

Swarthmore College

Works

Dance Faculty Works

Dance

1-1-2006

Unheard Voices, Global Stage

Pallabi Chakravorty

Swarthmore College, pchakra1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-dance>



Part of the [Dance Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Pallabi Chakravorty. (2006). "Unheard Voices, Global Stage". *H-Gender-MidEast*.
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-dance/101>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dance Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.



Guria, Gossip, and Globalization. Amelia Maciszewski.

Reviewed by Pallabi Chakravorty

Published on H-Gender-MidEast (January, 2006)

Unheard Voices, Global Stage

The film *Guria, Gossip, and Globalization* by Amelia Maciszewski is an important film for a number of reasons. First, it focuses on the social conditions of the present-day artistic community of *tawaifs* (courtesans) in India, whose legacy has been rendered invisible within the bourgeois histories of north Indian performance traditions. Yet, these women were the repositories of semi-classical musical forms such as the *thumri* and *ghazal*, and the classical dance form *kathak*. Although I will not reiterate here the history of the *tawaifs* and their postcolonial predicament, suffice it to say that in the medieval and colonial times they held high social status in the royal courts of north India. In the nineteenth century, the Bengali *zamindars* or *babus* lavishly patronized them. However, these artists were debased as prostitutes during the turn of the twentieth century and it is only recently that scholarly research has focused on their contributions to the development of north Indian performance practices. Second, the film introduces us to the organization Guria Sansthan, an NGO working to improve the economic conditions of *tawaifs*/prostitutes in contemporary India. Third, it shows us the possibilities of deep globalization; we see how global networks between India and the United States function towards the development of grassroots communities. Hence, it broadens the discourse of cultural globalization from media and elite cultural productions to local and marginal ones. Despite these positive aspects, the film itself lacks a consistent or a critical narrative on the present day *tawaifs* and the Guria

Sansthan.

As the name suggests, *Guria, Gossip, and Globalization* is a tripartite narrative. *Guria*, meaning “doll,” represents the modern day *tawaif* or prostitute and her commodity status within the international flesh trade. The film opens with a haunting rendition of a *ghazal* by Faiz Ahmad Faiz: *aaye kuchh abr kuchh sharab aye*. This song in the young voice of a *tawaif* girl is especially mesmerizing and draws the audience immediately into the world of the *tawaifs* in the old cities of India. We travel through their *havelis*, or houses, in the narrow dingy lanes of Benaras, Muzaffarpur, Jaunpur and Kolkata. We are acquainted with Zeenat Jahan, Neelam Devi, Kali Dasi, Madhuri Devi, and many others. They are represented as talented and self-conscious women who want to empower themselves. These images are juxtaposed with posters and newspaper excerpts on international trafficking on women and children. We are also introduced to the organization Guria Sansthan and its director Ajit Singh. Here, a showcase of the talents of the *tawaifs* in a festival organized by the Guria Sansthan is intercut with a focus on Ajit Singh. The camera follows Singh as he explains to the *tawaifs* and to the festival sponsors his vision of Guria Sansthan. He explains that he is concerned about the sustainability of the *tawaifs* as artists. However, he argues that his vision goes beyond the past context of patronage to incorporate today’s context of liberalization and globalization.

The second section called gossip reveals the negative images of the *tawaifs* in the media and in society. This narrative is con-

structed through several newspaper clippings that circulate nationally and internationally. The filmmaker Amelia Maciszewski inserts herself in the narrative here through an article in an English daily in India. We are made aware of her advocacy role in relation to the Guria Sansthan. The atrocities and police brutalities against prostitutes are also highlighted here. A man who lives with them renders through his powerful verses the social stigma attached to the community of prostitutes. However, the potential to build on the idea of gossip as discourse remains unexplored in this section. Perhaps the filmmaker could have presented us with a brief history of the <cite>tawaifs</cite> in this section. Sharing this with the audience could have given them a sense of the <cite>tawaifs</cite>' modern-day predicament as common prostitutes. The film could also have delved into the personal life histories of the <cite>tawaifs</cite> who negotiate their lives as dancers/singers and prostitutes in contemporary India. For example, I would like to know the story of the young girl who sang the beautiful <cite>ghazal</cite>. What is her lineage? Who is her teacher? After viewing the film a number of times I could trace her lineage back to Kali Dasi, the older <cite>tawaif</cite> in whose name the film is dedicated. I was curious about Kali Dasi's musical heritage as well. Such beautiful <cite>gaiki</cite> (style)—where was this coming from? Why didn't the filmmaker ask these questions? This is important information as there is not much work on the women-to-women transmission of musical knowledge within the patriarchal structures of north Indian <cite>sangeet</cite> tradition. Perhaps there is another film where Maciszewski has traced such lineages, but the viewer needed to be made aware of these connections. <p> The third section is on globalization. The film focuses on various national and in-

ternational networks working to bring the modern day <cite>tawaif</cite> into mainstream society. In the national forefront, a tourism enterprise titled "Incredible India" is shown hosting a festival. In the festival, various classical and folk forms are showcased. These practices had fallen into disrepute but they are being revived for tourism purposes. The film then shifts to the international context. The Association for India's Development, based in Texas, is shown to work in the interest of the Guria Sansthan and its project for these women. In a concert in Austin respectable women and men, including Maciszewski, are shown performing classical Indian music and dance to promote the cause of the Guria Sansthan. The global circuit is completed. We have traveled from Benaras to Texas. But I am not sure that I have learned enough about the Guria Sansthan or the Gurias from this travel. There is no critical argument presented on the work of the Guria Sansthan. Who is Ajit Singh? Why is he interested in the <cite>tawaif</cite> community? There has been some critical scholarship on the negative aspects of "festival culture" discussed by scholars such as Rustom Bharucha.[1] Why are these related points not highlighted? Ultimately I must ask myself whether this is simply propaganda for the Guria Sansthan. <p> I applaud Amelia Maciszewski for working on this important topic. There is a lot of great footage in the film. Although I must add that I was surprised by the abrupt transitions and cutoffs from the renditions of the songs. However, the film is rich in ethnographic detail and gives voice to an artistic community which was crucial to the development of north Indian performance traditions. <p> Note <p> [1]. Rustom Bharucha, <cite>Theatre and the World: Essays on Performance and Politics of Culture</cite> (Columbia: South Asia Publications, 1990).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-gender-mideast>

Citation: Pallabi Chakravorty. Review of , *Guria, Gossip, and Globalization*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. January, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15479>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.