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Between the Numinous and the Melodramatic: Poetics of Heightened Feelings in Bengali Islamic Sermons

Abstract   This chapter analyses a rhetorical technique that is decisive for the aesthetic experience of Islamic sermons in contemporary Bangladesh. I show how the performance of narratives in sermons relies on musical-bodily as well as imaginative expectations and expertise to evoke heightened emotions. I furthermore sketch a historical trajectory that demonstrates that the chanting in the sermons is part of the history of Bengali literature—from epics performed at regional courts to folk ballads—and of the history of South-Asian melodrama. This trajectory interlinks "secular" and "religious" aesthetics and has repercussions for the analytical terms we use to describe rhetorical phenomena. For this conceptual discussion, I take up the often pejoratively used term "melodrama." Rather than cast it as a low variant of excessive emotions juxtaposed with the sublime, I argue that the concept can be useful for historicizing and contextualizing the evocation of religious feelings.

Chanting and Dramatic Presentation in Sermon Gatherings in Bangladesh

Chanted prose narratives are a key feature in Bengali sermons held at nightly sermon gatherings (Bengali *oẏāj māḥ'phil*, equivalent to the Arabic *waʿẓ maḥfil*), which constitute the devotional and entertaining counterpart to ritual Friday prayers.[1] There are two key facets of the chants' composition: their sonic texture and relations to other sounds, and their alternation with spoken parts of the sermon. In order to illustrate these key facets of the chants, I will undertake a structuralist analysis of a sermon. I argue that chanting gives listeners audible markers that help guide their reception of the dramatic scenes narrated in the sermons. In particular, I will show how the use of chanting guides listeners' reactions to decisive turning points and emotionally charged parts of the narrative.

In *waʿẓ maḥfil*s, the voice of the preacher has a directly perceived bodily effect on everyone in hearing range of the highly amplified loudspeakers that are put up all over the congregation. This amplification gives preachers the opportunity to use both characteristic melodies and a quiet, conversational voice. It thus partakes in the general mechanism of mass media in which ever greater anonymity is accompanied by intimate communication styles.[2] Amplification makes audible the broadcasting of the "grain of the voice"[3] and helps transmit nuanced emotions.

The chanting featured in Bangladeshi Islamic sermons is most often called, in Bengali, "speaking melodically" (*sure balā*). There seems to be a limited number of dominant melodic contours to the chanted passages, each of which is identified with one region or famous preacher and is then emulated. The fact that all of the melodies employed in *waʿẓ maḥfil*s are recognized as belonging to the genre of sermons in question here seems to rely on their close relation to particular sets of text and on their being "word-centred."[4] The special diction of the sermons, with their reliance on tripartite repetitions of synonyms from different languages, greatly influences the speech rhythm.[5] Furthermore, there is a discernible melodic contour with a number of characteristic features, including a division of the melody and sentences into three parts of equal length, a gradual decrease from the main upper tone to the lower key followed by a sudden ascension—thus creating a specific form of tension-release—and a

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1   For an introduction see Max Stille, "Islamic Non-Friday Sermons in Bangladesh," *South Asia Chronicle/Südasien-Chronik* 4 (2014): 94–114. For readability, I used the Arabic transliteration instead of the Bengali *oẏāj māḥ'phil*.
2   John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*, paperback ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 214.
3   Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 179–189.
4   Regula B. Qureshi, "Islamic Music in an Indian Environment: The Shi'a Majlis," *Ethnomusicology* 25, (1981): 47.
5   Max Stille, "Communities of Code-switching Connoisseurs: Multilingualism in Islamic sermons in Bangladesh." *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* (2018), accessed 5 March, 2018, http://journals.openedition.org/samaj/4485.

specific quality of voice. Such similarity between the melodies of different preachers establishes the genre's melodic coherence, while at the same time allowing individual differentiation in a competitive and creative preaching scene.[6]

Neither the melodies, nor the text of Bengali *waʿẓ maḥfil*s are written down. They seem to blend together a variety of traditions, such as the Shi'i sermons and story tradition (*majlis*[7] and *jārigān*[8]), devotional praise chants about the Prophet Muhammad's coming to humankind (*mīlād*), Bengali story-telling traditions (*pūthi pāṭh*),[9] songs of praise for the Prophet (*naʿt*), and Quranic recitation. A specific example is the characteristic melody of a very influential preacher that came to be emulated by many other preachers to the extent that it even came to be called "common *sur* (melody)." The melody shares enough parallels with the final cadence of a "classic" Egyptian Quran reciter to draw a genealogical line.[10] In other words, the melodies are an example of the transcultural creation of an Islamic soundsphere[11] through the dissemination of technically reproduced media (the global advent of Egyptian Quranic recitation in the 1960s), which are then incorporated into regional aesthetic regimes.

With these general qualities of the chanting voice in mind, let us move towards the use of chanting over the course of a typical sermon. Melodic and rhythmic qualities are key, synchronizing the audience experience and the timed fulfilment of shared expectations.[12] The rhythm is constructed by alternating between spoken and chanted voice, both of which are used to render the sermons' mainly Bengali text. These shifts are not arbitrary; I propose that they are generated by a deliberate strategy. I will look at select passages from a sermon by the popular preacher Tophājjal Hosen Bhairabī, who makes his living as an independent preacher, traveling to a different sermon congregation nearly every night. At the time of my research, the sermon in question was available on video CD and on YouTube, media

6   Anwar Chowdhury, interview by Max Stille, May 5, 2015, Dhaka.
7   For the many structural similarities between majlis and *waʿẓ maḥfil* see Qureshi, "Islamic Music," 44–47.
8   See Sāimana Jākāriyā and Nājamīna Martujā, *Phokalora o likhita sāhitya: Jārigānera āsare "Bishāda-Sindhu" āttīkaraṇa o paribeśana-paddhati*, 1st ed. (Ḍhākā: Bāmlā Ekāḍemī, 2012) in Bengali or Mary Frances Dunham, *Jarigan: Muslim Epic Songs of Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press, 1997) in English.
9   For the musical aspects of this performance tradition as practiced today see David M. Kane, *Puthi-Pora: 'Melodic Reading' and Its Use in the Islamisation of Bengal* (London: Sylheti Translation and Research, 2017).
10 While it is not possible to "prove" this, the resemblance between the final cadence of Shaykh Muhammad Siddiq al-Minshawi to the melody of the chant of Delwar Hossain Sayeedi does strongly suggest that the latter adopted it from the former; see the transcription by Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur'an* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2001), 129.
11 The dynamics of this important process have been described in relation to Indonesia by Anna M. Gade, *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'ān in Indonesia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
12 David Brian Huron, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 167, 184.

formats which are important for distributing and spreading the fame of the preacher and which help enable his economic independence.

This particular sermon deals with parents' (and particularly mothers') pains and tribulations (*Mā Bābār Duḥkha Kaṣṭa*), and forms one of the most common themes of Tophājjal Hosen's sermons. The sermon connects narratives about the pains of the parents with the commandment to honor one's parents[13] and, more prominently, with the topic of Allah's mercy. Tophājjal Hosen turns the mother's mercy into an allegory for Allah's mercy by stating that every instance of a mother's boundless and excessive mercy demonstrates Allah's even greater mercy. However, there is a limit to these analogies; if we look at the entailments of the initial proposition, it becomes clear that Allah does not suffer as the mother does. The role of the suffering being is often assumed by Muhammad, who is not only compassionate, but also endures the kind of pain towards which he is compassionate. From this perspective, the sermons' narratives become means of affecting preacher and audience so that they can reach, within the confines of the sermon congregation, the pains that trigger Muhammad's compassion.[14]

The first longer chanted passage of the sermon is devoted to Muhammad's compassion towards his *umma*. It tells the story of the suffering that Muhammad endured as a child in order to demonstrate how his mercy exceeds his personal human worries. At the outset of the passage, the preacher states clearly that the pain of the Prophet is the foundation of Muslims' well-being. He does so by speaking in a "normal" speaker's voice: "That is what you call 'anticipatory bail'. That we got anticipatory bail has one sole reason: that we are the *umma* of the last Prophet! Because throughout the 63 years of his life, the Prophet didn't sleep sound for one single night, out of pain for the *umma*. Only tears."[15]

The preacher then continues, elaborating on Muhammad's pains by citing the speech of Aisha:

> Mother Aisha says: "Why should the *umma* of that Prophet not be forgiven? On one day I asked for permission to enter the Prophet's room (*hujra*) after he had a bath: 'Oh Messenger of God! Allow me to oil your holy figure!' After I got permission and started to oil him I see that the figure of my Prophet is so beautiful that it is impossible to look away. But on this beautiful form there sometimes are deep black spots on the Prophet's figure."[16]

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13 Q 29:08.
14 Max Stille, "Conceptualizing Compassion in Communication for Communication: Emotional Experience in Islamic Sermons (Bengali *waʿẓ maḥfil*s)," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 11, Special Issue Concepts of Emotions in Indian Languages, (2016): 81–106.
15 *Āgām jāmin peẏe gela śudhu mātra kāran hala āmrā ye ākheri nabir ummat. kāran ei nabir jibani teṣaṭṭi bachar paryanta śudhu ummater byāthaẏ ekdin o nabi rātre bhare ghumāẏ nā, śudhu kāndā.*
16 *Mā Āẏeśā Siddikā balen, ei nabir ummat kena kṣamā pābenā. āmi nabijir ekdin gosal kare hujrāẏ ḍhukte anumati cāilam. yā rasūl Allah, anumati den āpnār cehārā*

It is at this point that the preacher adopts the chanting voice:

Mother Aisha says: "I asked the Prophet: 'Oh Messenger of Allah! I want to know: what are the deep black spots on (your) beautiful figure!'" My Prophet turned his face towards Mother Aisha. He let his tears flow, their drops covering his cheeks: "Oh Aisha, don't ask about this thing, Aisha! My, the Prophet's, liver cannot bear the mention of these spots!" "Huzur, I want to know where these spots come from. Are these from chicken pox?" "No, Aisha, these are not from chicken pox, no, Aisha, that's not it." "Then what are the spots from?" "Oh Aisha, these spots are not chicken pox, they are not scabies or itches—these spots are spots from the attacks of the youth on the park of Taif [town close to Mecca]! Oh Aisha, not once, not twice—without any mistake, without any reason, they hit me so hard that I passed out three times. It is the spots from their stones that stay on my figure." Mother Aisha Siddiqa says: "Oh Messenger of God! If these spots are from the attacks on the earth of Taif, I feel pain and sorrow when I see them. Huzur, I know that my Allah accepts your prayer (*doẏā*). Please pray so that Allah will clear the spots." My Prophet cries: "Oh Aisha, no, no, don't ever say this, oh Aisha! I won't clear off these spots. On the day that the field of *Hāshar*[17] will be set up, the sun will come down half a hand above (everyone), the skullcaps will burst because of the heat, and the brains will melt and drop out of the nose. On that day my sinful community members (*ummat*s) will take the burden of their sins on their heads and run around like crazy. Oh Aisha, they will cry like orphans and call: 'where is the Prophet, where is the Prophet!' On that day I the Prophet won't be able to bear hearing these calls. Then I the Prophet will claim, for each of the spots, the redemption (*nājāt*) of millions of sinful *ummat*s!" My Allah says: "Oh my friend, you saved the spots from the attacks of the youth on the earth of Taif, come on, friend, I give you my word—do you know how much I love you? I Allah have, during the 63 years of your life, have not allowed one fly or mosquito to sit on your beautiful figure, not allowed one bug to bite you, my friend—and you have saved the spots of stones on this figure for the redemption of the *umma*. Come, I Allah gave you my word that those who will be your *umma*, those who will live according to your ideal, those who will live in your love, those who will give you love, friend, those who will stay on your side, if I Allah will only get a little chance, I Allah will forgive them."[18]

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mabārake tail māliś kare dei. anumati pāiẏā tail māliś karte yāiẏā dekhi āmār nabir cehārā eta sundar cokh pherāno yāẏ nā. kintu ei sundar cehārār mājhe mājhe kālo kālo dāg. nabijir cehārāẏ.

17 Ar. *Ḥashr*, the field where the Day of Judgement will take place.

18 *Mā Āẏeśā balen, āmi praśna kare baslām "yā rasūl Allah, eta sundar cehārāẏ kālo kālo dāggulo kiser āmi jānte cāi." Āmār nabi mā Āẏeśā Siddikār dike mukhṭā ghurāiẏā*

The argumentative point that Muhammad shows mercy to his *umma* is proven by the evidence of the narrative told by Aisha. The following elaboration of the Prophet's pain moves from external facts (the description of black spots on the Prophet's body) to the dialogue between Aisha and Muhammad, which is only interrupted by short indications of who is speaking. The direct speech is emphasized by the extensive use of vocative particles (*yā rasūl Allah*, *Āẏeśā re*, *Hujur*, *nāre Āẏeśā*, *bandhugo*) with which the three characters repeatedly address each other.

A key aspect of the shift to chanted speech is the accompanying shift in the addressee and addresser of the sermon. Put more concretely, the communication articulated here between preacher and audience is displaced; it shifts to the conversation between the characters in the narrative. Consequently, the preacher as a narrator is first substituted by Aisha when she tells her story, but then Aisha withdraws too and only the characters' dialogue within the dramatic scene remains.

This reorientation of the deixis[19] from the here and now of the sermon to the then and there of the scene is also supported by the demonstratives "this thing" and "these spots" directed at something seen within the story. In narratological terms, we find here a dramatic scene which is inserted into the narration. Of course, the preacher is always present as a mediator and thus there is never "direct" communication between the dramatic character (such as the Prophet experiencing pain) and the sermon's recipients. Nevertheless, the effect of the dramatic scene is much more immediate

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gāl beẏe beẏe cokher pāni gulo jhar jhar kare cheṛe dilen. "Āẏeśāre e dāger kathā jijñāis nā re Āẏeśā, ei dāger kathā mane haile āmi nabir kalijā mane nā." "hujur, ei dāgguli kiser āmi jānte cāi, eguli ki basanta haẏechila āpnār." "nāre Āẏeśā, khājli peñcṛā haẏechila, nāre Āẏeśā, tā nā." "tā hale dāggulo kiser?" "ere Āẏeśā, ei dāgguli basanta naẏ, khājli peñcṛā naẏ, ei dāggula hala Tāẏepher maẏdāner yubakder pātharer āghāter dāg. Āẏeśāre ek bār naẏ, dui bār naẏ binā aparādhe binā doṣe binā kārane āmāke mārte mārte tin bār kare bēhuś kareche. oi pātharer āghāter dāggulo āmār cehārār madhye lege āche." mā Āẏeśā Siddikā balen "yā rasūl Allāh, ei dāggula yadi Tāẏepher jaminer āghāter haẏ, dāggulo dekhle āmār kaṣṭa haẏ, byathā haẏ. hujur āmi jāni āpnār doẏā āmār Allāh kabul karen. ekṭu doẏā karun dāggulo yena āmār Allāh pariṣkār kare den." Āmār nabi kānde, "Āẏeśāre nā nā ei kathāṭā ār konodin balbi nā re Āẏeśā, ei dāg āmi doẏā kare pariṣkār karba nā. Hāsarer jamin ye din kāẏem habe, ādh hāt upare sūrya neme āsbe, sūryer tape māthār cār pheṭe yābe, magajgulo gale gale nāk diẏe bāhir habe. oi din āmār gunā(h)gār ummaterā gunār bojhā māthāẏ laiẏā pāgaler mata dauṛābe. etimer mata kāndbe 'nabi, kai, nabī kai' bale ḍākbe re Āẏeśā. oi din āmi nabi ḍāk gulo śune sahya karte pārbanā. takhan āmi nabi ek eṭā dāger binimaẏ kaṭi kaṭi gunāgār ummater nājāter dābī karba." āmār Allah balen "bandhugo Tāẏepher jaminer yubakder pātharer āghāter dāggulo ummater nājāter janya rekhe dilā, yāo bandhu kathā dilām, tomake ye āmi kata bhālobāsi tumi ki jāno? teśaṭṭi bachar jindegīr madhye tomār sundar cehārāẏ āmi Allah ekṭā maśā māchi baste dei nāi, ekṭā pakā mākaṛ dite dei nā go bandhu, oi cehārār pātharer āghāter dāg ummater nājāter janya rekhe dilā. yāo āmi Allah kathā dilām tomār ummat yārā habe, tomār ādarśe yārā calbe, tomār bhālobāsāẏ yārā calbe, tomāke yārā bhālobāsā dibe bandhu, tomār pakṣe yārā thākbe, āmi Allah tāderi ekṭu suyog pāilei āmi Allah tāderke māph kare diba."

19 On the different deictical functions in language, perception and fantasy, see Karl Bühler, *Sprachtheorie: Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache,* Reprint of 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Lucius und Lucius, 1999).

than if the same events were told by a narrator, be it in indirect speech or even in a s*umma*ry of events (e.g. just stating "the Prophet was sad"). This opposition between the narrator's depiction of events and the characters' speech is captured by what the narratologist Gérard Genette calls the "mode" of narration.[20]

It is no coincidence that in describing what Genette calls the mimetic mode of narration as opposed to the diegetic mode, narratology has often taken recourse to spatial and visual metaphors such as distance and closeness or "showing" and "telling." We could say that a mimetic mode of narration—passages of scenic presentation in which characters' speech is quoted—draws the listeners into the scene. And not only the listeners: Aisha is moved by the visual impression of the black spots, Muhammad by the pains of the *umma* on the Day of Judgement for Muhammad, and Allah by seeing the suffering Muhammad.

Tophājjal Hosen's vocal techniques continue to parallel his narrative techniques over the course of the sermon. The chanting and dramatic presentation in the following mark a scene that is somewhat ironic, for it breaks with the expectations of the compassionate mother. As most Bengalis would likely attest, the mother would rather be beaten herself than allow anyone to beat her child, but in the narrative Hosen suggests just the opposite. As a polytheist strongly opposed to her son's association with Muhammad, Abu Bakr's mother does *not* respond to Abu Bakr's call "Oh, mother! (*mā go*)." On the contrary, she hits her child relentlessly. Nevertheless, while the Prophet states that he feels pain and agony upon seeing the signs that Abu Bakr has been beaten, just as Aisha had in his case, he says that he the Prophet cannot do anything about it, because it was his mother who had hit Abu Bakr.[21]

The largest narrative complex, and that which dominates the remainder of the sermon, revolves around the child Prophet's yearning for his father. This theme is reminiscent of and perhaps invokes the emotionally powerful *viraha* romance narratives that have been popular in South Asia and Bengal in particular over the last half millennium. Interesting for our purposes is the fact that the chanted passages highlight the emotional turning points of the narrative typical of Sufi *viraha* romance:[22] The first is the "arising of desire" after the child Prophet is not picked up from school by his father as the other children are and he starts to cry, a scene that ends with his grandfather telling him: "Your father went to sleep the eternal sleep

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20 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). The present article intentionally does not follow "mood" as the standard translation for the French "mode," as it is misleading in the context of emotion research.

21 *Ābu Bakar re, tor cehārār madhye āghāt dekhā yāẏ, manṭā kaṣṭa dekhā yāẏ byāpār ki? Hujur, kālimā paṛār aparādhe āmār mā āmāke mārche. āmār nabi balen Ābu Bakar mā mārle ei bicār rāsuler kāche deẏā yābe nā.*

22 See Aditya Behl and Wendy Doniger, *Love's Subtle Magic: An Indian Islamic Literary Tradition, 1379–1545* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. 23.

in Medina's earth."[23] Following the pattern set by the romance genre, the next stage depicts the beginning of Muhammad's yearning and search for his father. The obligatory obstacles which he meets are presented through the worries of his uncle, Abu Jahl, who at this point in Muhammad's life is not yet his enemy, but who also does not see his nephew's special gifts. However, his uncle's worries turn out to be opportunities to show the Prophet's power in a series of miracles. As is common in narrations in *waʿẓ maḥfil*s, dangerous animals not only do not pose a danger, but often help the Prophet. Abu Jahl's horse, for example, is granted the power of speech so that it can explain to his owner that it will not move unless Muhammad is seated in front of his uncle.[24] Similarly, as his sermon progresses, Hosen deliberately digresses to describe a scene in which Allah saves an old woman whom Noah had forgotten to load onto his ark, which only serves to show that Allah would never let anything untoward happen to Muhammad. While he adopts chanting at the climactic dialogues of each of these scenes, Hosen always returns to his spoken voice to bring the narrative forward.

The two longest passages of chanting are found in the narrative's climactic scenes. They connect the child's wonders with his longing and later reveal how he reaches his father. The connection between the child's wondrous deeds and his longing is established in a scene that begins with an account told by another of Muhammad's family members, just as the first chanted section began with Aisha's story. This time it is Muhammad's uncle Abbas, who recounts that he saw his nephew lying in his cradle and moving the moon with his finger. The child, again in direct speech directed to Abbas with the vocative "oh uncle" (*cācā go*), explains his longing for a father who would buy, as other fathers do for their children, some flowers and hang them above the child to play with. Because Muhammad did not have a father to do this, however, Allah substituted the flowers by making the moon move at the child's will. This dramatic self-disclosure of the child reconfirms his power and makes his longing for his father tangible.

In the following, the chanted passage steers towards the climax, at which Muhammad finally reaches his father's grave. Arriving there, Amina breaks out in tears and Muhammad's grandfather explains to him that it is here that his father sleeps the eternal sleep. The child is finally able to cry out for his father:

> "Dad, oh dad, how did you become so hard-hearted, oh dad? All children of Mecca climbed on (their) dads' laps, I haven't climbed on (my) dad's lap once. I came from Mecca to Medina, oh dad, please get up,

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23 *Tor bābā Madinār jamine tomāre etim bānāiÿā cira ghum ghumāiÿā geche.*
24 A typical comical inversion, which also comes up in other instances of humor directed against the powerful, such as the Pharaoh's horse making fun of him. See Max Stille, "Dialectics of (De)Mobilisation: Humour in Islamic Sermons," in *Mobilising Emotions: The Affectual Dimension of South Asian Politics,* ed. Amélie Blom and Stéphanie T. Lama-Rewal (Routledge, forthcoming [2018]).

and caress me, please!" It is as if Abdullah is crying from the grave: "Oh Lord! Remove the earth from my grave, so that I can take my orphan Muhammad on (my) lap once!" My Allah says: "Oh Abdullah, don't you behave crazy. You remain sleeping, you don't have to take him on your lap—I, Allah, for my friend I have commanded the whole world, all of creation: you all have to love this my Prophet."[25]

This scene shares many of the characteristics of the previously discussed chanted passages. The emotionally charged dialogue showing the Prophet's personal pains again culminates in a speech act of Allah. This time, however, he performs not a promise, but a command. Again, Allah is sensitive and responsive to Muhammad's pains, clearly substituting Muhammad's earthly father. Also noteworthy is the way in which the dramatic model of direct communication allows the deceased Abdullah to speak, even if it is qualified with the fictionalizing "as if" (*yena*). As with the animals speaking or the dialogue between Muhammad and Allah, the dramatic scene here breaks the mold of ordinary possibilities. The communication within the scene emphasizes co-presence, as by the way does Hosen's evocation at the sermon's beginning, when he describes that the dead are sleeping right under the earth where the *maḥfil* is set.

The chanted scenes, in short, portray instances of suffering and heightened emotions through a distinctive mode of narration. Throughout the sermon, the proportion of direct speech in chanted passages is considerably higher (69%) than the proportion of direct speech in non-chanted passages (28%). This dramatic presentation enhances the identification of the listeners with the dramatic figures, who often have close relationships with the suffering Prophet. The characters disclose their emotions to other characters, who are all co-present. The listeners of the sermon—by virtue of this direct speech—are equally present in this emotional communication.

Historical Antecedents? A Glimpse at a Seventeenth-Century Sufi Court Romance and a Nineteenth-Century Folk Ballad

Having so far established the role of chanting in *waʿẓ maḥfil*s as internally raising and fulfilling expectations of emotionally heightened dramatic scenes with a stress on direct communication, we can now move on to consider the possible historical origins of this structure. To which diachronic series of expectations raised by shifting relations of genres do the

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25 "'Bābā, bābā go, eta niṣṭhur kemne hailā go bābā! makkār sakal chelera bābār kole uṭhla, āmi ekdino bābār kole uṭhlam nā. makkā theke madināÿ aslām go bābā, eḳtu uṭha nā, āmāre ādar kare dāo nā.' Ābdullāh yena kabar theke ḍāk diche 'prabhu go! Āmār kabarer māṭi sarāiÿā dāo nā, āmār etim Mohāmmader ekbār kole laiÿā dei.' āmār Allah balen 'Ābdullāh re, pāglāmi karte habe nā, ghumāiÿā thāko tumi, tomār kole nite habe nā, āmi Allah āmār bandhur janya tāmām pṛthibir kull makhlūqāt-er upar nirdeś diÿā dilām: tomrā sabāi āmār ei nabire bhālobāste habe!'"

contemporary sermons connect? Which historical antecedents does their structure of dramatic chanting draw on? Over the last few years, research on the longue durée of sonic history in South Asia[26] has been accompanied by an uptick in research on the oral and aural aspects of the telling of texts.[27] As the performance-oriented literary history of Bengali is, however, still in its infancy, I cannot at this point do more than draw attention to some striking structural parallels between the role of chanting in the *waʿẓ maḥfil*s and the role of a change in performance indicated by a change of meter in older literary texts.

More specifically, I would like to discuss a connection that I discovered during my research on the poetics of the seventeenth-century "Iusuph Jalikhā"[28] by Muhammad Sagīr, which was based on the "Yūsuf Zulaikhā" by the Persian poet ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī.[29] One of the most important aspects of taking up a form prevalent in Bengal at that time was the text's transmetricisation:[30] While the Persian work featured only one meter, the Bengali adaptation introduced a pattern of alternation between different meters, an alternation which in turn was linked to differences in performance. My detailed analysis of the metrically highlighted passages revealed that in the Bengali adaptation, the poet used devices similar to those discussed above in the contemporary *waʿẓ maḥfil* sermon: shifts in meter are linked to passages with a slower pace of narration; the narration prefers to report on events through the dialogue of intradiegetic characters or through pictorial descriptions; and changes in meter often occur at key turning points of Zulaikha's inner development and are focused on her emotions of *viraha*.

In Sagīr's rendition, the first changes in meter occur when Zulaikha falls in love with Iusuph, who appears to her in her dreams. Her journey from her homeland to Egypt is summarized, and the narrated events make clear that Iusuph is still in Kanaan. The ruler of Egypt is rather surprised—and very happy—to hear that such a beautiful woman has set out to marry him. The next change in meter shifts attention to Zulaikha's recognition of her mistake. As she cannot wait to see her beloved's face, she persuades her lady's maid—increasingly pressingly, and finally by saying that she would otherwise die—to help her catch a glimpse of the person she thinks is her

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26 Annette Wilke and Oliver Moebus, *Sound and Communication: An Aesthetic Cultural History of Sanskrit Hinduism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009).

27 Francesca Orsini and Katherine B. Schofield, eds., *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015).

28 Also "Ichuph Jolekhā" is common. See Śāh M. Sagīr, "Iusuf-Jolekhā: Sampādak ḍaktar Muhammad Enāmul Hak," in *Muhammad Enāmul Hak: Racanābalī*, ed. Manʿsur Musā, 2 vols. 2 (Ḍhākā: Bāṃla Ekāḍemī, 1993).

29 Max Stille, "Metrik und Poetik der Josephsgeschichte Muhammad Sagirs," in *Working Papers in Modern South Asian Languages and Literatures*, ed. Hans Harder, 1 (2013), accessed 12 July, 2018, http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/savifadok/2773/1/stille_josephsgeschichte_sagir_19.06.13.pdf, 1 (2013).

30 Thibaut d'Hubert, "Histoire culturelle et poétique de la traduction Ālāol et la tradition littéraire Bengali au XVIIe siècle à Mrauk-U, capitale du royaume d'Arakan" (PhD diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études, 2010)

beloved. Here, we find a change in meter from *paẏār* to *tripadī*, which indicates a change in performance. This is accompanied by a specific style of narration, which is characterized by a restriction of information—while before, the narrator "knew" about Zulaikha's mistake, in this passage he does not "know"—and a change in the mood of narration from diegetic to mimetic. An intimate dialogue between Zulaikha and her bosom-friends (*sakhī*s) reveals the depth of Zulaikha's suffering.

This mode of dramatically rendering decisive turning points is also applied to another character within the same work. Iẏākub (Yaʿqūb), the father of Iusuph, is told that Iusuph has been eaten by a tiger. The changes between meter, narrative information, and narrative mood mirror those of Zulaikha's lament in the passage before. The lament is repeated in a formulaic manner, to the degree that over many parts only single words are replaced. For instance, the word *karma* (deeds) in Zulaikha's lament is substituted with *putra* (son) in Iẏākub's. Both characters react to the perceived loss of and longing for Iusuph, a loss the audience is already informed about, but which is narrated once more from the perspective of and in the words of the characters involved.[31]

Again, drawing these parallels between forms that are separated by hundreds of years cannot be more than a beginning in tracing the history of the performance patterns we encounter today. However, we should not forget that works such as the different Bengali renderings of Yūsuf Zulaikha and other popular stories were distributed by the cheap printing presses of the late nineteenth century and have been performed as part of communal reading practice.[32] Furthermore, the alternation between the two main meters that we have considered thus far was not limited to one particular genre.[33] To illustrate, let us discuss briefly a work from the end of the nineteenth century that is analysed in more detail in this volume by Tony K. Stewart.

The *Bon bibī jahurā nāmā* by Mohāmmad Khāter[34] tells the story of a Muslim female saint (Bonbibī) who becomes the sovereign of the mangrove forests in South Bengal. One of the subplots of the story has Bonbibī saving a poor boy (named Dukhe, literally "grief"), who is taken into the forest by his rich uncle Dhonā to collect honey and wax. Upon arriving in

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31 From this perspective, it may be no coincidence that in a *waʿẓ maḥfil* about the story of Yūsuf, the scene of Yaʿqub's suffering upon being deceived by the brothers is the first instance of melodic presentation of a dramatic dialogue.

32 Anindita Ghosh, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1778–1905* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), 276, 287–288; Gautam Bhadra, *Imān o niśān: Uniśśatake bāṃlār kr̥ṣak caitanyer ek adhyāẏ* (Kalkātā: Subarṇarekhā, 1994), 402.

33 The use of the traditional *tripadī* meter to focus on the emotional tenor of the hero and heroine, especially *viraha* and other forms of emotional stress, is likewise a commonplace throughout Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇav Bengali literatures, hagiographical and poetic, as well as in popular *pīr kathā*. Personal communication with Tony K. Stewart, 12 July 2018.

34 The edition I use is: Mohāmmad Sāheb Khāter, *Bon bibī jahurā nāmā: Nārāẏanīr jaṅga o Dhonā Dukher pālā* (Kolkata: Gaosiẏā Lāibrerī / Ji. Ke. Prakāśanī, 2010).

the woods, however, the uncle offers the boy to the tiger-god in exchange for the coveted honey and wax. Dukhe's mother anticipated this danger, and so, after she realizes that she cannot prevent her son from leaving, she asks the forest saint for help. The saint eventually rescues the boy by appearing to him in the shape of his mother, even taking him on her lap. This conjunction of motherly care and saintly power is in many ways reminiscent of the longings of the child Prophet to be taken on his father's lap with Allah stepping in as a substitute for the missing parental love.

The main sufferer in the Bonbibī story is Dukhe's mother. Several scenes touch on her suffering[35] and foreshadow the climax, which once more features a shift in meter, voice, and narrative information. Like Zulaikha and Yaʿqub in the "Iusuph Jalikhā," the mother here suffers because of her limited knowledge. Unlike the recipients, who have learned all about the rescue of Dukhe, it has not yet been disclosed to her that her son was saved; this becomes apparent at the outset of a passage in the meter associated with dialogue and heightened emotionality. It reads: "The mother of Dukhe was at home, / the old woman, and heard / that Dhonā arrived from the place (far away) // When she heard it, the old woman immediately / went to the house of Dhonā / and asked about Dukhe."[36] Like Iusuph's brothers, Dhonā lies to the mother, telling her that Dukhe was eaten by a tiger. As we would expect with the new meter and the mother's widening perception, the scene shifts to the direct speech of the protagonists. The mother laments her fate, complaining to Dhonā that what he says blackens her liver-heart (*kalejā*). She addresses her son with the already familiar exclamation:

> "Alas, you apple of my eye | where did you go and disappear | come and show yourself to the aggrieved one (*dukhinī*) || Come and say 'Mother, mother' | may my eyes rest [literally "get cold"] upon seeing | that you survived on someone's lap || . . . Oh you Dukhe of the aggrieved one (*dukhinīr dukhe*) | come and show yourself to me | my liver-heart was roasted to kebab."[37]

Despite unquestionable differences in the contexts, ideological messages, and aesthetic regimes of the different works that we have considered, there are striking parallels, particularly in scenes that narrate suffering and the heightened emotions caused by characters' limited knowledge. The character's perception is suddenly expanded at moments in which the mode of narration shifts to a dramatic mode, often to interpersonal dialogue. At these moments, the performance changes, too. The heightened musicality is highlighted by a change of meter that corresponds to the change of

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35 Among the relevant passages are the mother's conversation with Dhonā (Khāter, *Bon bibī jahurā nāmā*, 17), her conversation with Bonbibī (Khāter, *Bon bibī jahurā nāmā*, 18), and the monologue of Dukhe (Khāter, *Bon bibī jahurā nāmā*, 23).
36 Khāter, *Bon bibī jahurā nāmā*, 31.
37 Khāter, *Bon bibī jahurā nāmā*, 32.

the performer's voice in contemporary performances. The commonplace of suffering combines different levels of narration and performance, and the listeners' expectations rely on this multitude of techniques.

Entanglements with Melodramatic Imaginations

Let us now widen our focus from Bengali narratives to related aesthetic fields. I will argue that the narrative shifts we observed so far are also intertwined with the history of melodrama, which has provided an important impulse in the adaption, proliferation, and transformation of narrative structures in South Asian popular culture since the late nineteenth century. This step is not only significant for historical analysis. I will tease out some reasons why the sermon I analysed in the beginning of this chapter, and the narrative technique it shared with historical antecedents, bears many characteristics that are deemed typically melodramatic by theorists of melodrama. For this reason, this section prepares the ground for approaching the evaluations and analytical vocabulary that make up the following section.

Most studies on Indian—mostly Bombay—cinema are not particularly concerned with situating their subject within literary history. However, some have sought to trace the genealogy of important aspects of Indian cinema—and in particular, songs used in the films—to traditional musical performance.[38] Kathryn Hansen has shown that Parsi theatre was an important predecessor of Bombay cinema, and that, for its part, Parsi theatre borrowed from techniques like recitation of Urdu poetry and its poetic conventions. "The public sphere for Urdu was thus enlarged through the institution of theatre, as was aesthetic appreciation of Urdu poetry's Islamicate cultural moorings. The extended performative reach of Urdu poetry was to have enduring effects on the development of Indian cinema, especially on the figuration of love and desire."[39] It is not the goal of this chapter to argue that the narrative structure of Indian cinema is part of the narrative complex I have described above. For such an inquiry other languages and regions would have to be taken into consideration and more evidence on early cinema would be needed.[40] Nevertheless, the narrative forms that we encountered in the narratives of "Iusuph Jalikhā" and "Bonbibī" described above continued to be influential in twentieth-century popular culture and the conflation of narrative and musical poetics sketched out

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38 R. Vasudevan, "The Melodramatic Mode and the Commercial Hindi Cinema: Notes on Film History, Narrative and Performance in the 1950s," *Screen* 30, (1989): 29–50, 45.
39 Kathryn Hansen, "Passionate Refrains: The Theatricality of Urdu on the Parsi Stage," *South Asian History and Culture* 7, (2016): 232.
40 For a similar performance pattern in Tamil Nadu see Alexis Avdeeff, "Horoscopic Sung Narratives, Prosody and Poetics: The Astrologer's Word as a Means to Relieve Mental Distress," *Anthropology & Medicine* (forthcoming).

above are part of the history of South Asian melodramatic poetics. Both are part of the history of the chanting in *waʿẓ maḥfil*s and might help us to fully grasp the evocation of heightened emotions in these sermons.

What are the characteristics of melodramatic poetics as they developed in colonial India? Hansen provides a stunning overview about how "[c]onventions of Western melodrama reached India via travelling actors and the circulation of published plays,"[41] many of which were gothic, military, equestrian, nautical and domestic melodramas. Drawing on Diderot, Hansen mentions as characteristic for "European melodrama" its close affiliation with painting, "the realistic depiction of scenes from everyday life," as is encapsulated in "tableaus or arrested pictures" which "were used to punctuate the end of an act," thus capturing "a moment in time's passage."[42] Furthermore, she claims that melodrama "provided the satisfaction of clearly delineating good and evil and heightening moments of dramatic climax through the device of the tableau, while evoking social themes and familial relationships."[43]

For our question, it might be helpful to consider the literary theorist Peter Brooks's claim that melodrama exerted an influence far beyond the stage, particularly on novels, but also on film. He describes melodrama as a "mode of excess" that depicts "an intense emotional and ethical drama based on the Manichaeistic struggle of good and evil."[44] Again referring to Diderot, he defines melodrama as "the effort to make the 'real' and the 'ordinary' and the 'private life' interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture that lay bare the true stakes."[45] Brooks believes that melodrama is a "peculiarly modern form."[46] In what seems to be intricately related to Charles Taylor's argument about the disenchantment of the modern world and its re-enchantment in romanticism, Brooks argues that melodrama was born after the French Revolution, which he sees as having been accompanied by the "shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms."[47] He finds a defining feature of melodrama in the fact that "to the melodramatic imagination, significant things and gestures are necessarily metaphoric in nature because they must refer to and speak of something else. Everything appears to bear the stamp of meaning which can be expressed, pressed out, from it."[48] While we need not attempt to establish a causal connection with modes of contemporary cinema and drama, we do find many of these same features surfacing in the sermons. So let us briefly consider some significant intersections

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41 Hansen, "Passionate Refrains," 228.
42 Hansen, "Passionate Refrains," 228, 229.
43 Hansen, "Passionate Refrains," 233.
44 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 12.
45 Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 14.
46 Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 14.
47 Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 15.
48 Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination*, 10.

between melodrama and the narrative techniques in *waʿẓ maḥfil*s and the Bengali narrative history analysed above: theme, sound, and image—all of which are related to the specific rhetoric of heightened emotions.

The theme of the sermon discussed at the beginning of this chapter revolves around intimate familiar relationships, most importantly that between mother (and, to a lesser degree, father) and son. The "eternal triangle of mother/son/daughter-in-law"[49] is completed in the sermon's closing scene, in which the son forgets his mother in favor of his new wife, which, of course, has tragic consequences. As Brooks remarked, this set of "familial relationships" is characteristic of melodrama, and even more so in India where the social drama was to become the focal point of melo-drama.[50] Like the melodrama, the sermon makes the ordinary and the private life interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture. Moreover, foreshadowing gloomy events and putting them off to create tension, as we encountered again and again in the sermon, is also an important technique of melodrama. Last but not least, the "special" knowledge (e.g. that between mother and son) reveals the true meaning of the situation by an obscure mechanism which on the one hand borders on the magical, but on the other on the psychological.

The melodramatic mode of the sermon's presentation fits the particular way in which listeners are positioned to perceive the events. Tophājjal Hosen consciously offers situations in which the listeners easily recognize their own personal relationships. Commenting on the scene of the child Prophet using the moon as a toy in his cradle, he states: "Many [of the listeners] have small children. [. . .] And those who have not married can take it from their own childhood: 'I was a child.' Thereby they make the grief their own."[51] Similarly, he states that the passage where Abdullah calls out to Allah has a strong effect on listeners: "At this moment, the people are also thrown into passion. There is so much pain. The child calls out to the father: 'Take me on your lap!' The father wants that you shall take away the earth. Upon these things the people cry. It comes upon them, they consider it as reality, they listen to the words patiently."[52] Reality here means that people can connect the scenes to their everyday lives allowing them emotionally to participate in the narrative. Moreover, Hosen not only consciously weaves "real incidents" into his sermons, but takes

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49 Kathryn Hansen, "Mapping Melodrama: Global Theatrical Circuits, Parsi Theater, and the Rise of the Social," *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies* 7, (2016): 24, accessed 21 November, 2017.

50 Hansen, "Mapping Melodrama," 24.

51 Tofajjol Hossain, interview by Max Stille, 26 March, 2014, Bhairab, Bangladesh. *Choṭa bāccāto anekeri āche. . . āmio to dolnār bāccā chilām. takhan eiṭā to yārā biẏe kare nāi, tārāo nijer belāẏ neẏ, ye āmi to bāccā chilām. te ei duhkhaṭā takhan nijer madhye niẏe āse.*

52 Tofajjol Hossain, interview by Max Stille. *Te ei samaẏṭā mānuṣo ekṭā ābeger madhye paiṛā yāẏ. ye eiḍā kata byathā. santān ḍākteche, bābā kole nāo. bābā cāiteche māṭi saṛāiẏā dāo. .. te ei jinisgulo mānuṣ takhan kānde nijer upare āse, bāstaber mato mane haẏ dhairya dhairā kathāguli śone.*

these references to reality from tabloids.[53] This is fitting, since the depiction of reality in the yellow press works along the lines of melodrama, and melodrama has long used tabloids as their blueprint.[54] Furthermore, the lengthy descriptions of the suffering mother as well as her benedictory powers are shared with contemporary Bangladeshi TV series, such as the recent *Your Prayer Keeps Me Well, Mother*.[55] The theme of the sermon and its presentation closely fit melodramatic poetics.

Second, while Brooks clearly underlines the importance of music for the "evocation of the 'ineffable,'" he treats music merely metaphorically, since he is concerned with novels.[56] Diderot, however, was particularly concerned—as the term melodrama implies—with the relation between drama (pantomime) and music, even subordinating the role of the poet to that of the musician.[57] He dealt with dialogue, recitative, and song and with the transitions between these techniques. For Diderot, a lack of transition between musical and dramatic parts served as a contrast to express heightened emotions.[58] As Hansen notices, such a "European" concept of melodrama "would have had little purchase in India since virtually all drama was already musical."[59] Or, to put it the other way around, song scenes are decisive forms of Indian melodrama exactly because they are linked to Indian traditions. Tophājjal Hosen's chanting during emotionally heightened scenes—particularly those of suffering—fits this pattern. Furthermore, the melodic speaking of the sermons undergoes a development typical of much of South Asia's mediatized folk traditions: it develops in an increasingly melodic manner.[60] During the scene at Abdullah's grave, for example, Hosen adds to the chanting as a marker of the dramatic scene by giving his melodies a particular twist: slight tonal shifts indicate the rising emotionality of the scene and the pains of the child.[61] Furthermore, Hosen

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53 Hosen, for example, told me about his new discovery, a "real" incident of his area, which involved a mother hacked into three pieces, see Tofajjol Hossain, interview by Max Stille.

54 Compare, for example, the origins of *The Colleen Bawn* as an adaptation of the novel *The Collegians*, "which retold the actual murder of a young married girl." Hansen, "Mapping Melodrama," 3.

55 The "drama serial" *Tomar doẏāẏ bhālo āchi mā* links to the important topic of international migration.

56 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 14.

57 Denis Diderot, "Die dramatische Pantomime oder Versuch über eine neue Schauspielgattung in Florenz," in *Ästhetische Schriften*, ed. Denis Diderot (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), 302.

58 Diderot, "Die dramatische Pantomime," 300.

59 Hansen, "Mapping Melodrama," 24.

60 Peter Manuel, *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 136.

61 I am aware that it is debatable whether thinking in tonalities is the right approach here. To my hearing, this passage moves from below (D flat major) to a higher layer (A flat major), to then a flat minor to express the child's pains. I do not insist on this terminology; it suffices to note that there is a differentiated micro-structure. For another example see Carla Petievich and Max Stille, "Emotions in Performance: Poetry and Preaching," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 54, special issue Feeling Communities, (2017): 57–102.

adds to the melodic a subtle "mimetic" voice that conveys the emotionality of the figure speaking: particularly noteworthy in this regard is the softness of the child's address to his mother and the mother's tender, consoling words in response, and in the voice of Abdullah which noticeably cracks when appealing to Allah.

Third, as mentioned above, some scholars have pointed out the close association between melodrama and tableau painting. The climactic scene of Boucicault's blockbuster *The Colleen Bawn*, for example, is not only connected to a musical piece, but also to a "set piece with the moonlit tableau of Myles supporting Eily, her red cloak trailing in the water," which "appeared over and over in illustrations of the day."[62] While cross-connections to other genres such as scroll paintings (*paṭuẏā*) come to mind, we should not overlook the visual dimensions of purely "verbal" descriptions. In the early example of the non-narrative metrically highlighted scenes in the Iusuph Jalikhā, extensive visual description (*ekphrasis*) is, like dialogue, a common narrative feature.

In Hosen's sermon, the discovery of the black spots on the Prophet's body, the child moving the moon instead of flower toys above his head, as well as Abdullah calling out to Allah from his grave, can each be imagined in an "arrested" picture, a "tableau vivant," with the fitting gesture and corresponding heightened emotion. Both melodrama and the described narrative technique in *waʿẓ maḥfil*s place stress on a single decisive moment. Hosen himself explicitly emphasizes the visual aspect of his narratives: "I [hold sermons] from seeing. I go to the field of Uhud, when I hold a sermon, the field of Uhud appears in front of my eyes, and I thus present the talk's feelings. The listeners are also as if they are seeing it: the events of the field of Uhud happen in front of their eyes, and this is the moment when tears are shed."[63] The excess of emotionality that this visualization evokes in both preacher and audience is certainly a commonplace of popular preaching. At the same time, we can discern specificities of melodrama and its visuality. Hosen states: "At such a heart-splitting incident I can't control myself. Tears come to my eyes. At that point also the listeners think (*mane kare*): 'I see in front of my eyes that they are hitting my Prophet.' Then they also cry. Someone gets up screaming out; someone loses his sense, moves hand and feet instinctively and finally loses consciousness."[64]

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62 Hansen, "Mapping Melodrama," 3-5.
63 Tofajjol Hossain, interview by Max Stille: *"Āmi ballām dekhen, āpnerā oẏāj karen paiṛā ār āmi oẏāj kari deikhā. āmi ohuder jamine gelām, āmār oẏājer samaẏ ohuder jaminṭā āmār cokhe bhāse, ār alocanār bhābṭā eibhābei upasthāpan kari, śrotārā o yena dekhteche, ohuder jaminṭā tāder sāmne ghaṭanā ghaṭteche, ei takhani cokher pāni ber haẏ."*
64 *Ei ye hṛdaẏbidārak ghaṭanāṭā āmi takhan āmāke control karte pāri nā. āmār cokh theke pāni āse. takhan śrotārāo jiniṣṭā cokher samne ei mane kare ye, āmāder cokher sāmne āmrār nabi mārteche dekhtechi. takhan tārāo kānde. keu keu cillāilā māirā dẽṛāiẏā yāẏ, keu keu āche māh'phile āpner sense hārā haiẏā hāt-pāo nāṛāiẏā jñān hārā haiẏā yāẏ.*

Aesthetic Critiques of Popular Preaching and Historicizing Heightened Feelings

So far, I have highlighted the parallels between religious preaching and other literary narrative and performative structures used for the evocation of heightened emotions, including those of melodrama. In particular, I have used melodrama to denote a particular form of narration and performance as seen through the eyes of a response-oriented performance analysis. I have analysed various means of evoking heightened emotions without criticizing these means or judging whether the evoked emotions are of the right intensity or type. However, the aesthetics of (melodic) narration and heightened emotions in religious oration are often problematized by actors in the field of Islamic preaching as well as by Western scholars. Their criticism is often directed at an excess in display and evocation as well as at the emotions evoked, or at stating that the emotions are of the wrong kind. What is more, criticism often targets features that I identified as being central to melodrama.

The New York-based Bangladeshi preacher Nurul Islam Olipuri, for example, states that in Bengali *waẓ* "there exists the tendency to [. . .] spellbind (*bhakta*) the people with vocal melody, and to entertain (*cittabinodan*) them with so much vulgar frivolity (*raṃ ṭaṃ er kathā*)."[65] Furthermore, according to Olipuri, listeners and speakers are used to this kind of preaching, which is characterized by long digressions (*abāntar kathābārtā*).[66] In his description, Olipuri hence links vulgarity and excess both of words and concepts; affection and pretension of preaching and transgressions of preacher and audience.[67]

In his preaching, Olipuri cautiously avoids both chanting and the other parts of the poetics of evoking heightened emotions discussed thus far. In his sermon on the story of Yūsuf (I here deliberately use the Arabic transcription to indicate Olipuri's stress on Arabic scholarly discourse), Olipuri does not chant and eschews the dramatic effect of limiting the listeners' level of information. Yaʿqub sees a dream from which he understands everything that had happened and was going to happen, including the plan of the brothers to kill Yūsuf and his eventual rescue. From this perspective, the tense events of the story—the brothers asking permission to take Yūsuf away and their staging of Yūsuf's death by showing Yaʿqub his shirt, which they smeared with blood—are cause neither for alarm nor

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65 *Galār sur diẏe mānuṣke bhakta karā, raṃ ṭaṃ er kathā dvārā mānuṣer cittabinodan karā [. . .] prabaṇatā bidyamān.* Nurul Islam Olipuri, interview by Kālkaṇṭha, October 15, 2010.

66 *Abāntar kathābārtā balā o raṃṭaṃ er kathābārtār dvārā śrotāder cittabinodaner mādhyame janapriẏatā arjaner abhilāṣī baktāder abhāb nei samāje. ār oẏājer nāme esab anuṣṭhān śunār mata śrotāro e samāje abhāb nei.* Nurul Islam Olipuri, interview by Kālkaṇṭha.

67 This in-depth semantics of the various levels of excess became clear to me in a correspondence with Tony K. Stewart on the translation of *raṃ ṭaṃ er kathā.* I remain grateful for his time and advice.

for sorrow. This is even confirmed by a prolepsis[68] that reports a dialogue between Yūsuf and his father. The fact that Yaʿqub will have cried for his son is thus only reported once, and because it is narrated proleptically and hence retrospectively, it does not take place in the dramatic present. Furthermore, it is only told to be refuted: in the dialogue of the prolepsis, Yaʿqub states that he cried not because of worries or pains of separation, but only because he could not be sure whether people would exert bad influences on his son while they were separated. While there is a shift to direct speech, this does not serve to create an emotionally heightened moment, in fact, quite the opposite: there is a leveling or diffusion of the emotional content and its dramatic structure.

Prejudices and defensive attitudes against popular excess have also been taken over in works on Islamic preaching written by Western scholars. Ignaz Goldziher wrote a classical account of Islamic storytellers and popular preachers from the perspective of the workings of the Prophetic traditions, which he suggested were in danger of being diluted by the preachers' own inventiveness. In this account, the later popular preachers in particular emerge as engaging in entertaining, weird, exaggerated descriptions that cater to the fantasy of the common people and deviate from the supposedly original intention of moral and religious exhortation. Reflecting the thoughts of Ibn al-Jawzī, Golziher describes the "affectation" and "wrong pathos" of preachers who seek above all to amuse audiences and lack moral and religious sincerity.[69] A century ago, Tor Andrae concluded that the preachers' "so-called pious fantasy reveals itself to be decidedly impious."[70] In short, it seems that rather than an appreciation of aesthetic technique and their function, normative standards modeled on Protestant concerns sometimes meet prejudices in the sources to inform a scholarly interpretation of popular Islamic preaching. The recent scholarly turn to the role of the senses, the aesthetics, and the materiality of religion has, as elaborated in the introduction to this volume, taken seriously and evaluated positively the aesthetic dimensions of these religious discourses. Current scholarship is much more sensitive to the role aesthetics and emotional styles play in power relationships.[71]

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68 A leap to a later event of the story.

69 For this classical and amusing description see Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien,* vol. 2 (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1890), 161–70. A more distanced but also much shorter contemporary view is Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature* (Richmond: Curzon, 2002), 87–88.

70 See: Tor Andrae, *Die Person Muhammeds in Lehre und Glauben seiner Gemeinde* (Stockholm: Kungl. Boktryckeriet Norstedt & Söner, 1917), Inaugural-Dissertation, 26. He further views popular preaching's excesses as external to Islam (28).

71 For insights in this regard, see Margrit Pernau et al., *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in Nineteenth-Century Asia and Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Birgit Meyer and Annelies Moors, eds., *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

Against this background, thinking about the evocation of heightened emotions in Bangladeshi *waʿẓ maḥfil*s asks us to reconsider aesthetic theories of religious feelings. On the one hand, narratological insights have proven useful for tracing the aesthetic and emotional experiences made possible by chanted scenes in *waʿẓ maḥfil*s; they furthermore draw attention to the history of aesthetic forms and underline the structural parallels between the evocation of emotions in *waʿẓ maḥfil*s and those employed in other narrative forms. On the other hand, the value judgements and moral arguments against excessive popular emotions within Islamic tradition and scholarship on Islam call for a deeper engagement with underlying aesthetic assumptions.

In closing, I want to suggest that we link the rejection of "melodramatic" aesthetics and heightened emotions to seminal figures in the study of religion and philosophy. Alongside more specific inquiries into regionally specific concepts of aesthetics, continued consideration of basic works still seems important because they guide our understanding of how to evaluate aesthetic processes. On the topic of the relation between aesthetic theory and religious feelings, Rudolph Otto's *Idea of the Holy* remains one of the most influential studies.[72] In it, Otto emphasizes that aspect of the holy that "completely eludes apprehension in terms of concepts."[73] Following Schleiermacher, Otto draws attention to the deep emotional foundations of religious practice, which he himself had the chance to observe during several long journeys. Otto's necessarily dialectical undertaking of a conceptual study of that which eludes concepts faces the challenge of making transparent the "means of expression of the numinous" or its "ideograms."[74] Otto's discussion—particularly of that aspect of the holy that he calls the *tremendum*—closely parallels Immanuel Kant's discussions of the sublime (*das Erhabene*),[75] a category which, in turn, has roots in rhetoric.

When approaching the evaluations of melodramatic aspects of religious discourse, it is particularly interesting that in Kant's discussion the heightened emotions of the sublime are juxtaposed to a lower class of feelings. These feelings, represented by "romances, lachrymose plays, shallow moral precepts," have negative moral consequences: they "make the heart languid, insensible to the severe precept of duty, and incapable of all respect for the worth of humanity in our own person," and are linked to "false humility" and "whining hypocritical repentance" "in a mere passive state of mind."[76] It seems that many of the characteristics that Kant

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72 Otto shares his emphasis on individual feeling with contemporaries such as William James, see William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Centenary ed. (London: Routledge, 2003).
73 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, transl. John W. Harvey, 6th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 5.
74 Otto, *Holy*, 61.
75 See Immanuel Kant, *Kant's Critique of Judgement*, trans. J.H. Bernard, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1914), §§ 23–29.
76 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 141–42.

attributes to these non-sublime emotions resemble judgements against prose-chanting.

The structural analysis of the narrative design of *waʿẓ* in contemporary Bangladesh and its possible antecedents and parallels have demonstrated the persistence of what, with Otto, we might call "ideograms of the numinous": the seemingly "immediate" perception of the holy time and figures in dramatic scenes; the importance of miracles performed by these figures;[77] and, more specifically, the excessive love of Allah for Muhammad and of Muhammad for humankind, which can only be depicted in analogies. The affects that the sermons generate in preachers and their audiences seem to allow them to have contact with the numinous, which can only be reached by having suffered.[78] The preacher and the audience both participate in this affective movement, thus blurring the difference between production and reception.[79] The expressions of the numinous and melodramatic modes overlap in many respects, as both work towards expressing and evoking heightened emotions.[80] Their parallels pose challenges for any attempt to demarcate the "real religious feeling"[81] and its sublimity from low popular forms.

There may be various reasons for adopting poetics that have been successful in evoking excessive emotions. The religious communication dealt with in this chapter shows the continued relevance of heightened religious feelings for religious history. At the same time, the chapter has proposed that we pay closer attention to expressions of the numinous in different historical and cultural settings, and, in doing so, emphasized possible uses of concepts from related fields such as literary or film studies. On this basis, hopefully, we can disentangle and historicize the various ways in which heightened religious feelings are evoked in popular religious cultures, and evaluate anew their overlaps with and contributions to other fields.

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77 Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, 65–66. "Nothing can be found in all the world of natural feelings bearing so immediate an analogy—*mutatis mutandis*—to the religious consciousness of ineffable, unutterable mystery, the absolute other, as the incomprehensible, unwonted, enigmatic thing, in whatever place or guise it may confront us."

78 Jörg Villwock, "Sublime Rhetorik: Zu einigen noologischen Implikationen der Schrift *Vom Erhabenen*," in *Das Erhabene: Zwischen Grenzerfahrung und Größenwahn*, ed. Christine Pries and Klaus Bartels (Weinheim: VCH, 1989), 33–53, here 39–40.

79 Villwock, "Sublime Rhetorik," 43.

80 See Hans Joas, "Säkulare Heiligkeit: Wie aktuell ist Rudolf Otto?" in *Otto, Rudolf: Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, ed. Jörg Lauster, extended new edition (Munich: Beck, 2014), 276.

81 Otto, *Holy*, 126.

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