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Sonic Care: The Affective Aesthetics of Bombay Jayashri's Lullabies

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Abstract

Music has long been understood as a medium that steadies the human psyche against anxiety, sorrow and the diffuse pressures of daily life. Among its earliest and most intimate forms, lullabies shape the first sonic world encountered by infants, offering rhythm, breath and tonal softness as tools of regulation and reassurance. Far from being minor domestic utterances, lullabies have remained central to discussions on affect, care and the cultural work of listening. They act as conduits through which emotional steadiness, memory and relational warmth circulate.

Within this continuum, Bombay Jayashri occupies a distinctive space. Her vocal practice, rooted in Carnatic discipline yet softened into a maternal hush, folds breath, silence and measured melodic drift into an atmosphere of sonic care. Her lullabies create a listening environment where timbre becomes touch and where vocal texture performs the labour of soothing.

This paper explores the affective circulation generated through Jayashri's lullabies and examines how her vocal aesthetics participate in a broader cultural economy of affect. It investigates the ways her maternal voice performs care, intimacy and emotional labour, particularly through the slow tempo, stable pitch arcs and contemplative pauses that characterize her renditions. In a contemporary soundscape saturated with speed and sensory excess, Jayashri's lullabies offer an aural counterworld: a quiet, immersive field that restores intimacy and recalibrates the listener's nervous system. By reading her work as a practice of aural intimacy and affective healing, the paper foregrounds the cultural and relational significance of her sonic craft.

Keywords*: Affective humanities, Bombay Jayashri, Cultural studies, Lullaby, Sonic healing, Voice Studies*

Introduction

Across cultures, music has long served as a vital medium through which communities shape emotional life, transmit memory and create shared zones of comfort and belonging. Among its most intimate forms, the lullaby, a small, domestic genre that nonetheless carries deep historical, cultural and affective weight, occupies a unique position. Commonly marked by short duration, slow tempo and a narrow pitch range, lullabies rely on "simple, repeated melodies… sung freely, and often semi-improvised, using a soft voice" (qtd.in.Brooks 84). Positioned at the intersection of care-giving, gendered labour and oral tradition, lullabies not only soothe the infant body but also articulate cultural rhythms, emotional expectations and modes of relationality. Their quiet cadences form one of the earliest sonic worlds that human beings encounter, marking the beginning of their lifelong engagement with sound.

Bombay Jayashri, a transnational Carnatic vocalist whose career bridges classical discipline, global circulation and contemporary sonic sensibilities, has contributed significantly to the lullaby genre. Her work across concert halls, films, collaborative projects and digital platforms has expanded the reach of Carnatic vocality, while her lullabies, in particular, reveal a striking synthesis of technique, tenderness

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and cultural memory. As a renowned critic in *The Hindu* observes, "The contemplative quality, her expository technique giving space for creativity, her intuitive and melodic approach; all these lend a spiritual tone to Bombay Jayashri's music," ("Profile") a description that aligns with the maternal softness her voice carries. Shaped by rigorous training, yet opening toward listeners with a universality that exceeds linguistic or regional boundaries, Jayashri's lullabies continue to resonate across diverse audiences.

This paper attempts to argue that Jayashri's lullabies function as affective and healing cultural texts. The songs like, "Thangamani Rathiname," "Aaraaro Aariro," "Chakkaramuthe" and "Ghum Padani" from the album *Moon Child* and "Pi's Lullaby" from *Life of Pie* (2012) are examined to illustrate how her vocal timbre, measured pace and strategic use of silence enact a form of sonic care-giving that resonates across diverse listening contexts.

To explore this, the study draws on frameworks from Affective Studies and Voice Studies. Together, these perspectives illuminate how Jayashri's lullabies generate aural intimacy, perform emotional labour and participate in broader cultural economies of affect.

Aural Intimacies and Maternal Voice in Bombay Jayashri's lullabies

Bombay Jayashri's rendition of lullabies can be understood through three intersecting aural qualities: the tenderness of her vocal timbre, the unhurried pacing through which she shapes a rhythm of care and the intimate silences that breathe between her phrases. As Ansdell reminds us, "we experience music as an embodied phenomenon that is closely related to features and processes of our bodily life. Music has energy, movement in space and time, pulse and tone, force and attraction, tension and release, intention and direction – just like our bodies" (Ansdell 67). Similarly, Sara Ahmed notes,

> . . . emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others. Indeed, attending to emotions might show us how all actions are reactions, in the sense that what we do is shaped by the contact we have with others. In Spinoza's terms, emotions shape what bodies can do, as 'the modifications of the body by which the power of action on the body is increased or diminished.' (Ahmed 4)

Together, these elements create a sonic environment where the maternal voice becomes not merely a vehicle of melody but a medium of affective transmission. Jayashri herself has acknowledged her deep emotional investment in the form, admitting that "lullabies were a weakness for her" because she felt the ache of being "unable to sing such songs for her own children" (Harikrishnan, "How Bombay Shaped Jayashri's Personality").

This personal resonance subtly inflects her performances, allowing her lullabies to conjure a listening space that feels close, slow and gently illuminated, inviting the listener into a field of care rather than a conventional musical frame. Her sound world rests on warmth, temporal softness and breath-led quietude, forming an aural intimacy that echoes the embodied gestures of comforting, rocking and holding. It is within this triad of timbre, pace and silence that her lullabies gain their healing resonance and their capacity to circulate affect across homes, screens and cultural borders.

Vocal Timbre as Affective Medium

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It is often said that, "music affords dancing, worship, co-ordinated working, persuasion, emotional catharsis, foot-tapping, and a myriad of other activities of a perfectly tangible kind" (qtd. in. Ansdell 37). These affordances emerge from our perceptual engagement with music's properties like timbre, rhythm, metre, form and culturally embedded meanings. In this sense, it is always the personal and social context that determines how a particular musical gesture invites certain actions or emotional responses. This framework is particularly useful in understanding how Bombay Jayashri's voice, through its tonal and textural qualities, affords states of comfort, stillness and intimacy.

The vocal timbre intends to explore the tonal shadow of Bombay Jayashri's voice in each of these five songs. A major focus shall be given to detect whether the tone is bright, (clear), warm (relaxed), dark (deep and velvety), breathy (airy, whispers and light) or nasal (sharp), and how they participate in affect circulation. It is found out that ". . . via a variety of resources (such as rhythm, timbre, melodic line), music is able to resemble the dynamic and visceral qualities of bodily feelings…," (Reyland and Thumpston 299) and it is precisely through such visceral resemblances that Jayashri's tonal shifts acquire their affective charge, allowing the listener to perceive her voice not merely as sound but as an embodied gesture moving across emotional states.

In "Thangamani Rathiname," the singer's voice opens with a clear, warm tone, establishing an intimate cadence in the line "seeraatta nee urangu" (Jayashri 0:47) and a playful lilt at "thalaiyaattum" (0:57). By the line "paar aalum" (1:36), her tone deepens into a velvety register, and the line "sughamagha thoongu kanne" (2:49-2:53), with the chorus section there appears a whispery, nurturing tone that merges individual and collective comfort. Here, warmth shades into softness, illustrating how Jayashri's voice affords both security and gentleness.

A similar affective warmth shapes "Aaraaro Aariro," where Jayashri's voice begins with a soft warmth, the low register embracing the listener with maternal tenderness. Yet this tenderness takes on a different sonic texture in "Chakkaramuthey," whose opening hum (0:05) is characterised by a nasal resonance that gradually transitions into breathy, whisper-like phrases—a timbral shift that mirrors the physical act of soothing, as though the voice itself leans closer to the child's ear.

This intimacy transforms again in "Ghum Padani," which opens with a husky, whispery tone (0:21–0:24) that carries a faint grain, suggesting vulnerability or fatigue. As the line "bata bhora" (1:24) emerges, the timbre darkens, conveying emotional depth and reflective melancholy. Here, the lullaby becomes less playful and more contemplative, its darker hues affording a mood of emotional resonance and inwardness.

In "Pi's Lullaby," by contrast, Jayashri's voice fuses Carnatic tonal discipline with cinematic orchestration. Beginning with a husky, breath-inflected "Kanne" (0:05), the timbre gradually expands into a high-pitched, luminous register by 0:45—a transformation that affords transcendence rather than domestic intimacy. The movement from huskiness to radiance sonically enacts the song's emotional arc, balancing tenderness with spiritual uplift.

Across these songs, Jayashri's timbre modulates to express comfort, longing and transcendence. Her voice, in its shifts between warmth, softness, huskiness and luminosity, functions as an aural embodiment of affective care with each timbral choice affording a different emotional posture, a different way of holding and being held.

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Pace, Timing and the Rhythm of Care

This dimension shall dive more deep into the rhythmic cadences of the song; whether its slow, moderate, or fast. Jayashri's rhythmic approach across her lullabies exemplifies what might be termed a temporal ethics of care—a deliberate slowing and spacing of musical time to create room for emotion and repose. "The rhythmic patterns in lullabies help children discern patterns in language, aiding sentence construction and comprehension later on. Additionally, the repetition inherent in lullabies bolsters memory retention, allowing children to remember and eventually recite lyrics, further enhancing their linguistic skills" ("The Influence of Traditional Lullabies on Early Cognitive Development"). This aligns with Honing's observation that "beat induction is the cognitive skill that allows listeners to infer a regular pulse from a varying rhythm" (Honing 381), a capacity present even in infants. Such innate pulse-detection enables babies—and adults—to subconsciously synchronize with the steady, soothing rhythms of lullabies, allowing the body to "settle" into their calming temporal flow.

Within this framework, the specific musical choices Jayashri makes in each song take on layered significance. In "Thangamani Rathiname," for instance, the moderate tempo continues up to 2:28, with the rhythmic lull shifting after "thaaleeloo…soppanamayi," and the phrase "soppanamayi vandhavane" (Jayashri 2:43–2:54) introducing a gentle acceleration that mimics the transition between wakefulness and sleep.

This carefully modulated pacing mirrors the real-life maternal technique of increasing and decreasing rocking motion, allowing the child's body to attune to changing rhythms and bodily cues. Jayashri uses this rhythmic swell as an affective signal, a soft cue that the world can safely fade into the dream-state.

The song "Aaraaro Aariro" follows a rhythmic structure beginning moderately but slowing down markedly with the phrase "aaraaro aariro" (2:09–2:39), imitating the decelerating rhythm of a rocking motion. Here, the sensory and emotional force of Bombay Jayashri's voice can be well understood through Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of affect. As they argue, "the body modifies itself through effects that involve speeds and intensities" and music becomes one model of such affective interaction, working through "relations of speed and slowness" to alter the listener's embodied state (qtd. in. Reyland and Thumpston 162).

"Chakkaramuthey" reveals subtle rhythmic modulations—its humming section at 0:25 introduces a slower, more meditative pulse. Humming itself is an effective device: it blurs linguistic edges, creating a soft vibratory field that infants sense through bone conduction. The rhythmic dip accompanying the hum accentuates this bodily resonance, heightening the sensation of being held.

"Ghum Padani" is rendered at an almost suspended tempo, evoking stillness, yet in the line "khaat naal paalong naaii" (Jayashri 01:55), the shift to humming slightly alters the pace, suggesting the cyclical motion of breathing. This suspended rhythm aligns with Clarke's idea of musical affordances: here, the affordance is stillness itself—music offering the possibility of calm, quiet presence. The minor rhythmic shift signals continuity rather than disruption, holding the child within a stable sonic environment.

In "Pi's Lullaby," the pace begins with a slow, reverent rhythm in "kanne" (0:05) before gaining moderate flow in "mayilo" (0:35); by "malare" (2:11), the rhythm shifts again, creating emotional

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undulation. This ebb-and-flow of tempo resembles the emotional tides embedded in caregiving—the swell of affection, the settling of reassurance, the rhythmic breathing shared between mother and child. Jayashri's tempo changes thus map a gentle emotional topography, one that affirms connection through sonic movement.

These temporal variations underscore Jayashri's understanding of rhythm not merely as structure but as a tactile rhythm of care, where time itself becomes an extension of maternal tenderness.

Silence and Breath: Acoustic Spaces of Intimacy

Here, the pace with which she lingers, pauses and elongates her notes shall be the major focus. The moments of pronounced silences between the lines and effect that it induces shall be identified. Music should be understood "not only through the symbolic but as material and intermaterial vibration," in which bodies, breath and flesh participate in producing the sonic event (Eidsheim 161). This framework illuminates how Jayashri's lullabies rely on breath and paced vibration to create an intimate field of affective care.

In "Thangamani Rathiname," the elongation of phrases like "aalilayil thoongum" (Jayashri 2:10–2:26) produces a suspended serenity and the sustained "thaaleelo" (2:36) marks a cadence that feels both sonic and emotional. This lingering of sound functions as an affective hold, a vocal equivalent of a mother's gentle hand resting on a child, sustaining the moment long enough for safety to be felt rather than merely heard. Jayashri's stretched phrases thus allow the listener's breath to synchronize with the music, forming a subtle bodily entrainment.

In "Aaraaro Aariro," pauses between the phrases "aararaaro aariro" (Jayashri 1:49–1:51) elongate the sound's affective afterglow, while from 2:39 onward, her humming transitions into a wordless intimacy, where voice becomes touch. These inserted silences operate as emotional apertures, micro-gaps that encourage the listener's own memory, longing, or tenderness to surface. The transition into humming, devoid of linguistic markers, signals a shift from semantic meaning to pure embodied presence. "The sensorial effects of…music are essential to a holistic understanding… listening is a combination of what is scientifically observable and how sounds are socially embodied in memory and identity," (Reyland and Thumpston 260) a formulation that resonates with Jayashri's ability to fuse breath, silence and vibration into an intimate affective exchange.

"Chakkaramuthey" employs breath and silence texturally; especially, the humming at 2:11 followed by "vaavurangu" creates an intimate vocal space, and the gaps between hums (3:40–4:22) form what might be called breath intervals—moments of shared stillness.

Here, silence becomes an active agent: it structures emotional pacing and creates a cradle-like sonic environment. These breath intervals act as affective punctuation, allowing the listener to dwell within the softness of the soundscape.

In "Ghum Padani," the oscillating elongations of syllables "padani" (0:43), "modeyr" (0:46), and "chokh" (0:55) evoke a wave-like rhythm that mirrors the physical motion of lulling; by 2:02, humming dissolves into ambient silence, shifting the listener's focus inward.

Such elongations mimic natural bodily rhythms—breathing, rocking, heartbeat—creating a physiological continuity between singer and listener. The dissolution into near-silence marks a threshold where music becomes atmosphere, encouraging introspection and calm.

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In "Pi's Lullaby," the interplay between voice and instrumental silence in "kanne/kanmaniye/kannurangiyo poove" (0:05–0:30) crafts a textured intimacy, and the brief pause between two hums (1:32–1:37) embodies acoustic tenderness. These orchestrated quiet moments heighten emotional presence by foregrounding what cannot be sung—breath, nearness and vulnerability. The careful spacing of sound draws the listener into a shared sonic cocoon, where even absence resonates.

Jayashri's measured silences and breathing intervals materialize intimacy itself, shaping an aural world where presence is felt through stillness. Her use of quietness transforms listening into a shared act of care, each pause a gentle negotiation of space between self and other.

Across these works, Jayashri's control of breath and silence transforms listening into an act of empathy—each pause a shared inhalation, each breath a gesture of care.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Bombay Jayashri's lullabies operate within an intricate affective and embodied ecology, where timbre, pace and silence converge to create a sonic world shaped by care, memory and intimate relationality. Her vocal timbre, moving between warmth, breathiness, depth and radiance, functions not merely as a stylistic choice but as an affective medium that transmits comfort and embodied presence.

Jayashri's deliberate modulations in pacing thus encourage physiological settling, attuning the listener's breath, heartbeat and emotional state to the maternal cadence embedded in her songs. Silence, too, carries expressive weight: the pauses, hums and breath intervals form acoustic spaces where intimacy is not spoken but felt.

Together, these auditory elements reveal that lullabies are far more than simple melodic forms; they are embodied gestures rendered in sound. By attending to the microstructures of Jayashri's performances like the warmth of a held note, the deceleration of a rocking phrase and the resonance of a whispered hum, this study has shown that lullabies create a multisensory field of care. They hold listeners in a space where voice becomes touch, rhythm becomes reassurance and silence becomes a shared breath. Jayashri's lullabies thus offer not only musical beauty but a profound model of affective attunement, demonstrating how sound can carry tenderness across bodies, homes and cultural borders. In recognizing the depth of these sonic gestures, we also recognize lullabies as enduring sites of healing, relationality and embodied listening.

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