do but gets no benefits/As if the only reason to be a good friend, or a decent fucking human being/is if you get something in exchange") (Button Poetry May 2013). While "Star Gazer" (Christina) involves Christina horrifically reliving her assault and then her healing process; "People You May Know" (Button Poetry Apr 2015) presents the audience with the aftermath and Kantor's struggle to survive and move past his trauma.

Speaking of these issues not only allows authentic voices to articulate their stories, it also helps them and validates the feelings of those who have gone through these experiences and enlightens those who have not. It helps newcomers to the spoken word scene understand their own restrictions and break out of them. Melizarani T. Selva, a Malaysian-Indian spoken word poet, spoke of Phil Kaye's profound impact on her at the Incitement Kuala Lumpur platform in 2015, saying:

When I think of Phil's [Kaye] poems, there's only one name that matters, and that name is Nicki Babcock. Because that poem had the word 'vagina' in it, and it was the first time I realised you could say 'vagina' on stage and get away with it. We can talk about things that can make us uncomfortable – and they're not supposed to – but that's the beauty of Spoken Word (Incitement)

GENDER ROLES, SEXUALITY, IDENTITY

"Finding your own voice is like taking a citizen from Iceland and putting him in the middle of sweltering Delhi summers. Imagine the layers of clothes that he has to take off. But [...] poetry gives me the power to write and take off those layers" – Preeti Vangani, "Story of a Voice", TEDxHRCollege (Tedx Talks 2015)

In 2010, five years before marriage equality became legal in the USA, Andrea Gibson performed a poem on California's Prop 8 called "I Do". The loss of rights felt by themselves and their lesbian partners are obvious in these lines: "I want to know that fifty years from

now when you're in a hospital room and getting ready to die, when visiting hours are for family members only, I want to know they'll let me in to say goodbye. Because I've been fifty years memorizing how the lines beneath your eyes form rivers when you cry..." (voxfeminista's channel). Over the years, a number of LGBTQ-identifying poets have come out through their poetry, and a number of allies have used performance to lend them support and speak against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

In "God is Gay", Elliot Darrow informs listeners that the word "faggot" used to mean "a bundle of sticks/originally used as kindling for fires that engulfed gays" before comparing this definition to the story of Moses and the burning bush, ending this line of thought with "What is a burning bush but bundles of branches on fire/isn't it funny how faggots and God can look the same sometimes" (Button Poetry Darrow 2013) Manasi Nene speaks of erasure in "Half My Love Poems", stating mournfully that "half my love poems will not be published/because in public, half this love can be punished" (Airplane Poetry Movement). In India itself, many poets have turned to poetry to protest the overturning of the 2009 judgment on Section 377 of the IPC by the Supreme Court. Hindustani poet Ramneek Singh uses his poetry for protest, asking lawmakers what makes them think they have the right to write the law in his bedroom, highlighting the ridiculousness of this archaic law by asking them to dictate the colour of his sheets and which direction he should sleep in (Singh). With spoken word as a platform, authentic queer stories have the chance to reach out to a wider public, giving those who have not understood their issues an insight into the challenges they face. An unnamed woman in New York is cited (by the Humans of New York Facebook page) as moving away from her conservative beliefs and questioning heteronormativity: "... gender and sexuality are bendable and flexible...How are you supposed to object and say that 'who they are' is wrong?" (Stanton)

QUESTIONING, EDUCATING, TRANSFORMING

Given its interactive nature, it isn't surprising that spoken word is also used as commentary on popular culture, whether it's on books, film, music or news. Often, poets highlight problematic portrayals within these mediums and allow these examples to shed light on discrimination in general. Katie Makkai answers Doris Day's "will I be pretty?" (from "Que Sera Sera") with "You will be pretty intelligent/You will be pretty...amazing, but you will never be merely pretty" (crzylbrlchick). Rene Sharanya Verma, in her spoken word piece "Open Letter to Honey Singh", uses Honey Singh's own style of music to address the misogyny in his lyrics (Delhi Poetry Slam).

Poets do not just stop at questioning the status quo within patriarchal and heteronormative cultures. They also explore the problems within several progressive movements. In "The Dozens", Rachel Wiley criticizes mainstream feminism that focuses on white women and does not explore the intersections between sex and race, stating: "White feminism swears/she will unlock the door to equality and let us all in/if we just hoist her on our backs/and ain't that just like white feminism, always getting up on someone else's back" (Button Poetry Apr 2016). Janani Subramanian of Darkmatters argues against pinkwashing amongst many LGBT communities in their poem "trans/national": "My testosterone is now made by Israel's largest company/there is colonization running through my bloodstream" (Dark Matter) Even the spoken word scene itself is not left alone – poets can sometimes create a dialogue between themselves through their poetry, as is evident from Melissa Lozada-Oliva's "Like Totally Whatever (After Taylor Mali)", where she takes on spoken word veteran Mali's criticism of the language used by young people today, and retorts that he cannot dictate whether or not she should discard the fillers in her speech (Button Poetry Aug 2015).

The power of performance often goes beyond the comfort of the stage into classrooms. Many spoken word artists go on to become educators; conducting workshops and teaching spoken word in schools. In his TED Talk “The Danger of Silence”, Clint Smith speaks of challenging his students to “explore the silences in their own lives through poetry” and creating “a culture within [his] classroom where students feel safe sharing the intimacies of their own silences” (Smith).

Slam/performance poetry can also act as entry-points into hard discussions, Jamie Banks reiterates. “When students write slam poems themselves, they can connect themselves to a history of a kind of activism through art that is empowering...and counter to the dominant narratives of history...Many students [...] go on to...work in the community teaching art, or get really interested in social justice.” (Banks 2013) Artists also lend their poetry towards activism in different fields – either through tie-ups with initiatives, fundraisers or campaigns. In 2013, spoken word artists in Melbourne joined hands for an event aimed at raising money for Refugee Action Collective and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, which helped refugees in Australia (Solah). In India, the Mumbai-run Words Tell Stories, in a tie-up with a program called A Period for Sharing (which helps women in rural areas with menstruation and hygiene by providing sanitary pads), asks its patrons to contribute packets of sanitary pads to be passed on to these rural areas (Words Tell Stories). Bring Back the Poets, Delhi, conducts the event Extremely Queerious Poetry twice a year as a platform for poetry engaging with gender and sexuality (Bahuguna) Aditi Angiras, its founder, maintains that “as it explores the political possibilities of identity, slam poetry begs to be regarded not only as a performance poetry movement but also as a social movement.” (Majumdar). Every year, a grassroots group called 100 Thousand Poets for Change – founded by Micheal Rothenberg and Terri Carrion, encourages local poetry communities worldwide to organize events in September, “about change within the guidelines of peace and sustainability”. (Rothenberg & Carrion)

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at exploring the impact spoken word/performance poetry as an art form has had on the way people both view issues of gender and sexuality, and how they explore their own narratives through this lens. Through an examination of both stage performances, interviews and educational talks on various issues surrounding gender norms and stereotypes, the effect spoken word has had on subverting historical narratives and societal norms has been seen, as well as initiatives taken by poets and educators to allow spoken word to be accessible beyond their own local poetry communities – thus engaging poets in dialogue with mainstream society.

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