

Performance as Discourse

“Tamaashaa” in the Articulation of Ecstasy During Qawwali

by Sharilee M. Johnston

The male audience was intently focused on the qawwali. It was late at night; the call and response musical genre was reaching the peak of its intensity. The qawwali singers, accompanied by the familiar harmonium, dholak drums, and hand clapping, were pushing the tempo forward to a frenzied pace. Often individuals or groups would approach the singers to offer money (nazar dena, a form of blessing), subsequently falling into an ecstatic state (haal or wajd), sometimes shaking, weeping, or dancing as the experience overtook them. Yet, I was becoming aware that in this instance, my camcorder was becoming a visual marker framing the performance. I was taping a musical performance, my intention to observe the relationship between musical event and listener's ecstatic expressions. However, my recording also served to heighten the specular aspects of the qawwali session.

I had been given permission to tape the devotional Sufi qawwali at the Yusufain dargah (shrine) in Hyderabad, India. In a rare opportunity, I, as a female ethnographer, was allowed to videotape the performance intended to provoke ecstatic experiences among a male audience. I was positioned in the public space at the end of the center aisle. This was distinct from my usual position behind purdah (a veil), or inside the women's section. I was

excited; I had a good camera angle and this was a striking example of what appeared to the articulation of ecstasy (haal) that accompanies the "true, spiritual" or "religious" (ishq-e-haqiqi, or mazhabi) qawwali.

In this paper, based on fieldwork conducted from May 1997 to May 1998 in South India, I suggest that the listener's private mystical experience and ensuing bodily articulations of ecstasy are intrinsically intertwined with the public space of spectacle. Embodied experiences not only create a space for a secondary, specular performance, but also rely on spectacular displays of ecstasy for their own efficacy. The visual dimension of ecstatic experience encompasses multiple and contrasting frames for experience. Consonant with Bourdieu's notion of heterodoxy (1977), the privately experienced and publicly witnessed displays of ecstasy resonate with both a devotional, faith-centered habitus and one of a secular orientation.

Ecstatic expression in *qawwali* is complexly understood both as *wajd*, meaning private, mystical experience and as *tamaashaa*, pejoratively meaning spectacle. In a Bakhtinian sense (1986), the ambiguous relationship between *wajd* and *tamaashaa*, creates a heteroglossic performance space. It puts into question the polysemic relationship of the visual space, the musical space, and private experience. Expressed in the contagion of the specular, intertwined musical and visual performances engage listeners in both imagined and felt experience (Benjamin 1978 [1936]; Duranti 1986; Stewart 1996; Taussig 1993).

Within Islamic Sufism in South Asia, ecstatic experiences are said to be inspired primarily by listening to the *qawwali*. Terms such as *haal* (state but referring to an altered state) and *wajd* (ecstasy) describe listeners' experiences. In the "authentic" sense, ecstasy or *wajd* is taken seriously by listeners, i.e., embodied expressions are understood to be necessary to the experience and beyond the control of the listener, and are a socially sanctioned part of the session. Listeners say a person in a *haal* is "seeing" his beloved; the term beloved can refer to the Prophet Mohammad, the saint of that particular shrine, or the disciple's own *pir* or spiritual master who is alive and to whom he is affiliated. Hussein Sahab, a devoted listener I spoke with at the shrine of Gesu Daraz Banda Nawaz in Gulbarga, explained to me that a person's *haal* is very serious and should be respected as it is in that moment that he experiences love:

This is the power of love. Everything exists because of love. It is not just enough for a person to be highly educated unless he is able to love and this is more important.

These people [in the trance] may not be educated but they know what true love is... For a short time the person is totally absorbed in Sufism. When he finds peace, his soul gets relaxed and peaceful. But there is restlessness till he finds peace. He meditates upon him [Allah, Mohammed, his *pir*]. This is the highest degree of Sufism; of love. His concentration becomes so intense that he might actually die [during the *haal*].

Listeners describe *wajd* as a personal and intimate experience in which the person is overcome with emotion and moved to bodily expression: "You get into a *haal* and become overcome. You can't contain your feelings anymore so you have to cry out..." A.A. Mohammed, one of the initiated listeners who attended the death anniversary commemoration (*urs*) of the saint Gesu Daraz in Gulbarga, told me. He continued, "People like our *sajjaadah sahib* [the spiritual leader and hereditary custodian of the shrine] control themselves. But we can't, especially new people, they have to express themselves and sometimes they even dance in their excitement." Hussein Sahab expressed his understanding of the actions connected to ecstatic *haal* saying:

A person is so moved by the poetry that he goes into a *wajd* (trance or state of ecstasy). This is a transcendental experience. It is so very spiritual that physical actions do not matter. In a situation like this he dances, makes noises, and when he cannot control his emotions, he weeps. He finds peace when he cries out. Some people dance during the *qawwali* embrace each other, the feeling that they get here offers them tranquility.

In states of *wajd*, the tangible sense of physical and spiritual intimacy is evidenced in listeners' facial expressions and gestures. At times listeners rock back and forth in a sitting posture, sometimes raising an arm or both arms and gesticulating in time to the music, sometimes pointing upwards. Some fall into a state when they and others offer money' (*nazar aana/dena*) to, and receive a blessing from the hereditary caretaker and spiritual keeper of the shrine (*sajjaadah nasheen*, sometimes the *mujaawir*); they lean into his lap, crying or shaking. Others stand holding onto or being held by their fellow listeners, other *murids* (disciples) or *pirs* (spiritual masters). Some begin dancing (*raqs*) in the central aisle, rotating in circles

while gesticulating, crying out, and even weeping. In practice, both listening and visual displays of *wajd* are intrinsically part of the *qawwali* performance. Yet in the ideal, *qawwali* is defined as an assembly for listening, that is, listening is the prescribed means of achieving ecstasy.

Listeners say the “true” experience should be private; it is inspired foremost by listening to the musical performance of *qawwali*. Sufis say one should concentrate on the meaning of the words and the hypnotic rhythm of the music. Listening allows a person to interpret the poetry and imagine his beloved. Akin to Bourdieu’s habitus (1977), listeners’ experience *wajd*, not only as an ideal they might imagine, but as world they inhabit. The socially sanctioned space of belief creates the possibility of a shared, yet extremely personal habitus of felt ecstatic experience.

In the ideal or normative assembly, listeners should not observe those around them or allow themselves to become distracted (This also includes distraction as a result of a female presence such as myself, even when veiled). Strict religious etiquette prescribes an atmosphere of concentration in order to focus the listeners’ attention on the aural experience. After taking the necessary ablutions prior to attendance, dressing in the appropriate white, including a head covering, listeners should sit in an attentive manner, preferably kneeling while staring straight ahead. In the ideal, the shared social space creates the opportunity for individual listening and experience.

However, in practice, a listener may “get into” a *haal* both by listening and watching. The chronotopic quality of the private experience is intertwined with social conditioning and visual, public acknowledgment. There is much talk about the benefits of watching another person’s *haal*. Many feel that the visual aspect of watching another person’s ecstasy, is necessary for their own experience of *haal*. “If the other people around me have a little faith within them, they’ll be influenced/inspired by [seeing] my *haal*. The way we feel cannot be expressed [through words].” Embodied enactments of ecstasy can be read as markers of both solitary individual experience and shared, socially inclusive experience. In the ideal sense, the embodied expression of *wajd* or ecstasy is not a performance, though it is observed by co-audience members. In theory, it serves to further compel the individual toward the immediacy of ecstatic experience.

Complexly, watching also places a discursive frame on the performance, thereby distancing listeners from experience and engaging them in the *tamaashaa* (show or spectacle) of another person’s *haal*. In another conversation I had with several elderly devotees of the saint Gesu Daraz Banda Nawaz, they again discussed ecstatic expressions. Here it becomes

apparent that a performance is open to multiple interpretations; some want to be entertained, some view it as spectacle and others as a space filled with the possibility of their own mystical experiences. Visual articulations can and are read as polysemic, and open-ended.

S: And what do people who watch it [another person’s *haal*] think about it?

Listener: For them it’s *tamaashaa* “spectacle”. The common people who watch all this do not understand (its significance). For them it’s a *tamaashaa*. For us the *tamaashaa* will be the judgment day. So when we think about all these things we get into the trance.

S: These days *qawwalis* are used for entertainment?

Listener: Well, our Sufis like Shaikh Shahabuddin Suharwardi, Abu Talib Maseeh, Abu Nasar, and then Khaja Banda Nawaz himself had said that it is wrong (*haram*) to use *qawwali* for entertainment. In other places dance and music which invoke evil are used for entertainment. To use *qawwali* in the same way is sacrilegious. We will not welcome such people. The *qawwali* that we listen to is to meditate upon God. It’s like a prayer for us. If one wants to listen to the *qawwali* with a divine motive, then it is proper. Otherwise a person who wants to use it [for] entertainment shouldn’t come to us.

In practice, the space of musical performance is intensely visually marked. It is differentiated into categories: the musicians, the listener as audience, and the aisle reserved for those who make offerings. Those who become affected with a state of ecstasy are often, almost always, standing in this center aisle when the *haal* affects them. They are frequently on their way to or from offering money either to the lead singer or one of the spiritual leaders in the assembly when the *haal* comes over them. They are already in a highly visible position in the assembly when they become the ‘other’ performer. Their ecstatic states are filled with polysemic ambig-

thanks. Rather the money was frequently given with a flashy show of bills thrown high in the air. The money was casually strewn around or thrown down in a waterfall or cascade effect, bills scattering down on top of the singer and front row of listeners. Throughout, the listener danced, in circular motions in the aisle in front of the musicians, displaying his enjoyment and wealth. His actions were accompanied by shouts of “*wah wah!*” and “*kyaa baat hai!*” (shouts of enthusiasm normally heard at classical musical concerts as a sign of appreciation, but typically considered inappropriate in devotional *qawwali*). By the end of his performance the singer had to shift piles of money back to the second row of musicians several times. This was done so as to keep the top of his harmonium free to continue playing as well as to receive more offerings.

In other parts of the audience, men—those who usually stand up along the back periphery on the men’s side with folded arms—were looking simultaneously interested and annoyed. There was some whispering about this becoming a “show,” a *tamaashaa*. People were commenting on the flashy style of singing which is not considered “traditional” *qawwali*. Later, after the program, my assistant was very judgmental of this type of *qawwali* saying, “Yes this is all this *qawwali* is really all about—just for show and spectacle. There is no spiritual significance in it, only greed and desire for attention on the part of the musicians and wealthy audience members.” Here the *qawwali* performance, instead of creating a space of ‘faith’, a habitus wherein mystical experience is possible, also creates a heterodox environment (Bourdieu 1977) of both belief and entertainment or *tamaashaa*.

On another occasion I had again gone to a *qawwali* session at Yusufain shrine hoping to videotape. Soon after I arrived, Aisha, the sister of one of the shrine caretakers who had taken an interest in my project, saw me. She asked me to follow her over to an area on the East side next to the dirt heap where some construction was being undertaken, but in full view of the performance. Initially, I had taken a seat on the ground almost directly behind the *qawwali* party, but on the edge of the women’s section. This position prevented me from really seeing anything at all in terms of the performers. It also prohibited me from hearing the performance well as the sound of the *dholak* drum reverberated in the small space and distorted the melodic line completely. Now I followed Aisha. She is a tall woman with a strong voice and speaks very adamantly to both men and women. She does not wear *burqa* (covering worn by Muslim women). She wears *sahwaar kameez* (traditional Indian dress worn by both Hindus and Muslims) and covers her head loosely with an *ordni* (shawl). She spends most

ities; as the unintentional performers, they are said to be experiencing a private *wajd* “ecstasy” whose articulations are sometimes entertaining.

In the following section, I have chosen to elaborate on two instances during *qawwali* performances at Yusufain shrine in Hyderabad. Both exemplify the complex relationship between the spectacular and the ecstatic. By the ambiguity of intent demonstrated among the listeners, these instances call into question both “real” and “imagined” experience. Consonant with Stewart’s notion of a dialogized self (1996), the double musical and visual “performances” frame a heightened space of subjectivities — a space which exceeds its own boundedness in form. In these examples, the space of the musical performance appears to spill over into the space of listener who, having now entered the central aisle to make an offering, also performs or narrates himself before an audience.

I was attending the weekly Thursday night *qawwali* at the Yusufain shrine in the Nampally locality, Hyderabad. It was performed in the usual location at the south door of the shrine. There were some outstanding performers that evening, most notably a young *qawwal* (lead singer) from Delhi, who people told me was from the prestigious *qawwal Bache* *gharana* (a well known musical lineage) of the Nizamuddin Shrine. He was dressed in a dark brown “fancy payjama” outfit with an expensive fez cap. He was much more professional than the usual local singers and attracted a lot of attention. As he began, the audience shifted around quite a bit. More serious listeners moved closer to get a better seat and view of the event. The atmosphere shifted into one of intense concentration. He sang in the style of the famous Pakistani singer, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, employing virtuosic vocal techniques—*bol tans*, *gamak tans*, *sargam tans*—which got a lot of crowd response. Several listeners looked as if they were from the new city; they were dressed in Western style clothing rather than in Muslim religious dress. They were respectful, and came wearing various types of head coverings (symbols of respect), but appeared more affluent than the average listener.

One listener sat close to the lead singer and paid particular attention to the music, gesturing and shouting out frequently. During the course of the evening, he got up twice to place impressively thick gold chains around the singer’s neck. Several other affluent listeners got up to offer thick stacks of 100 rupee notes during the hour-long performance. Notably, the listeners were not offering the money with the typical devotional-style gesture: two hands held together with the money in the hands which is then dropped or placed on the top of the harmonium in front of the singer while he gestures *salaam* (“greetings” or “peace be with you”) to the listener in

of every performance night keeping the women in their section, keeping the middle aisle free for men to walk down offering money and generally keeping order in the area. Aisha was helpful and insistent, having obtained permission for me to videotape in this prominent location. I was at once relieved and uptight as I set up my video camera and audio tape recorder directly in front of the party. Some of the men sitting on the edge of the aisle on the western side were visibly irritated by my presence. The men sitting close were more serious listeners and expressed their feelings to me by suggesting strongly that I should move back into the women's section rather than obviously stand out to the men.

Each *qawwali* party played 2-3 songs before turning the session over to the next party. The first few parties received only a few coins from each person who came forward. These listeners would often come by themselves without the spiritual assistance of a *pir*. As the evening progressed, the parties improved in terms of musical talent. Performer competence translated into a larger audience and more money being offered to them.

Around two in the morning, when the music was really becoming intense and frequent shouts of "*wah wah*" and "*kyaa baat hai!*" could be heard in the crowd, a middle aged, portly man stood up, seemingly in a state of rapture. He began to move in a circular manner typical of ecstatic dancing. His arms were up and he was twirling faster and faster. During this man's *haal*, the singer repeated the same verse as is customarily done until the listener has returned to a normal state and quit gesturing. The tempo of the rhythmical clapping of the *qawwali* had increased. Even the crowd had joined in the clapping. A *pir* and some nearby listeners stood and joined hands to form a circle around the man so he wouldn't injure himself by falling or bumping into something. His arm, facial and body movements became more pronounced and his rotation faster. After about ten minutes he stopped gesturing, then sat quietly. The lead singer then went on to the next verse, thus signaling his acknowledgment of the end of the man's *haal*.

Seconds after the man sat down, he again stood, this time coming directly over to me. I was thinking he must still be in a state and hoping he wouldn't knock over my equipment as his movements were forceful. He approached me and said clearly in English², "Next we will be doing the final prayers (*namaaz*) at the threshold [of the south door of the shrine] so please aim your camera in this direction and set it up over here so as to get a better view."

He was correct, for within a few minutes everyone moved around to face the threshold of the south door. The incense was moved next to the

threshold and a line formed—soon to become a shoving mass of men—to receive the *pir*'s blessing at the threshold before the prayers began. I was suddenly in a very precarious position at the center of action, being jostled and trying to hold my camcorder and tripod steady. Several men wanted me to move out of the area entirely as I was the only woman there; they were now on both sides of the aisle and were standing next to me. I was struggling to leave the area quickly and safely when one of the leaders insisted I continue to videotape. He asked me to take my equipment, climb over the iron gate and stand on the uneven mound of concrete and dirt so as to be high enough to get a good view of the event. I did so and continued videotaping the event.

First, the man who had been in a *haal* and who had subsequently spoken to me bent down at the threshold and again went into an ecstatic state, pounding his head repeatedly on the threshold while a *pir* stood by. Meanwhile devotees were lining up on each side of the aisle, facing the threshold. As I turned my camcorder away from the threshold in order to videotape the men in the semicircle, the same man again moved from the threshold to the center of the semicircle, also the center of my photographic frame. The group then began the final prayer which concluded the evening.

The previous example of "ecstatic" expression, by consuming a visual, gestural space, seems ironically to portray an ambiguity of intent. Rather than an ideal version described by elderly devotees, ecstatic articulations offer heteroglossic renderings of *haal* which conflate the categories of "real" and "imagined." Instead of a habitus of faith, a realm wherein individual and socially agreed on ideals create an aura of belief, a heterodox environment (Bourdieu 1977) is created by competing and ambiguous performance frames. The listener's *haal* was a show, possibly inspiring other listeners toward mystical states, possibly attracting the attentions of the crowd, and most certainly, attracting my attention as the videotaper.

In *qawwali*, the visual is also the discursive. Significantly, the act of watching places a discursive frame of 'performance' on the occasion, thereby leaving room for the specular *tamaasha*. It is already a visual commentary on the effects of the musical performance, a show which mirrors back a version of experience, distancing listeners from the immediacy of experience. The visual performance intends to draw the listener into the space of a shared habitus, a space of faith. The frame of performance creates a safe distance between listener-turned-observer, and listener-turned-performer. It posits a tension between the 'ideal' and the 'imagined', and between 'performed experience' and 'discursive performance' (Benjamin 1978, Hanks 1987, Hammer 1987).

In the previous two examples, as with other occasions I was able to physically videotape *qawwali* performances outside *puṛdah*, my excitement at the rare opportunity of having sight not obstructed by some type of veil was diminished by the effect the camera lens had on the performance. My sense of listeners' experience of *wajid* is complexly woven into my analytical view of how a visual (lens) frame affects the embodiment of that same private ecstasy. I am no longer categorized foremost by my gender, but more singly as recorder whose lens frames the visual "performance". I am also one of the people on display. In this regard my observation is in itself, participation. Without the Geertzian-style pleasure of unobtrusively looking over the shoulders of the participants, my interpretations are a result of the complexities of my own subject position as a female ethnographer delving into a male genre.

Conversely, I gained a hermeneutic perspective on the process of being a listener at *qawwali*. I saw and experienced how the discursive and distancing frame of the visual is integrally blurred with the experiential habitus of belief and ecstatic experience. The notion of performance is blurred as the private and mystical depends on and creates the public and specular; the musical relies on and occasions the visual. The idealized and experienced habitus of ecstasy perpetuates heteroglossic and heterodoxic notions of embodied *tamaasha*.

Notes

¹ The practice of offering money, known as *hazar anna/dena* in Urdu, is standard in devotional assemblies. Often the amount is small, ranging from 1-5 rupee coins to ten rupee notes depending on the financial state of the listener and the quality of the performance. Occasionally offerings are made in hundred rupee notes in a grand show of wealth and/or enjoyment of the performance. Money is typically offered in a reverential style with palms outstretched; it is given to either the spiritual leader (a *pir* or the hereditary custodian such as the *sajjadah nasheer*) or directly to the lead singer (*qawwal*).

² I should add here that in all my communications with everyone at this shrine, no one had uttered a word of English to me. Urdu is the lingua franca in this type of setting.

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