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Representation of the Self and the Surrounding: An Ethnomusicological Analysis of the Songs of Singer Arivu

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Abstract

Music has always been the nuanced form of human emotions and expressions. Musicology deals with the nature and origin of sounds closely interlinked with natural surroundings. Ethnomusicology is an interdisciplinary approach that links the social and historical factors of the musical rendition. It is the observation of cultural aspects reflected through music by analysis, observation and immersive approaches. Ethnomusicology draws its tenets majorly from anthropology and comparative musicology. This area dominantly focuses on non western music and gradually incorporates scientific methods to deeply analyse the notes, structures, history and the contextual meanings of music. Recently the trend of representing environmental and social concerns through songs have become popular in the Tamil industry. The songs of singer Arivu especially the song Enjoy, Enjaami became a global sensation that represented the issues of environmental exploitation and anthropocentrism of human beings in the name of modernisation. The other recent albums by singer Arivu including the ValliyammalPeraandi series represents various social issues which have high reception by the audience for the content and the music blended with message. The study aims to analyse the themes like environmental issues, protection of indigenous communities, their rights and global warming highlighted in the songs of singer Arivu and its ethnomusicological aspects.
Keywords: Ethnomusicology, Tamil Songs, Representation, Arivu, Indigenous Community.

Introduction

The Indian film industry has exhibited strong characterisation that represents various sects of the society. The industry began with simple Indianised themes and has evolved capturing global attention in recent times. The release of the first Indian silent film Raja Harishchandra by Dadasaheb Palke

The themes dealt by Indian films are diverse in nature and have always addressed contemporary issues and trends in its plot. The characters reflect real life issues along with solutions to the issues present in the society. Indian cinema offers nuanced understanding about the multi layered social hierarchies with aesthetic expressions. The identity crises, social struggles and social evolution after the brink of Indian independence influenced the themes of Indian cinema.

The entry of director Satyajit Ray marked a new era of Indian cinema and an influential icon of Indian cinema. The oriental art themes were dominantly found in Indian movies during this period, later romances and commercial films were majorly produced. The 1990s witnessed globalisation after the invention of the Internet which gave world class exposure and influenced cultural hybridisation around the world. Indian cinema reflected the impacts and effects of hybridisation and evolution in its characterisation and plot. In the present day the Indian entertainment industry has evolved with global recognition especially for its music productions and diverse appreciation of art forms.

Indian Soundscape

Indian music has played a crucial role in the outreach of Indian movies. The music industry took deep influences from Carnatic and Hindustani music styles. Pertaining to the Tamil music industry the advent of composers like KV Mahadevan and MS Viswanathan marked the pioneering of melodic orchestration. With the introduction of the legendary composer Ilayaraja revolutionised and redefined the Tamil music industry. The introduction of composer AR Rahman modernised Indian music by digital orchestration and global fusioned music along with electronic accompaniments that created an international appeal for Tamil industry's music. Further the compositions of artists like Harris Jayaraj, Anirudh and Santhosh Narayanan have gained global traction and found spots in global playlists due to its innovative styles and incorporations. Recently the Tamil music industry has embraced evolution and technology that supports independent artists and even AI generated compositions.

Singer Arivu

Arivarasu Kalaignan known as Arivu by his performing name, is a rapper, singer, lyricist and composer who produces compositions in Tamil often immerses in reflections upon social issues and politics through his music. The lyrics of his songs often contain deep satirical social commentary and blends traditional Tamil folk music. His songs often use traditional music instruments and styles of Tamil Nadu like Oppari, Gaana and Ammanai. The fusion of these elements enables Arivu to present the issues like caste based oppressions, discrimination and social inequalities through a modern representative style. His prominence rose after the formation of Casteless Collective band to promote social reforms through music. The group focuses on representing the subaltern narratives and advocates rights for the marginalized through music. His independent album Therukural gained prominence for its deep political commentary through its lyrics and innovations in sound technology.

Singer Arivu had a global breakthrough through the album Enjoy Enjaamisung along with singer Dhee. The song ruled over global playlists and earned worldwide recognition to singer Arivu and Dhee. The song explored and represented themes like farmers rights, environmental exploitation and colonial influence, that brought global recognition to Tamil independent music composition.

Ethnomusicology

Ethnomusicology is often referred to as the anthropology of music, where music is observed through sociological, historical and cultural lenses. It relates how these factors exert influence

on daily human practices right from politics, rituals and identities. The theory emerged from comparative musicology. The term “ethnomusicology” was popularized in the 1950s, with scholars like JaapKunst, a Dutch musicologist, credited for coining the term. Another foundational figure, Bruno Nettl, played a crucial role in defining the discipline’s scope and methodology. The core tenets of ethnomusicology views music as a cultural product. It borrows ideas from cultural relativism where music is understood based on its cultural elements. Modern ethnomusicology examines globalized music flows, hybridity, digital media, identity politics, and postcolonial narratives. It challenges Eurocentric views of music and actively works to decolonize methodologies and representation. The tenets of ethnomusicology seek to answer not just what music is, but why it matters culturally, spiritually, politically, and personally.

The songs of singer Arivu offer ethnomusicological exploration, where his songs are not mere forms of entertainment but acts as a cultural medium. It offers insights on various factors like cultural memory, resilience and identity. The lyrics deeply resonate with contemporary social issues and awareness regarding the intensity of the issue. His composition style is often a mix of traditional music and modern music styles. This fusion exemplifies how these kinds of songs act as a vehicle of cultural and ethnographic advocacy to people.

Ethnomusicological Representation in Singer Arivu Songs

The songs of Arivu, particularly EnjoiEnjaamireflected social issues using multilayered perspectives. The lyrics had a profound impact on the listeners and captured their attention by powerful words and references.

The lines Kammankara Kaniyellam Paadith Thirinjane Aadhikkudi Nayi Nari Poonai kundhan Indha Erikkolam Kooda Sonthammadi (Across the River Banks and On The Fertile Fields, Our Forefathers Have Sung Through Their Life.The Lakes And Ponds Belong To Dogs, Foxes And Cats Too) represents the rich biodiversity of the land of the Tamils and the eco balance between humans and animals that has been reduced due to industrialism and anthropocentrism. Similarly the lines

Rathinandha Suththi Vandha Seva Koovuchu

Adhu Pottu Vachcha Echamdhane Kada Maarichu

Namma Nada Maarichu Indha Veeda Maarichu

(As The Earth Rotates Around The Rooster Crows. Its Excretions Fertilize The Forests. It Turned To Our Country, It Also Turned To Our Home)

Explains human evolution and co existence of species constituting to the ecological balance of the world. The environmental issues are addressed using simpler elements from the perspective of farmers and forefathers of the land.

The reception of these lyrics kindle thought provoking understanding of the environmental crises represented in a simpler way with captivating music.

Arivu’s recent release Kangaani album from his ValliammaPeraandi series of songs portrayed the struggles of the migrated labour of the tea estates.

The lines Ooraanaoorizh and haoththapanathoppizhandha Paeraanakanniyila peththathaayanaam arandhan, refers to how the labourers were treated during the colonial era and how indigenous people were robbed off their rights and culture. The indigenous communities of the hill and tribal areas were forced to cultivate agro products as per the instructions of the colonisers. The land rights, succession rights violations by colonisers deeply affected the indigenous communities forcing them to become labourers for survival. This issue has been sharply represented by emotion evoked words by Arivu in his songs.

Conclusion

The songs of singer Arivu demonstrate how music, a form of sonic expression, acts as a tool to represent cultural memory, social resistance and identity crises. Arivu creates a music hybridity by his fusion styles of music and forms of music. His compositions transcend the category of mere artistic output and acts as ethnographic documentation of lived experiences, their cry for rights and subaltern narratives. His work embodies Alan Merriam’s tripartite model of music as sound, behavior, and meaning, illustrating how music operates as both personal testimony and collective consciousness. Arivu’s insistence on linguistic authenticity, cultural specificity challenges the dominant narratives of mainstream Indian music. His songs not only preserve endangered musical forms but recontextualize them within contemporary discourses of caste and resistance. In conclusion, Arivu’s music exemplifies the transformative potential of ethnomusicology.

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